AN ANALYSIS OF RURAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AMONG THE FRENCH-SPEAKING PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN LOUISIANA

T. LYNN SMITH
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

This paper deals primarily with the ecological aspects of rural social organization. This is partially due to methodological reasons. Fundamentally, however, this delimitation of the subject is due to a firm conviction that the relationships of farmers’ dwellings to the land and to one another is basic to all rural social organization and consequently a logical beginning for any analysis of the structure of rural society.

From the ecological standpoint two sharply contrasting types of rural social organization are widespread: (1) the village community, typical of a large part of European agriculture, characterized by the close spatial relationship of farmers’ dwellings to one another, and by a remote relationship between the dwelling and the cultivated land; and (2) a system based upon isolated farmsteads, characteristic of America north of Mexico, where the relationships of the farm home to the land are close and intimate, but where the relationships between the dwellings of different families are remote.

It would lead us too far astray to point out all of the characteristics or to trace the development of these two types of organization, since they have been the subject of much analysis and debate among students of the several social sciences, history, economics, government, and sociology. It is sufficient to list a few of the outstanding advantages and disadvantages of each type. For example the positive characteristics of the village community seem to be: (1) close, intimate contact with a large number of neighbors; (2) proximity to social institutions; (3) nearness to numerous playmates for the children; (4) greater opportunities for mutual aid, both in neighboring and exchanging work; (5) more adequate protection against fire and against lawless elements; and (6) economical securing of modern conveniences, electricity, telephone, gas, water, hard-surfaced roads, etc.

But the village community also has some disadvantages: (1) due to the remoteness of the cultivated lands, daily trips between the village and the fields are necessary. These consume much time and tire man and beast; (2) the proper care of livestock constitutes a great problem. Either the work stock, milk cows, and other livestock must be left by themselves in the fields, or they must be driven back and forth daily, feed transported to the village, and the barnyard manure hauled back to the land; (3) to haul all grains to the village for threshing would be very uneconomical, hence much of it is done in the fields. This wastes many by-products which chickens, pigs, etc., could utilize, had they but access to the threshing grounds; and (4) it is very difficult to give daily attention to the conditions of the soil and crops, and this is especially true if the farmer’s holdings are scattered about piecemeal as they almost always are wherever the village community type of organization is found.

As contrasted with the village community, a system of organization based on isolated farms offers the following advantages: (1) close, intimate and constant contact with the land and crops; (2) fewer complications related to maintaining and caring for livestock; (3) greater opportunities for utilizing the by-products of the farm; (4) an elimination of the efforts needed to haul feed to the village and manure to the farm; and (5) more plentiful opportunities to observe carefully the conditions of the soil and crops. But this type of organization also has its disadvantages. Chief among these are: (1) scarcity of neighbors and infrequency of social contacts; (2) remoteness from social institutions; (3) scarcity of playmates for the children; (4) relative lack of opportunities for mutual aid; (5) difficulties in securing adequate protection against fire and against unlawful elements; and (6) comparative expensiveness of securing modern conveniences.

All in all it appears that the village community obtains the advantage of a high degree of social integration and cohesion at the expense of a low degree of economic integration and cohesion, while the isolated farm obtains a high degree of economic integration and cohesion at the expense of a low degree of social integration and cohesion. If one engaged in social planning were to decide between the two, it would be necessary to do so by weighing the economic advantages of the isolated farm against the social advantages of the village community. Any decision reached would be sure to bring forth sharp criticism from one side or the other. Happily the choice is not limited to these two types. The thesis outlined in this paper is that among the French-
speaking people of southern Louisiana, a type of organization exists which combines the economic advantages of the isolated farm with the social advantages of the village community, without the major disadvantages of either.

