ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY THEORY

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Introduction

It is generally agreed among social scientists that a necessary preliminary to any systematic study of society is the construction of a conceptual framework within which reality may be analysed. A model-building approach within human geography has been developed essentially during the last two decades,[1] and the experience of using both normative and stochastic models has led geographers to question the deterministic nature and low explanatory powers of such models and to turn to more suitable alternatives.[2] Behavioural approaches, attempting to incorporate decision-making into explanation, reflect this increasing dissatisfaction with purely stochastic approaches to human geography.[3]

Although in any study of community change the focus must be upon the concepts of 'community' and 'social change', neither has received much attention from geographers. Too often communities have been conceived as places rather than homes of individuals and social groups, whilst overemphasis of a cause-and-effect paradigm has hindered the conceptualisation of social change as a process.[4] It would appear, therefore, that there is a need, as Harvey has claimed, to introduce a greater sociological imagination into the geographical analysis of communities.[5]

The concept of community

There is still considerable confusion over the meaning of the term 'community', which has been used in so many different ways that it has been described by Hillery as an 'omnibus term'.[6] Some interpretations encompass almost any form of social grouping—for example, the family, professions, prisoners, etc.[7]—whilst others have restricted it to 'a locality group which contains the major social institutions'.[8] To several scholars a community has a more humanistic manifestation since 'it expresses our vague yearnings for a community of desire, a communion with those around us, an extension of the bonds of kin and friends to all those who share a common fate with us'[9] and, therefore, provides 'the cooperative fullness of action, the sense of belonging, the face-to-face association with people well known'.[10]

Of the numerous attempts to unravel the term community, probably the most penetrating and comprehensive was that of Hillery in 1963.[11] Using nineteen traits, he concluded that the social organisations defined by earlier social scientists as communities formed two specific types, the communal and the formal: the latter contains one or more specific goals which it seeks to attain; the former 'refers to a system of institutions formed by people who live together'.[12] This communal definition views a community as an ecological or social organisation arising from the fact that people share a common area for a large number of their activities. In other words, 'a community arises through sharing a limited territorial space for residence and for sustenance and functions to meet common needs generated in sharing this space by establishing characteristic forms of social action'.[13]

Within the field of social geography there are two major approaches to the concept of a community. First, the well-established approach of an ecological system in which community structure manifests itself in a spatial and temporal sense:[14] it 'includes the area, the population of which, however widely distributed, regularly turn to a common centre for the

satisfaction of all or a major part of its needs',[15] and 'differs from other systems in that locality is a datum in the integration of the system'.[16] According to R. E. Park the purpose of human ecology is 'to investigate the process by which the biotic balance and the social equilibrium are maintained once they are achieved and the process by which, when the biotic balance and the social equilibrium are disturbed, the transition is made from one relatively stable order to another'.[17] Obviously such an approach contains two distinct forms of explanation of community life: first, a biotic, or sub-social, based upon processes such as competition, invasion, and succession; and, secondly, a socio-cultural, based upon co-operation and commensalistic relations. However, pioneer social ecologists believed that only the first of these could be analysed by means of ecological methods. Such restriction produced a widespread criticism of human ecology and hindered its development until it widened its horizons during the 1950s. A number of neo-ecologists now insist that it should not be limited to the sub-social since 'you cannot throw away what is most distinctly human—communication with symbols, custom and the artificial or cultural transformations man makes in his environment—and treat the residue as the ecology of the species'.[18] This change of attitude has led to a revival of interest in human ecology within the social sciences,[19] and to its emergence as a focal point within social geography.[20] Despite the growth during the last two decades of a considerable body of ecological literature on communities, criticism has continued unabated. It has been argued that, as a result of increasing wealth and enhanced aspirations, man's spatial horizons now extend beyond the locality and, therefore, the ecological explanation of behaviour is insignificant. For example, R. E. Pahl believes that 'any attempt to tie the patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise'[21] and the *avant-garde* planner, Melvin Webber,[22] envisages the emergence of an aspatial society in the not-too-distant future. Another form of criticism has emerged from those who argue that, despite the broadening of its perspective, human ecology

still remains essentially deterministic, and therefore any consideration of process is still precluded.[23] Within geography this approach manifests itself in three types of study: the community as a settlement, as a locality, and as a social ecological system;

