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**Consequences for Three Rural Social Institutions  
Existing in a World Economy**

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**Abstract**

*This paper employs Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) World Systems Theory and Lewis Coser's (1956) Conflict Theory to understand the historical and demographic context of three social institutions in South Dakota, rural education, church and family. Consequences for the three institutions are suggested given the demographic backdrop of continued population decline. Some scenarios are presented based on the analysis presented.*

**Introduction**

The study of rural education, church and family has not garnered the attention that other sociological research has in recent years. This of course begs the question, why the lack of current interest in these rural issues? Rural America has been undergoing dramatic, and profound, social, and cultural change for nearly one hundred years, yet little has been written recently about this change. "The urban problem is that of growing congestion, but the rural problem is that of growing isolation. While the evils connected with the city have long provoked discussion, because they force themselves upon public gaze, the vicissitudes of the country have been somewhat disregarded, because [the problems are] hidden in their solitude." (Nesmith 1903).

Rural research would seem to be a prime area for sociological research. Perhaps the answer to this dearth of rural research can be found in the 1952 *American Sociological Review* article by Neal Gross who states "...the slight attention given to conceptualization [of the problems] and the aversion to theory in rural sociological study" provides an explanation (Gross 1952). Is rural sociological research devoid of applicable sociological theory? Of course not. Perhaps the dearth of rural sociological research is akin to the problems facing rural America. There is an ever-shrinking population in the rural agricultural areas of the Great Plains states. Who wants to look at something that is not growing, new, and exciting? This article will look at the social institutions of family, church, and education in relation to rural population decline. Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory can explain conditions in rural America, and specifically in South Dakota.

### **Historical Contexts**

South Dakota was opened for white European settlement with the Federal government's homesteading program. Most immigrants to the state settled on homesteads and hoped to make a living by farming. For some this was a productive and even prosperous existence. For most, the work was hard, the living conditions barely tolerable, and the financial and personal rewards minimal. Those that could make a living by farming stayed and continued to work the land. The farmers who remained needed to have large families as offspring were needed to supply labor to work the land and complete household chores. The population of South Dakota grew during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century due to immigration and a high birth rate. During this same time period negative consequences occurred for South Dakota's Native American population.

They were forcibly relocated to reservations which consisted of some of the worst land available in the state. Change was highly negative for this group of people.

An unexpected demographic change occurred for European settlers in the early 1900s in the rural Great Plains. The 1900 United States census showed nationwide “there were 5.4 percent fewer people in the country than ten years before; and of the 13,000,000 people added to the population during the decade, 73.8 percent found homes in urban centers, and only 26.2 percent in the rural district” (Nesmith 1903). John Palen (2002) contends that nearly all population growth in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was urban. The costs of these demographic changes are both social and financial. “Every state that shows a marked decrease in rural population reveals an accompanying decrease in farm values. This loss moreover, increases with the farmer who remains. The road deteriorates. The taxes increase. As the road deteriorates, the farmer is pushed farther and farther back from the village. The value of the farm falls in proportion; the cost of transportation increases, until in some communities, it is said, it costs the farmer as much to haul his produce six miles as he pays the railroad to carry it five hundred.” (Nesmith 1903).

The period of the 1920s and 1930s saw the most significant change to ever occur on the farm. Agricultural mechanization transformed the amount of labor needed to undertake the farm chores. Machines began to replace human laborers. For the first time in history, farming was becoming easier in terms of human labor requirements. As William Ogburn states, “technological innovations ... are the causes of most of our social change” this has held true in the case of agriculture (Ogburn 1929).

Also during the mid-1930s the nation’s Great Plains suffered through two consecutive years of nearly unimaginable drought. Those farmers who had overextended themselves with debt, mostly acquiring the new labor saving farm machinery, lost their farms to the banks. The banks foreclosed on the properties and the farm families were left with nothing. The small town banks also suffered as thousands, whose deposits were mostly invested in farm land, went bankrupt

causing depositors to lose their life savings. Farm families who could not survive the rural farm economy set out on their journeys west. Many of these families ended up in the western states of California, Oregon, and Washington.

