

# 1 *After the frontier: theory, historiography, and the social history of settled rural America*

Economic development and its social context are major themes in the new social history of nineteenth-century America, a century that witnessed the great transformation of American society and the emergence of the basic economic, geographic, and social contours of the modern United States. Employing methods borrowed from the other social sciences and utilizing new sources of data, historians in recent years have been able to delineate the dimensions of these changes with a scope and precision unattainable through more traditional approaches. Moreover, a greater awareness of social-scientific theory has facilitated the analysis of American trends in comparison with patterns of development in other societies and with respect to more general theories of human behavior and social change.<sup>1</sup>

The principal focus of this new social history, however, has been largely urban and industrial development. There are numerous studies of nineteenth-century urban social structure and social mobility, the creation of an industrial work force, the nature of the immigrant experience in the cities, and the changing roles of the family in industrial society. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to comparable issues in the development of northern rural society at a time when most of the population lived in the countryside and the United States was still predominantly rural. Obviously, urban and industrial growth was the most dramatic aspect of change in the nineteenth century and is more directly related to present-day conditions, but throughout the century, agriculture also went through significant transitions as farmers specialized in commercial crops and adopted more efficient forms of technology.<sup>2</sup>

The lack of a new social history for the rural North is due to a variety of intellectual constraints, both historiographical and theoretical. The particular historiographical traditions of frontier and agricultural history limit the comprehensive consideration of rural social development. As Robert Swierenga has noted, frontier, land, and agricultural history are the orphan children of American rural history and do not provide "a coherent, general framework for an overall history of rural development in America."<sup>3</sup> At a more general level, historians concerned primarily with broader theories of social change

## 2 Those who stayed behind

have been little disposed to analyze conditions in the commercialized farm communities of the second half of the nineteenth century because of the nature of those theories. Consequently, notions about agrarian life in industrializing America are often confused and contradictory. This chapter attempts to elucidate the character of our present understanding of nineteenth-century northern rural society and suggests ways to broaden that understanding.

Any consideration of the state of nineteenth-century rural historiography must begin with the pervasive influence of Frederick Jackson Turner. Most social history of the rural North during the period has been written with an eye toward supporting or refuting his interpretations. Yet Turner's conceptual framework does not encompass the entire spectrum of rural development and is little concerned with theoretical questions about the impact of economic change on agrarian society. Instead, Turner emphasizes the relationship between one specific stage of rural development – the frontier – and the nature of American character and American institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Turner's theory of the frontier is an elaborate expression of the agrarian myth. In his argument, the frontier experience was the social equivalent of a medicine-show elixir – good for whatever ails. The process of settling the wilderness was capable of transforming landless eastern farmers and city dwellers into stouthearted and independent yeomen rooted to their new land. In place of older communities, which were stratified and characterized by social conflict, frontier communities were cooperative, egalitarian, and open to all, including foreign immigrants. The easy accessibility of free land and the upward mobility characteristic of the frontier also served to preserve the peace in older areas by acting as a safety valve for malcontents.<sup>5</sup>

Turner's critics, in turn, reject his version of the agrarian myth. They demythologize the frontier by emphasizing the continuity of commercial values and social conflict rather than the transforming powers of frontier life. New settlers were not self-sufficient yeomen but petty capitalists and speculators constantly on the move, buying, improving, and selling new parcels of land. In addition to farming, urban development and boosterism were critical components of the expansion of the frontier. Pioneers were not individualists but, in general, social conformists who sought to maintain rather than to abandon their cultural values. Instead of forcing cooperation and assimilation, the rigors of frontier life intensified conflict and divisiveness in the new communities and preserved older ethnic and class distinctions.<sup>6</sup>

The accessibility of the frontier and the availability of free land also seem to be more myth than reality. The impact of speculation on the price of land and the costs of starting a new farm meant that the frontier was really “open” only to a narrow spectrum of the nation’s population. Certainly, few urban workers seem to have actually made the move, and recent historians have stressed factors other than a frontier safety valve to explain the relative lack of militant working-class consciousness in nineteenth-century cities.<sup>7</sup>