The French-speaking migrants who came to Louisiana from France and Acadia established in this country a pattern of organization with which they had been familiar in the "old country." The unique thing about it was the method of laying out the lands. Rivers and bayous were taken as the points of departure, and plots were laid off measuring so many arpents along the bayou and so many arpents back towards the swamp. Since the width of the holdings was always very slight as compared with the length, a map of an area so laid out, presents the picture of a series of very narrow strips laid side by side. Each strip heads on the stream or bayou, cuts across the highlands which the overflow from the bayou has built up, and butts against the swamp with its abundant growth of timber. As the waterway twists and turns, the rows of strips flanking it on either side twist and turn with it.

The settlements on Bayou Lafourche in southern Louisiana were established according to this pattern. In order to show more clearly the advantages of this type of organization an intensive study was made of a section in which it prevails. A four-mile segment of the territory lying along Bayou Lafourche was visited and data secured from each family. The area chosen lies on the western side of the bayou, midway between the town of Thibodaux and the village of Raceland. It centers at the St. Charles Catholic Church which lies on the opposite side. The region studied consists of those portions of the service areas of the church and school which lie on the western side of the bayou. Along this four-mile stretch are located the homes of 120 families, including 95 homes occupied by farm operators; five by colored farm laborers; eleven by white farm laborers, six by dependent families of whom two are families of widows, two families of aged couples and two others; and the remaining three are the homes of a produce dealer, a merchant, and a carpenter. Much the same thing is present on the other side of the bayou except that several large plantations complicate the pattern.


The more detailed information concerning this neighborhood will be given in a thesis which Mr. Fosco is preparing in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. degree at Louisiana State University.

The 95 farms average approximately 220 feet in width and extend back about a mile and one-half. These farms which are very uniform in size average around 40 acres. Eighty-one of the 95 farms are owned by the operators, and several of those which are rented are leased from such near relatives of the operator as brother, mother-in-law or uncle.

The population is overwhelmingly of French extraction, 108 of the 120 families reporting French as the line of descent on both sides. Families reporting mixed descent, numbered only six, consisting in three cases of French and German, in one case of French and Irish, in one case of Scotch and French, and in one case of German and Spanish ancestry. In addition there is one family of German descent. Five families of negroes complete the total of 120.

In language, too, the neighborhood is overwhelmingly French. Eight families reported French as the only language spoken in the home, while only one, that a negro family, reported English as the only language used. The remaining 111 families reported the use of both French and English in the home, but French was the language stated to be most commonly used in 94 homes and English in only 17 homes. The field worker reported that the use of English by the children in school carries over into the home to a minor degree, but that French is overwhelmingly the language of the community. Indeed the securing of data was possible only because the worker himself could use the French language.

Except for the five families of negroes the population is solidly Catholic in religion, not a single exception being found. A similar homogeneity in politics is present, all being Democrats, and all of the white families except ten contain members who are registered. Nearly everyone reported voting in the last election.

Trait after trait might be enumerated but those already considered should suffice to give some impression of the neighborhood studied, of the great homogeneity of the group, of the strong intimate ties which characterize it, morphologically, and of the suitableness of the area for ecological analysis. Let us now turn to an examination of our thesis.

To demonstrate that this type of organization possesses the advantages of the isolated farm is unnecessary, because each farmer actually dwells on his farm, in immediate proximity to the fields he cultivates, with his sheds and barns for grain and livestock and his stacks of feed in the immediate neighborhood of his dwelling. It should be noted in passing that some disadvantage from the standpoint of farm management may arise out
of the narrowness of the strips of land, but the specialist in farm
management at the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station*
assures us that they are not serious. Since each farmer lives upon
his holding, the thesis of this paper will be proved if it can be
shown that this pattern of rural organization secures the social
advantages of the village community.

As stated above, farms in the four-mile stretch along Bayou
Lafourche average 220 feet in width. Each dwelling is built at
the front of the holding near the bayou with the result that
the settlement presents the picture of a long one-streeted village
winding its way across the country side. Behind the dwellings
are the cultivated fields, long narrow strips running back about
one mile and butting against the woods and pastures which con-
stitute the rear portions of the holdings. Deductively one can
surmise the possibilities such a system offers for social interac-
tion, and the objective facts substantiate the theory.