Another change taking place during this time was that major cities of the East and the Midwest were becoming places of concentrated industrial activity and manufacturing. These cities were begging for workers. The rural agricultural centers had an abundance of workers. The classic push-pull hypothesis was at play as suggested by Wallerstein. The push-pull hypothesis states "that migration is due to socioeconomic imbalances between regions, certain factors pushing people persons away from the area of origin, and other pulling them to the area of destination" (Fuguitt 1959). The rural areas for the first time ever had an abundance of manpower as a consequence of mechanization of agriculture. The urban industrial centers had a need for laborers and they were pulling workers in from the rural areas.

One result of this push-pull factor is that the youngest, and most productive, members of families often left the family farms to relocate in cities. Once settled into cities, many of these workers decided to stay in urban areas. Cities grew in population, social complexity, and increasing social specialization. Rural areas stagnated and eventually began the long process of decline. This decline continues today, and has had an impact on all aspects of rural society. This decline brings up the question of how to explain rural life change using a sociological model.

One of the premises of Wallerstein's (1974) world systems theory states that resources will flow from the periphery to the core. While his theory looks at international resource flow, the same process can be applied to South Dakota's rural demographic changes. The resource of human labor left the rural areas for the cities, which could be considered the core region in Wallerstein's model.

"We shall denote this distinction as one between the periphery of a world-

economy in the geographic sector of it wherein production is primarily of lower-ranking goods (this is, goods whose labor is less well rewarded) but which is an integral part of the overall system of the division of labor, because the commodities involved are essential for daily use" (Wallerstein 1974). Wallerstein designates "geographic center" in the definition of a periphery. In this paper we will consider South Dakota as an example of such a geographic center. South Dakota qualifies as peripheral by being a major exporter of raw agricultural products to the rest of the core economies of the world. Agricultural products qualify as "essential for daily use" in his definition. South Dakota is a state with a human population of 754,844 persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) and a cattle population of 4.05 million in 2001 (South Dakota Agricultural Statistics Service 2002). This state is also a provider of grain, poultry, swine and eggs. However, with all of this production of raw products, little is processed into finished products in the state. While a major producer of pigs, the state's pork processors have mostly gone out of business. A relatively small beef processing plant remains in Sioux Falls, as the state remains the major exporter of feeder cattle to be fattened and processed elsewhere for market.

Another of Wallerstein's definitions involves the compensation of labor. On this front South Dakota has one of the most poorly paid work force in the nation. Two of the three poorest counties in the nation are located in South Dakota. Much of the state exists in economic distress with only a few, exclusively urban, islands of prosperity. South Dakota has a per capita income of \$17,562 (US Census, 2000). When compared to neighboring states, only Montana has a lower per capita income. The average per capita income of the six neighboring states is \$19,423 (US Census, 2000). South Dakota has two metropolitan statistical areas, defined as population centers of 50,000 persons or more. These two metropolitan areas have an average per capita income of \$19,937 (US Census, 2000). South Dakota has sixty six counties, forty-four are

considered rural and twenty-two have urban areas, defined as cities with a population of at least 2,500 persons (US Census, 2000). South Dakota also has five counties with total populations of less than 2,500 persons. These five counties have an average per capita income of \$15,314, with a range of \$12,794 to \$17,407. These income averages are all well below the state average and significantly below the national average of \$21,587 (US Census, 2000).

Population movement has long been from economically distressed rural to more prosperous urban places. Wallerstein is suggesting that the more highly valued the labor the greater will be labor's compensation. Clearly rural areas suffer from low levels of income, helping to explain negative consequences for the state's social institutions.