The second socio-geographical approach to community views it as a social system; that is, the smallest spatial system which encompasses the major features of society. According to Reiss there appear to be two, albeit relatively similar, ways of analysing social systems.[24] The first, the collective-action approach, views the community as a place where there is a common cultural or psychological bond among its members which manifests itself in the recognition of 'local' goals and the creation of a common motivation towards these goals, whether of co-operation or conflict. According to Sanders the major determinants of such feelings are tradition and local values,[25] although others, such as Warren,[26] argue in favour of a sense of security provided by the identification with a locality. Both ideas are encompassed in the more generalised concept of community sentiment, or 'an awareness of sharing a way of life as well as the common earth'.[27] In the majority of modern communities these common ties have been broken down and, therefore, the use of this approach to identify community variables has been weakened. However, interest in this approach continues, in particular among those who believe that much of the alienation, frustration and loneliness experienced by individuals could be overcome with the restoration of the common bonds.[28]

A different emphasis to the view of the community as a social system has been provided by those who adopt a social-group approach. Briefly, a community is a place where individuals interact with each other and receive the greater part of their physiological, psychological and social needs. This most recent approach to community analysis is primarily concerned with the identification of those forms of interaction which integrate individuals into a community and the stages through

which they evolve.[29] Obviously, one of the problems involved with this approach is the fact that not all interaction within a single territorial area derives solely from a community. However, Margaret Stacey has attempted to overcome these weaknesses by conceptualising the community as a local social system.[30]

Rural–urban continuum

The position of the rural community within the total framework of community types is traditionally identified by adopting a polar typological approach. Basically, this is a simplified model of the social and cultural system under examination, which emphasises the degree of similarity between two or more communities. The best known of the typologies used to differentiate rural from urban communities is the rural–urban continuum. In its original form this typology merely distinguished the extremes, but more recent interpretations have emphasised the transformation which occurs from one pole to the other. In other words, this typology is also a theory of social change which can be used to identify the nature and direction of the social processes involved. In a review of this typology Reissman has identified at least seven terms which have been used to describe the two poles;[31] of these the most influential in social geography is the folk–urban concept of Redfield.[32] Considerable support for the existence of a rural–urban dichotomy/continuum has come from several quarters, in particular Louis Wirth's influential paper 'Urbanism as a Way of Life'. According to Wirth 'the bonds of kinship, of neighbourliness, and the sentiments arising out of living together for generations under a common folk tradition are likely to be absent, or at best, relatively weak in an aggregate, the members of which have such diverse origins and backgrounds. Under such circumstances competition and formal control mechanisms furnish the substitutes for the bonds of solidarity that are relied upon to hold a folk society together.'[33]

Thus, an urban society is characterised by a predominance of secondary over primary contacts, a high division of labour, high rates of vertical mobility, a formal mechanism of social control, and communication via the mass media.

In recent years a good deal of criticism has been levelled at this typology both as a means of locating communities relative to each other and as a conceptualisation of social change.[34] Probably the most crucial is its failure to recognise the possibility of a co-existence of different societal elements within the same community. So widespread is the empirical evidence in support of this that Gans has concluded that 'if ways of life do not coincide with settlement type and if these ways are functions of class and life cycle rather than the ecological attributes of the settlement a sociological definition of the city cannot be formulated'.[35] Similarly, objections to the continuum have been raised over its western ethnocentrism and particular ideological stance as a result of the realisation that the transformation of social values is not a universal process but solely one related to a particular cultural context. Pahl has even argued that the use and interpretation of the continuum has been too simplistic, leading to sweeping and often inaccurate generalisations.[36] However, despite these widespread criticisms the defenders of the concept of the rural–urban continuum have claimed that it still has much of value in it.[37] There exist at least three contexts in which this defence has taken place:

1. *Theoretical* A number of the supporters of the continuum have pointed out that many criticisms of it are based on a misinterpretation of the role of ideal constructed-types in social scientific investigations.[38] Too often these were interpreted as generalisations which, according to Hauser, 'without the benefit of adequate research, well illustrates the dangers of catchy neologisms which often get confused with knowledge'.[39] In an analysis of Tönnies's ideas Loomis argued that 'no social system could persist if relations were either completely *Gemeinschaft*-like[40] or completely *Gesellschaft*-like.[41] This fact does not prevent the human mind from conceiving of such

"ideal-types" and using them for comparative and ordering purposes. In fact, this is their chief value.'[42]

2. *Multi-dimensional* Duncan's assertion that 'it is highly doubtful that the uni-dimensional continuum, in any rigorous mathematical sense, is a sufficiently realistic model for research on inter-community variation'[43] led a number of researchers to claim that there exists a series of non-overlapping continua. Such a multi-dimensional continuum is composed of a series of continua, for example social demographic, cultural, political and economic, which need not all be present in every situation and which do not necessarily change along its continuum in a similar fashion. This realisation of the complexity of socio-cultural variation within communities has generated a growing literature in recent years. After a review of community life in town and country in his book *Communities in Britain*, Frankenberg develops 'a theory of social change, a progressive and historical development from rural to urban, mediated by industrialization, division of labour and role of differentiation',[44] and then aligns the communities along what he calls a 'morphological continuum'. An alternative, yet similar, approach is that adopted by Burie in his model of inter-community variation, which conceives change as multi-dimensional and dispenses with terms like 'city', 'countryside', 'rural' and 'urban'.[45] Each community varies on a physical, cultural and structural dimension and, therefore, any group of communities can be placed with regard to one another in a three-dimensional space (Fig. 1). Despite Burie's promising attempt to operationalise his ideas empirical studies along these lines are scarce.

3. *Core institutions* Another significant criticism of the rural–urban continuum is its failure to reveal how one type of community changes into another, and to suggest some means of measuring change. An interesting perspective on this weakness has recently been given by Lockwood, who suggested that a community can be viewed as changed if the 'core' or 'dominant' institutional orders change.[46] Although these may vary from one society to another they are capable of cumulative
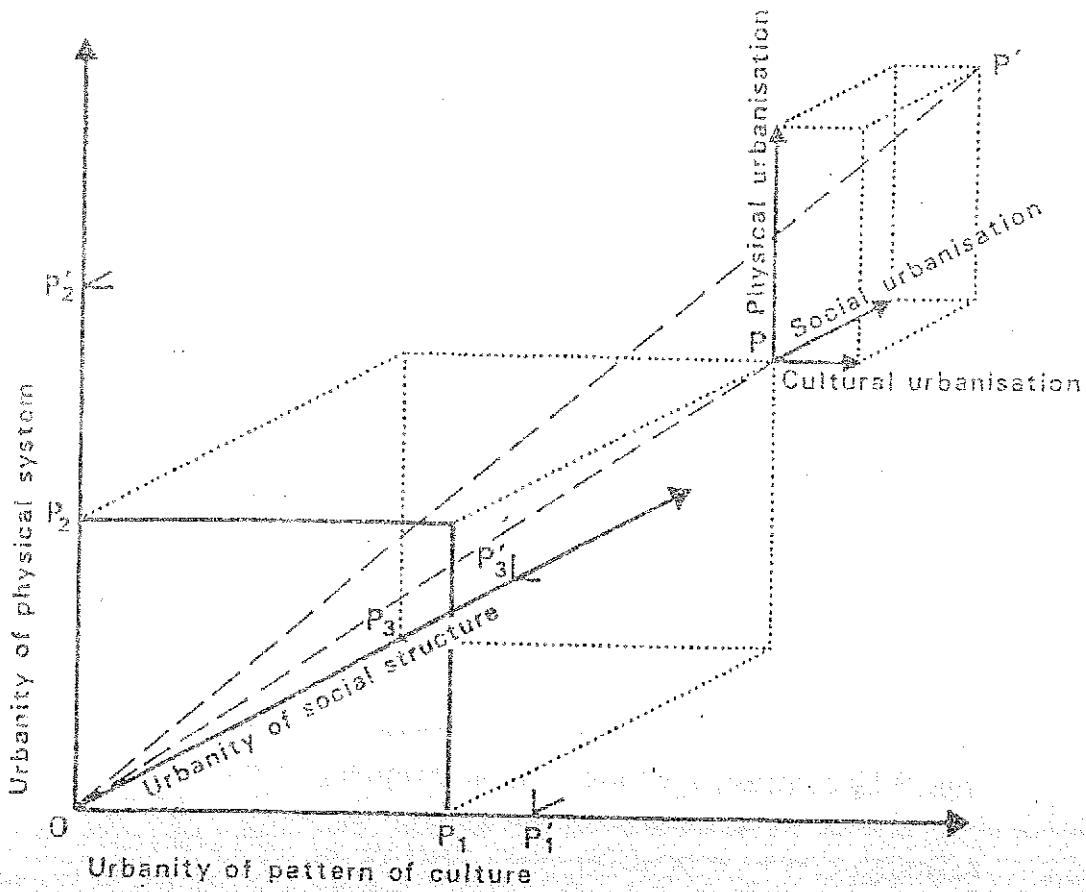
Figure 1. The process of urbanisation of an imaginary community (P) represented in three-dimensional space. (Source: Burie, J. B., 'Prolegomena to a Theoretical Model of Intercommunity Variation', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 7, 1967, pp 347–64)