Although his detractors significantly revise Turner’s vision of the frontier, his ideas remain central to their analyses. As a result, the historical literature is somewhat splintered, consisting of separate and extensive discussions of particular aspects of frontier society rather than a more holistic analysis. Each debate revolves around a single characteristic (conflict vs. cooperation or individualism vs. conformity), and the conclusions are skewed toward the extremes of an issue rather than toward a more complex middle ground. Ironically, even though some of the frontier historians are pioneers in the use of the quantitative methods so central to the new social history, they use only the theoretical framework developed by Turner.<sup>8</sup>

More important, the focus on the frontier precludes a comprehensive study of nineteenth-century rural development. There is little consideration, for example, of conditions in older rural areas. The frontier was a critical yet short-lived phase in America’s rural history, but what happened after the frontier passed? As a result of Turner’s influence, we have an east-to-west migration of rural historiography paralleling the movement of the original settlers.

Clearly, the study of United States rural history needs to move beyond Turner conceptually, temporally, and regionally. Agricultural and economic historians have given us extensive studies of nineteenth-century farming after the frontier within the context of the nation’s economic growth and theories of economic development and economic behavior. At the macro level, the performance and expansion of the agricultural sector was a key aspect of America’s economic advance during the nineteenth century. At the micro level, the character of farming changed dramatically as farmers specialized in commercial crops and improved the quality of the different factors of agricultural production.<sup>9</sup>

To a large degree, this revolution in American farming was intertwined with the industrial revolution. The rise of urban markets increased the demand for agricultural commodities and led to greater market orientation and more rationalization in farm operations. Clarence Danhoff surveys this transformation for all northern agriculture

#### 4 Those who stayed behind

in his classic study *Change in Agriculture*; and Allan Bogue and Eric Lampard, for example, have studied corn-hog production and commercial dairying, respectively. In addition to the adoption of better farming practices and technological innovations, all these authors stress the importance of attitudinal and institutional change. The old-style farmer who marketed his surplus casually was replaced by the farm-operator-businessman who used his entrepreneurial skills to get maximum output from his resources. Support institutions such as marketing cooperatives, the agricultural press, agricultural societies, and government departments of agriculture at the state and national levels all emerged to facilitate their efforts.<sup>10</sup>

This literature, however, does not generally discuss the social context or consequences of economic development in the rural North, and important questions remain unanswered, indeed not even formulated. Were the revolution in farm production and the commercialization of agriculture accompanied by a revolution of social relationships in the countryside? Did change and continuity in rural communities parallel contemporary nineteenth-century urban patterns? How did change in rural areas affect the nation as a whole? What does the changing nature of agrarian life in nineteenth-century America imply for general theories relating economic development to social change?

The recent analyses of social change resulting from urban and industrial growth have been framed largely by either modernization theory or Marxist concepts. Both theoretical models describe the destruction of a traditional village society and its replacement by a new social order based on impersonal relationships and large-scale organization, but they place quite different values on this transformation. Modernizationists assume that this process was progressive, reflecting the awakening of a universal concert of liberal aspirations, which provided ever-expanding dimensions for individual freedom and accomplishment. In contrast, the Marxist historians emphasize disruption and alienation. The impulses behind social change were narrow class interests, which oppressed other groups and forced them into a continuous struggle to maintain cherished agrarian, artisan, and ethnic traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Recently, several American social historians influenced by the French *Annalists* and British Marxists have begun to analyze rural social developments within these conceptual frameworks. In an important article, James Henretta seeks to reconstruct the *mentalité* of preindustrial American farmers. In contrast to the ideal type of the traditional European peasant, Henretta's husbandmen were not communally

oriented as has been suggested by several colonial historians. Nor were they prototypical modern men or nascent capitalists whose acquisitive goals were frustrated only by the lack of sufficient markets to warrant completely commercialized agriculture. Rather, preindustrial American farmers were primarily concerned with the well-being and continuation of their family lines. They were not profit maximizers who strove to accumulate great wealth. Instead, they measured success by one's ability to pass on a freehold or competence to each of one's children – no more and no less.<sup>12</sup>