### **Impact on Family**

The first social structure impacted as a result of the changes occurring in the rural Great Plains is the family. The intergenerational familial connections began to splinter. This again is due to the fact that the younger members were heading to the cities and leaving the older members and the very young members on the farms. In many cases, the family's best and brightest members were moving into the cities. The young farm workers became a valuable asset to the manufacturers as they had practical problem solving abilities learned from their farm experiences. As the younger members of the family moved off the farms the ever-present amount of farm work fell to those who remained.

For the young members of the family who moved to the city, he or she would at first long for the comforts of the familiar farm. Young people are flexible however. It didn't take long for the newly arrived young person to meet other people in a similar situation. The contacts between persons not related grew in importance and soon these friendship ties were approaching the importance of family ties. Emotional needs were being met by friends, not by family members. Another unique aspect of this social change is the people with

whom one became friends may or may not have similar ethnic backgrounds. With an ever increasing concentration of people in the urban areas, there was a growing diversity of cultures, religion, and ideas in these growing cities. The cities of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century must have been exciting places to live. But what was happening back on the farm?

As the farm family members aged, the question arose, who would take care of the increasing numbers of elderly rural residents? For countless generations families cared for elderly family members. Now this was not working. There were too few younger family members to provide care for the elderly. More or perhaps different care was needed. The obvious answer was that formal community elderly care centers would be needed. It must also be noted that advances in medical care and treatment of illness was allowing people to live longer and live with more frail health than ever before. This ultimately increased the care needs of the elderly. Even today in most rural communities, one generally finds long-term elder care. It is about the only viable business left in many communities. In George Maddox' study, he states "...when affluent societies reach advanced stages of industrialization the welfare of older persons can be assured" (Maddox 1979). The physical welfare of the older person is one thing, but who interacts with the elderly and tells them they are valued; and that they have something remaining to give to society. With the loss of the younger family generations to the city, a connection is lost with the historical aspects and intergenerational connectedness of the family. The result of this loss of connectedness is the growth in the importance of the nuclear family as opposed to the connectedness found within an extended family.

A secondary theory used in this article is Lewis Coser's (1956) conflict theory. An elementary application of this theory would state that the conflict being felt by the family resulted in social shifts from primacy of family to the growing importance of other social supports. This would support Coser's belief

that conflict can be a unifying force in society.

### **Impact on Church**

The second major social institution to be affected by this rural demographic change is the traditional rural churches. In South Dakota the predominant rural religions were, and continue to be, Christian: the protestant denominations and Roman Catholics. "The church and the school have always been prized for their value to inspire a longing for the highest life. It is a great loss for a community when the standards of these institutions fall" (Nesmith 1903). The church does not have the luxury of government support and is the most influenced when membership or contributions for support began to fall. When people move out of the rural areas and access to church, via poor roads is factored in, the church suffers irreparably. "So we witness in our rural communities a vast destitution of religion. We hear annually long reports of dead and dying churches; we behold churches barely alive, with no settled pastors; we see churches with settled pastors giving their entire strength in a mere fight for existence, and having no money or energy left for community interests and philanthropy" (Nesmith 1903). "With the redemptive power of the church practically nil, her message forgotten and marred, the spiritual condition of the rural community falls correspondingly lower" (Nesmith 1903).

An additional aspect of the death of the rural churches is that people abandon the rural church and begin to travel to the rural villages and cities to attend worship services, if they attend at all. The importance of the rural neighborhoods began to decline as a result of this movement to cities or other areas for church services. The churches in the upper Great Plains were the first to begin consolidation. There are few truly rural churches left. Most of these churches have long been closed and are only a memory of the aging rural population. The churches that remain are in the rural villages and cities. The consequence of the rural church loss is that now the churches are no longer

composed of several close knit families who are essentially similar. The churches have become a collection of city and rural members who have a variety of occupational activities. There is great variation amongst church members and one result is less social and intimate connections between the members. Continued specialization and compartmentalization is occurring on the religious as well as the familial front in these rural areas. The ministers of this "area-wide" congregation must present a religious message that is so broad so as to include everyone and spiritually move few. Church members no longer know each other by name, face, place of residence, and familial lineage. Church members must review a church photographic directory to place individuals who attend the services. The minister may or may not know members by name. He or she most likely recognizes the faces of the daily attendees, but is unable to know those who attend on a more sporadic basis. Even in church it is possible for one to become invisible in the crowd.