Counting only those on the one side of the bayou the average
number of neighboring families within a mile of a given family
is sixty, within a half mile, thirty, or a quarter mile, fifteen. Simi-
lar conditions on the opposite side of the bayou would double
this number. Thus from the standpoint of number of neighbors,
this type of organization approximates the village community.
On the qualitative side there is a tendency for neighbors to be
closely related to one another. Thus, seventy-two of the families
had as their nearest neighbors on one side or the other, the family
of some relative. And in forty-two cases this relationship was
either that of parent and child, or of children of the same par-
ents. The seventy-two cases take no account of relationships more
remote than first cousin. This brings out strikingly the fact that
one's closest neighbors are those to whom he is tied by the most
intimate and durable of social ties—physiological kinship. The
large number of neighbors, their similarity in race, religion, oc-
cupation, and political beliefs, and their close kinship provide
ample opportunity for social interaction and effectually insure
against social isolation.

The close, intimate contact with a large number of relatives
and friends greatly extends the possibilities of neighboring and
mutual aid. For example, the number of farmers with whom it
is possible to exchange labor is nearly as large as in the village
community. The ease of making arrangements is also much
greater than if the farms were isolated. Just as in the village

* Dr. R. J. Saville.

community, assistance in time of sickness, trouble or distress is
always near at hand. If the family is away from home, the watch-
ful eyes of neighbors can be on the alert to see that all is well
about the house and the farm property. A neighbor is not greatly
inconvenienced by doing a few chores for a family which is ab-
sent from home. A volunteer fire crew is always in the immediate
neighborhood.

A very important feature of this bayou settlement is that the
numerous families of neighboring relatives and friends supply
abundant playmates for one another's children. The visitor to
Bayou Lafourche cannot help but be struck by the large number
of children who are everywhere to be seen. A count showed that
the 120 families contained 127 children less than 12 years of age.
Sixty children under 12 within a mile of one's home and an addi-
tional 60 just beyond (not to mention those over 12 and those
across the bayou) one can readily see is a radical departure from
the situation on the isolated farm, and approximates the condi-
tion found in the village community.

The immediate proximity of social institutions is another great
advantage. The service areas of the church with its 1,200 mem-
bers, the elementary school with its 220 members and the high
school with its 51 members extend only two miles in each direc-
tion. These institutions are not only present in the neighbor-
hood, they are used. Of the 120 families, 109 reported the practice of
attending church at least once a week. Despite the fact that no
busses operate in Lafourche Parish to transport the children to
and from school, the principal reports the attendance in both the
elementary grades and in the high school as extremely high. Since
only 35 of the 120 families have automobiles, these data should
illustrate the fact that this type of organization approximates
the village community in providing close and intimate contact
with social institutions.

Contacts with economic agencies present some unique features.
These can best be discussed after the advantages which this type
of organization offers in the economical securing of modern fa-
cilities for communication and transportation, and other modern
conveniences have received attention. It should be apparent that
these advantages are very great. To begin with, four miles of
concrete pavement provide a roadway passing directly in front
of every one of the 120 dwellings. If we consider only the 95
homes of farm operators, this represents a great saving over the
13½ miles of pavement which would be required to reach the
homes of 96 families living in an area corresponding in size and
laid out into 40 acre plots according to the checker-board system. The actual advantage is even greater, because bridges and ferries make the paved road of immediate service to the families living across the bayou. If economical securing of electricity, telephone, etc., is considered (to these the bayou offers no barrier) the advantage with the bayou settlement is almost eight to one. The fact that in this particular settlement only fifteen of the families avail themselves of the electric power and two families of the telephone does not alter the possibilities inherent in this pattern of organization. It might be stated that these families, like those in the village community, do not need the telephone as badly as families on isolated farms, and that in this neighborhood many homes which are wired for electricity have had the current shut off due to the pressure of economic circumstances in the last few years. Twelve of the families using electricity also possess radios, and ten dwellings are equipped with modern plumbing. More important in showing the advantages of this pattern of organization is the fact that 35 of the families reported the use of ice refrigerators. This is possible only because the highway and the density of population make it economically profitable for a truck from Thibodaux to deliver ice daily to the homes along the way. With this type of set-up, it is possible to have fresh milk, butter, meat, eggs, vegetables, ice cream, or any other perishable product, delivered daily to each home. Nearly everyone on Bayou Lafourche keeps a milk cow and produces most of the other products named, but the possibility of contacting a great number of farm families quickly and cheaply remains.