Two other authors, Michael Merrill and Christopher Clark, amplify Henretta's ideas more explicitly in terms of Marxist theory. Merrill attempts to define rural society in the North between 1750 and 1850 as the social product of a "household mode of production," which was distinct from either a simple commodity mode or a capitalistic mode of production. As Clark's work demonstrates, however, this mode of production was not incompatible with an increased involvement in the market. New England farm families, for example, welcomed the rise of putting-out industries during the first half of the nineteenth century but for traditional reasons. Proto-industrialization offered the rural family new means to preserve the older household system in the face of land scarcity and declining local agricultural opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

Henretta, Merrill, and Clark do great service by placing the social history of early nineteenth-century rural development within a broader theoretical context. Their interpretations facilitate the comparison of American trends with recent work on the emergence of a market economy in the European countryside. Similarly, American labor historians have also emphasized a household mode of production to explain artisan life in preindustrial cities. Finally, by elaborating new categories, this work has explicit implications for the more general theories of economic and social change. Pre- and proto-industrial American farmers were, to use a more modern agricultural term, hybrids. They were neither traditional peasants nor modern profit maximizers but rather transitional figures – in the market but not of it.<sup>14</sup>

But transitional toward what? All three authors assume that the rise of capitalism had the same disruptive social effects in the countryside that it had in the cities, but none actually studies conditions in commercialized rural communities. Clark asserts that the rise of centralized manufacturing and commercialized farming eventually undermined the viability of the older household system. He offers theory instead of evidence, however, to support his claim, and he

**6 Those who stayed behind**

fails to delineate the kind of social order that emerged as a result. Actually, within the scope of his study, Clark does not deal with greater market involvement in agriculture but focuses only on putting-out industries. Henretta also posits a decline in the orientation toward family goals, but he does not explain why ensuring the establishment and continuation of one's family line could not also be the primary goal within a thoroughly capitalistic order as well as in a preindustrial society.<sup>15</sup>

Like the frontier historian, ironically, Henretta, Merrill, and Clark focus on one specific phase of American rural development. Certainly the transformation from a developed noncommercial to a commercial rural economy was an important historical process, as was the settlement of the frontier, but an exclusive consideration of either tells us little about the nature of the settled rural conditions so prevalent during the second half of the nineteenth century. We cannot simply assume that social change in older rural areas paralleled urban and industrial trends.

Both this assumption of parallel development and the disinclination to study commercial agrarian society stem from precisely the same theoretical perspective that makes this new work so exciting. Modernization theory and Marxist analysis assume a rural-to-urban shift over time. Center stage, so to speak, moves from the country to the city. As a result, we have numerous concepts and empirical studies dealing with either the premodern rural society of peasants and villages (and their American variants) or the modern industrial order of workers and cities. In contrast to these emphases, however, there are almost no models to help us to understand social relationships in modern, commercialized rural communities or, for that matter, premodern urban settings. As two rural sociologists recently put it: "The classic nineteenth-century European writers in sociological theory devoted comparatively little attention to agrarian and rural life, concentrating their efforts instead upon explanations of the emerging urban-industrial sector."<sup>16</sup>

Rural sociology, a discipline devoted to the study of modern rural society, unfortunately offers historians little help in this regard. The field's particular institutional connection to agricultural experiment stations and extension services has resulted in work that is mainly applied and empirical with little overall synthesis. Instead, the discipline is characterized by a relative absence of theory and even, in the words of one critic, by an antitheoretical emphasis.<sup>17</sup>