An additional interesting and unique factor that has sped the decline of the rural church is the ever growing need for denominationalization of the church. Rather than have one Christian church service to meet the needs of the rural residents, there was a "Methodist" church, a "Lutheran" church with all sub-sets of Lutheranism, a "Presbyterian" church, and a "Roman Catholic" church. With all of these specific denominations none, individually, were strong enough to resist the exodus of the rural population to the city. The churches themselves helped to speed their own demise based on strict adherence to specific dogma dictated by these denominations. As the churches went into decline the best and brightest ministers were called to the cities to serve their growing congregations. The results for the rural churches were "irregular and inefficient ministers, narrow in theology and weak in personality, have added to the growing indifference" (Nesmith 1903).

The impact of the closure of the rural churches for many meant that they

attended no formal religious services either in the rural areas or in the nearby rural community. "It is said with authority that there are ninety-five towns in Maine where no religious services are held, and that there are more villages in Illinois without the gospel than in any other state in the Union. Over one-half of Vermont, so purely agricultural and intensely American, never goes to church. Statistics show that people living over two miles from church in fourteen of the states east of the Mississippi never go to church" (Nesmith 1903). The same scenario was being played out in South Dakota. What was happening nationwide in the rural areas was also happening here.

### **Impact on Schools**

The church has been affected by these demographic changes but the school has also been affected in numerous ways. "In the settlement of this country the pattern of rural sociological organization was that of the country neighborhood, the country church, and the one-room school. In those days villages and farms formed two distinct sections of rural society, and there was little sense of interdependence between them. ... Today the villages are competing for the farmer's trade and in many of them business is no longer their primary service to the countryside." (Sanderson 1941). As farmers were being pulled into the villages for trade, the viability of the one room school house is being raised. As society becomes more complex the question of whether these one room schools, which usually only teach to the eighth grade, are actually meeting the educational requirements of society. In response to this question, and for economic efficiency, more and more schools in rural areas are consolidating in central locations. These consolidated schools are often at a great distance from farms, usually in nearby villages and small cities. Parents were losing their direct influence over the education of their children. They were turning that responsibility over to another community whose standards may or may not be similar to their neighbors. The argument for closure of rural schools,

especially the one room school house was growing in the mid-twentieth century.

An argument for the rural school consolidation that was being heard by rural residents of the time was raised by John G. Fowlkes. "One of the most important aspects of any school for any age group is the opportunity to associate with people of comparable age and both similar and varied interests and experiences. Education is obtained through experiences, and it is greatly conditioned by the social situation in which it takes place. Social development resulting in desirable balance and bearing more individuals can be gained in no other way than through group association. Thousands of our rural schools, both elementary and secondary, enroll too few children to provide essential group association." (Fowlkes 1942). Fowlkes goes on to state that the curriculum of rural schools is inferior to that enjoyed by students in urban areas. "There is little evidence that the curriculum of the rural elementary schools has been sufficiently changed from the days of the past to meet the general educational needs of present day life. There similarly has been insufficient revision of the rural high-school curriculum. To be sure, excellent work is being done in agriculture and home economics in many of our rural areas, but such opportunities are by no means universally available" (Fowlkes 1942). Similar arguments can be heard today regarding education in rural South Dakota.