The unique relationships to economic agencies which this neighborhood exhibits are possible only with this type of organization. When questioned as to where they purchased various articles, each family explained that trucks from various stores, especially the two located in the area studied, made the rounds daily and delivered all the goods needed. Of the 120 families, 97 per cent reported the practice of buying their groceries, 90 per cent their dry goods, 92 per cent their work clothes, 92 per cent their hardware, and 82 per cent their dress clothes, from these trucks. Furthermore they indicated that, although trucks from Thibodaux and Raceland also made the rounds, most of the purchases were made from their two storekeeping relatives, neighbors and friends. It is interesting to note that farm products such as eggs were accepted by the merchants in payment for the goods, and that both the stores carry relatively complete lines of all the goods mentioned. For drugs and for medical, dental and banking services, Thibodaux and Raceland are resorted to although the contacts are primarily with the former.

Commercialized recreation consists mostly of movies and dances, likewise supplied by the town of Thibodaux and the village of Raceland. The central position of Raceland with respect to highways gives its dances great drawing power so that these entertainments which are held on Saturday nights are attended by people from a radius of 50 miles or more, and mingled among the crowd are representatives from one-fourth of the families in the area. Sunday night will find another group, representing one-sixth of the families, at the dance in Thibodaux. Saturday night movies attract members of fifty-seven families, mainly to Thibodaux. From the school, it is just eight miles to either Thibodaux or Raceland, paved all the way. If any who lack a car desire to go, neighbors and friends load theirs a little heavier and everyone goes who wishes.

Within the neighborhood, the annual church fair is a time of great celebration. Two days of festivities, Saturday and Sunday, with dances each night constitute the proceedings. Literally every one attends, male and female, young and old, well-to-do and poor, owner, tenant, and laborer, all are there. In addition, the whole-hearted enjoyment arising from the frequent assemblies of friends and relatives, gives recreation within the settlement a tone similar to that of the recreation characteristic of the village community.

Let us briefly summarize the argument given in this paper. Much discussion has arisen concerning the relative merits of two types of rural organization, one based on isolated farms, and the other upon village communities. To choose between the two, one would have to decide whether the economic advantages of the isolated farm were more important than the social advantages of the village community, or vice versa. Such a choice is not necessary, since a third alternative is existent in the form of settlement established by the French-speaking people who settled southern Louisiana. Here every farmer lives upon his farmstead and thus secures the economic advantages of the isolated farm. But the system of dividing the land permits the formation of a village-like settlement which enables most of the social advantages of the village community to be secured. Data were offered to show that this bayou settlement offers abundant contacts with neighbors, close proximity to social and economic institutions, adequate opportunities for children to have playmates, excellent chances for neighboring, economical ways of securing the mod-
ern methods of communication, transportation and household conveniences, and better protection against fire and the lawless elements.

In conclusion let us urge at this time, when things are in a state of flux, when social planning is everywhere talked of, and when the re-location of large numbers of our population is being considered, that those responsible for the form the new settlement shall take, give some consideration to the possibilities offered by this type of organization. The bayou is no longer an essential element. When the settlements in Louisiana were established, waterways were the arteries of communication and therefore formed the logical points of departure. Today were settlements established according to this pattern the highway could be taken as the point of departure.