To the extent that a theoretical perspective on modern rural society

has been developed by rural sociologists, it is problematic. The concept of the rural–urban continuum, a variation of Ferdinand Tönnies’s classic formulation of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, or community and society, is the dominant theoretical framework in the discipline. Community is defined by localistic, personal, and informal interactions, whereas society is cosmopolitan, anonymous, and formal or bureaucratic. Although Tönnies intended these terms to represent two modes of human association that can exist simultaneously in the same geographic location, American rural sociologists have equated *Gemeinschaft* with the countryside and *Gesellschaft* with the city and made them mutually exclusive. The rural–urban continuum has been challenged significantly by recent studies, which find both kinds of attributes in rural as well as urban communities, but it continues to influence rural sociological research, which consists largely of measuring the differences between rural and urban society in terms of a wide range of characteristics.<sup>18</sup>

Although there are obviously many significant differences between modern urban and modern rural communities, the notion of a rural–urban continuum does not specify the causes of those differences. Instead, rural and urban are only descriptive and empirical terms without any explanatory power. Yet it is precisely those causal connections that are crucial to historians if they are to understand past rural society and explain the way it changed over time.

Even though there are few systematic studies of older farm communities, American historians have pervasive notions about the nature of that society because, in the absence of any appropriate interpretive construct, scholars have tended to superimpose urban and industrial patterns on the late nineteenth-century countryside. Whether they are primarily concerned with larger theories of social change or not, many historians implicitly, if not explicitly, tend to regard settled rural areas in much the same way as they interpret industrial development.

Writing about northern farming after the Civil War, agricultural historians detail the rise of large-scale operations that utilized increasing amounts of machinery and other capital investments. The surviving photographs from the 1890s of teams of twenty or thirty horses pulling great combines in the fields of California and the northern plains provide a graphic illustration of this trend. Similarly, the nature of farm labor changed as these new large-scale farmers reached beyond their families for workers and relied on wage labor or tenant farmers. As rural wealth became concentrated in fewer hands and

8 **Those who stayed behind**

new opportunities declined, the social structure of rural communities came to approximate the cities, and class divisions between farm owners, tenants, and laborers became more rigid.<sup>19</sup>

Yet commercial farm operations in the North during the second half of the nineteenth century were not, for the most part, factories in the field. They differed significantly from contemporary industries and do not begin to approximate the scale or organization of current American agriculture. There were huge farms, especially in the trans-Mississippi West, but these were not typical. Historians debunking Turner's vision of small frontier farmers and those interested in the technological evolution of farm machinery have overemphasized the small minority of large farms that used expensive machinery and hired great numbers of wage laborers.<sup>20</sup>

Instead, until the middle of the twentieth century the overwhelming majority of farms were family farms, which relied primarily on family members for labor and management. In his overview of the economic history of American agriculture, economist William Parker stresses the pervasiveness and constancy of the family scale of production from the colonial period to World War II. Although large-scale farms, tenancy, and hired labor were more prevalent in the West and the South, the older farm states in the North showed no inevitable trend toward those conditions. In his brief discussion of farming in *The Visible Hand*, Alfred D. Chandler explains the persistence of family management in contrast to the increasingly large scale of organization in industry:

In the raising of corn, cotton, wheat, and other crops, biological constraints determined the time of preparing the soil, sowing, cultivating, and harvesting, and so set the overall processes of production . . . But the need almost never arose to devise organizational procedures to integrate and coordinate the processes. Therefore, the family was able to remain the basic agricultural working unit; and the farmer, his family, and a handful of hired helpers relied, until the twentieth century, on human and animal power to work farm implements and machines.<sup>21</sup>

The analogy to urban society also obscures significant differences in the social structure of rural communities. Farming communities were mainly collections of farm owners and their families. Although farmers hired outside labor, these workers were usually hired for only a short time period and rarely in numbers comparable to city factories. The frequency of wage labor and tenancy did increase during the late nineteenth century, but the social position of these laborers and tenant farmers was much more ambiguous than that



of industrial workers. Often, for example, the tenant was the son or relative of the farm owner. There are not sufficient studies to delineate fully the rate of rural social mobility and its temporal, spatial, and ethnic variations, but those studies that do exist, especially the recent work of Donald L. Winters, indicate that the agricultural ladder toward farm ownership was a more well-traveled reality for northern rural workers than the occupational ladder was for laborers in nineteenth-century cities.<sup>22</sup>