Fowlkes did not appreciate the functions rural schools have for rural communities. Rural schools serve as the social center of the community. It is the facility where children learn, but also the facility where citizens vote, meet for community events, and attend school functions. It is the center of rural community life. Perhaps it could be considered the heart of the community. Close rural schools and send children to the nearby town and the community loses its heart. One cannot survive without a heart. The first to go was the one-room school houses, then the small consolidated schools. To remain viable ever larger consolidated schools must be formed. This painful process of

consolidation continues to this day in South Dakota.

### **Today**

Past history and context has been reviewed here for three main sociological institutions. Sociologists like to look at institutions and draw inferences from the specific institutions to the larger society. When looking at the significant changes that have occurred in the past one hundred years with our rural families, rural churches, and rural schools, what is to become of our rural areas? More specifically what will become of South Dakota? Where will the children of this state reside when they are in their eighties?

According to the 2000 US Census, South Dakota now has more people living in urban areas than in rural areas. An urban area is defined as any city having a population of 2,500 persons or more (Moss and Satterlee 2001). Since 1970, rural farms have declined nearly 50% from 162,730 to 76,170 in 1990 (Moss and Satterlee 2001). Today nearly 49.6% of all South Dakotans live in urban areas. Most of South Dakota's urban growth is focused in the Southeast corner of the state and fueled by rapid growth in the state's largest city, Sioux Falls.

While the Southeast corner of the state is growing in population this is at the expense of nearly every other county within the state. The primarily rural counties continue to see their population decline. This started in the 1930s and continues today. Reasons for this population decline remain the same. There is little demand for workers in rural areas and growing urban areas are pulling rural youths and citizens away from farms. In conjunction with population decline in the rural areas, the average size of the farm is increasing. With fewer farmers and the same amount of land, average farm size increases. In 1910 the average South Dakota farm was 335 acres, in 1997 the average size of a South Dakota farm was 1,418 acres. An average farm size increase of 423 percent.

In terms of education in South Dakota, most school districts, which have long ago been consolidated to form their current configuration, are seeing the

continued population declines of school age children. Sioux Falls and the southeast corner of the state are the notable exception. In addition to population decline, the rural areas face a decaying educational infrastructure with an average school building between 70 to 80 years old. This does not bode well for the future of education in South Dakota. With per pupil education costs rising, and declining population figures, the obvious outcome will likely be more consolidation. This will result in an ever increasing population demise in the rural areas, inability to attract business to the area, and the “graying” of rural South Dakota. In addition to the issues discussed, there will be less local social control pertaining to the content of education and more reliance on state and federal monies with all of the requirements that come with this funding source.

Education of South Dakota’s children in the remote areas of the state will most likely be supplemented with technological delivery of education through means of satellite educational programs, interactive television, computer networks, or other means. Students of the rural agricultural areas may return to the hypothetical one room school house. In some rural areas of the state, students spend a significant amount of time on a school bus being transported to a school in a city that is far from their homes. There is little likelihood of meaningful social interaction as espoused by John Fowlkes. There may even be a future scenario in the state where students are removed from the rural areas and educated in the urban areas. These students may be less willing to return to the rural areas to “take over the farm” after experiencing life in the city.

In reference to the family, the extended family is becoming ever more scattered geographically through the impact of rural to urban migration. As a result of this migration, the younger members are leaving and the older members remain. South Dakota now has some of the oldest counties in America in terms of average age. Aging of South Dakota’s rural citizens influences the already problematic issue of healthcare costs, long-term care needs, and declining school

age populations. The future, when viewed in these terms, looks simply frightening for South Dakota. Older persons do not have children, do not start business, and do not attract other young families to move into a specific area.

Lastly, in reference to the church, most rural churches have been closed. The churches in small cities are also seeing the problems of a declining membership base, increasing difficulty in locating an effective pastor willing to reside in the rural areas, and future possibility of church closure. It is likely more and more marginal congregations in rural areas and small cities will close or merge with nearby churches. Small city churches are being replaced with the urban mega-worship complexes that have services as choreographed as any Las Vegas show.