change. Such an approach can aid an understanding of the co-existence of traditional and modern elements of social structure and values but attempts to operationalise it are bedevilled by the complexity of the dimensions involved.

The rural–urban continuum, as originally conceived, is an inadequate framework to analyse the changing rural community since even its defenders have broadened its conceptual base. As research has progressed it has been realised that the 'manifold threads of inter-relationships make the community a very complex system',[47] and this has resulted in a questioning of the model's underlying assumptions. This does not mean that total attacks on the continuum are fully justified. Schnore's comment that 'on demographic and settlement criteria, rural–urban differences while clearly diminishing are still crucial',[48] offers the view that the continuum is a simple starting-off point to the analysis of change.

Concept of social change

The increasing attention being paid by geographers to the concept of social change is due largely to the argument of the Swedish geographer, Torsten Hägerstrand, that there is a prime necessity to consider the processes involved in spatial behaviour.[49] In contrast, sociology and anthropology have always considered social change to be a major focus of interest, although they have tended to view rural society as static and unchanging in comparison with urban society. A much truer picture is the contention that social change is a 'theme that runs like a red thread through the fabric of rural society'.[50]

The concept of social change can be interpreted in different ways and at different scales. At an individual level it can be defined as 'the process by which individuals change from a traditional way of life to a more complex, technologically advanced and rapidly changing life style'.[51] This type of definition is often described as 'modernisation' and is analogous to development at a societal level. According to Rogers and

Burdge, development is 'a type of social change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher *per capita* incomes and levels of living through modern production methods and improved social organisation'.[52] The transition from one type of society to another as a result of these processes is closely interwoven with changes in their demographic structure. Changes in the birth- and death-rates result partly from rising socio-economic expectations consequent upon economic development and partly from the spread of information about new medical and family planning techniques. At the same time economic development both causes and results in population movements. Zelinsky has, in fact, gone as far as to claim that 'there are definite, patterned regularities in the growth of personal mobility through space–time during recent history, and these regularities comprise an essential component of the modernization process'.[52] His five-stage model links the mobility and vital transitions 'as a kind of outward diffusion of successively more advanced forms of human activity'[54] (Fig. 2). However, this type of interpretation of social change has been severely criticised for its western or European overtones and value judgements, and its failure to consider other forms of change.