But what about the attitudes or *mentalité* of the commercialized farmer and the nature of life in settled rural communities? Various authors note the increasing prevalence of urban cultural patterns and “modern” attitudes in the countryside. Lewis Atherton narrates the transformation of main street in the Middle West from a dynamic social force and cultural arbiter to a shrill mimic of the big city, and Wayne E. Fuller similarly chronicles the urban cultural inroads that resulted from rural free delivery. As has already been mentioned, Clarence Danhoff and Allan Bogue discuss the new attitudes of farmers themselves as they took a more calculating, rational, and business-like view of their farming operations.<sup>23</sup>

The case for the convergence of urban and rural culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is by no means unambiguous, however. On the contrary, other studies indicate that the rise of the city and the ascendance of urban values were confronted by heightened resistance in the countryside. Robert Dykstra, for example, labels town–country conflict as the hidden dimension of American social history, and Stanley Parsons uses a similar social fault line to delineate the context of Populism in the Midwest. Rather than assume that commercial farmers acted as fully rational economic men, Anne Mayhew argues for a distinct set of rural values when she interprets farm protest between 1870 and 1900 as a reaction to the increasing market orientation of plains agriculture. Finally, Don Kirschner’s study of state legislation in Illinois and Iowa indicates the persistence and increase of deep-seated rural animosity toward city ways well into the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup>

The characteristics of urban and industrial society, then, are not wholly satisfactory models for understanding developed agrarian society. Rather than capturing the essential features of commercialized rural life, the urban analogy obscures some of its critical and distinctive qualities. If the urban and industrial model is inadequate and misleading, however, so are the various notions of traditional, or pre-modern, village life. From the scattered evidence available, the nature of late-nineteenth-century rural society remains a puzzle, simulta-

10 **Those who stayed behind**

neously exhibiting social and economic characteristics that have been associated with the pastoral village as well as with modern, capitalistic society.

Any attempt to resolve this seeming paradox must consider the fact that rural areas during the second half of the nineteenth century experienced fundamentally different patterns of development than did contemporary cities within the larger context of a commercialized, capitalistic economic and social order. In contrast to the rapid and continuous economic expansion typical of urban industry, economic growth in settled farm communities slowed down and leveled off. Whereas the population in the cities increased rapidly between 1860 and 1900, rural growth rates declined and many areas lost population. The key to an understanding of the social history of older farm communities, it would seem, lies in a detailed consideration of this lessened growth and its various social ramifications.

These different urban and rural patterns are strongly implied by theories of economic development. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, American cities expanded dramatically by creating new jobs and economic opportunities. Jane Jacobs defines this as the process of adding new work to old work, and Allan Pred, in his more formal model of American metropolitan growth, delineates a multiplier effect in which a city's manufacturing activity led to still other economic endeavors. Increased urban economic activity simultaneously enhanced the possibility of new inventions or innovations, which further accelerated the multiplier process to new levels, and this expansive spiral continued almost unabated until it ran into diseconomies such as high land costs resulting from overcrowding. Yet, in the case of high land costs, the adoption of still other forms of technology such as electric street railways permitted continued urban-industrial expansion in a more decentralized form.<sup>25</sup>

Like industry, the agricultural sector of the national economy grew significantly during the nineteenth century. Between 1869 and 1899, estimates of net farm output increased from \$3.5 billion to \$8.5 billion (American billion). This aggregate expansion, however, was due primarily to the development of new farming areas and their integration into the market and not to any continuous increase in the productivity of older farm regions.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to the seemingly never-ending growth of cities and industries, agricultural development was limited by the supply of the least mobile and least flexible factor of production – land. Once a given location was settled and in farms, the number of family farm sites was near its maximum. To the extent that later adjustment to