### **Explanation and Analysis**

A number of sociological theories can be utilized to explain the issues occurring in rural America and specifically rural South Dakota. Wallerstein's world systems theory is used as a primary explanatory theory. Secondly, Lewis Coser's conflict theory is also used to bring additional support to the conclusions being suggested by the use of Wallerstein's theory. Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) discusses a world systems theory where there is a migration from the hinterlands to core. His theory focuses on economic resources, raw materials, and an inverse flow of knowledge and technology. While this theory has not been applied on a micro level, such as an individual state, the ideas driving the process appear valid.

We clearly see these demographic changes occurring in South Dakota with devastating consequences for rural areas. We also see this occurring on a world scale with persons from Central America, the Orient, and other areas migrating to America in search of a better job and life. In many aspects life in rural South Dakota is not significantly different than life in the less developed regions of the world. Many of the same factors pushing persons from their Central American,

and Oriental homelands are occurring here in South Dakota.

Lewis Coser states that conflict can be a unifier. In his terms, conflict has a positive influence on society. "Conflict is seen as a binding element between parties that may previously have stood in no relation to each other ... conflict may give rise to regulations and norms governing its conduct and restrain the forms in which it is being fought out" (Coser 1956). There is a conflict between the rural and the urban areas. Conflict in South Dakota evolves around money, schools, healthcare, crime control, and maintenance of social order. These are the same issues that concern people nearly everywhere in the United States. Coser's idea of conflict as a unifier can be utilized when local and state governments look at a way to control the loss of its rural populations. Idealistically wealthier urban areas need to share more of their resources with the sparsely populated rural areas, which realistically is unlikely to occur.

### **Conclusion**

Population decline is not a new phenomenon. Population decline in rural South Dakota has been progressing since the 1930s and now affects much of the state, with a few notable exceptions. This paper has looked at the impact of this change on families, churches, and the schools. Social theories of Wallerstein and Coser have been used to examine the impact on the three social institutions to explain this phenomenon. What is next?

Kept unchecked, the population decline in much of rural South Dakota will result in a state with only a handful of viable communities and vast tracts of land used solely for cattle or agricultural production. These vast tracts of land will be serviced with huge mechanized agricultural methods demanding little human input. There is also an increased risk of large corporate agriculture entering the state in even greater numbers, since the cost of the huge machinery required to farm the large tracts of lands quickly becomes prohibitive for the family farmer with limited economic resources. One cost of the loss of rural

population will be that rural local governments will be unable to maintain roads, and other needed infrastructure, due to its inability to increase taxes beyond a certain reasonable level. Disorder at the local government level will soon follow and spread to other parts of the county and even perhaps to the state.

Some possible or hypothetical scenarios about what may happen in South Dakota based upon current demographic trends are described. One scenario is to make the rural areas more attractive to young citizens. To do this would require massive federal and state monies to relocate jobs, industry, or other people attracting activities to the rural areas. In this era of ever shrinking tax revenues combined with a concept of less government, this is not a likely scenario.

A second scenario is to return the land to its pre-European settlement condition. Let nature take over and return the land to dormant non-agricultural use. This is essentially the concept espoused in the "Buffalo Commons" discussion created sixteen years ago by Drs. Frank and Deborah Popper, and presented by Dr. Richard Rathge at the October 3, 2002 Fargo Great Plains Sociological Association Meeting. This scenario would truly render South Dakota as one of those states that you fly over when traveling.

The data reviewed for this paper suggests that continued population decline will occur in much of South Dakota with all of its corresponding social impact on our social institutions. The state, without massive federal help, will be unable to tax its citizenry at the levels required to maintain current government, health, and educational services. The future does not look positive for this state. South Dakota joins most other central plains states in facing this population decline issue. We shall see what the future holds. The only certain thing in South Dakota is that social change will occur at the same unrelenting pace as the prairie winds blow.

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