Probably a more effective way of considering social change is to define it simply as the process by which alteration occurs in the function and structure of a community. Even when viewed in this manner, social change is still made up of a series of sequential stages; for example, the creation of new ideas, the communication of these ideas and the changes which result from their adoption or rejection. The sources of these changes may emanate from within or from without the community, and empirical evidence would suggest that the latter is by far the most dominant among rural communities. An increasingly significant source of change, in particular among rural communities in the developing world, comes from outside organisations, for example through sponsored development projects with specifically defined goals. Once again these changes often result in the migration of individuals which in turn initiates
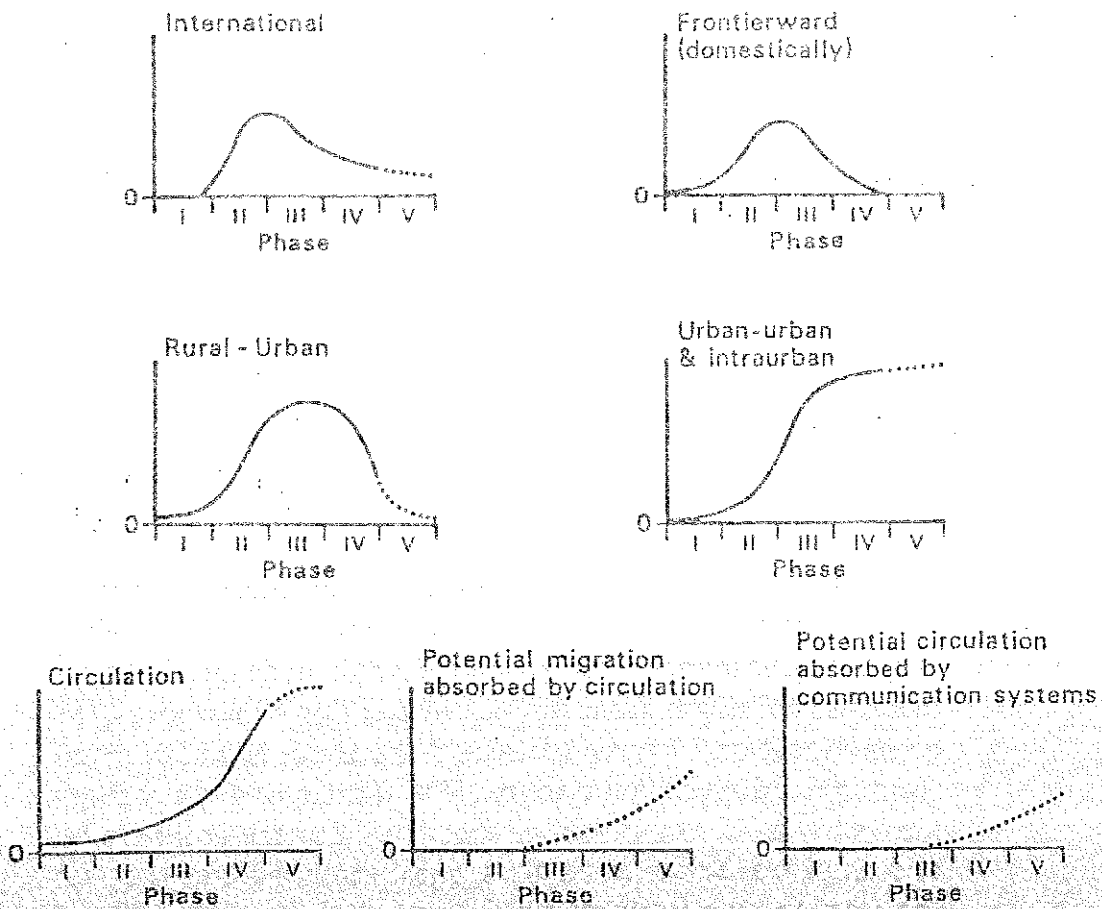
Figure 2. Comparative time profiles of spatial mobility. (Source: Zelinsky, W., 'The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition', *Geographical Review*, 61, 1971, pp 219–49)

further community change. It is well established that individuals favour change to varying degrees, and therefore communities can be conceived in terms of their susceptibility to change. Some twenty years ago Mitchell, from a detailed study of a number of Devon villages, differentiated rural communities on the basis of their attitude to change and degree of integration.[55] The twofold distinction between open and closed communities and integrated and disintegrated has since been interpreted by Thorns within a time perspective[56] (Fig. 3). Such a conceptualisation of rural social change has been extended by Rogers and Burdge with their identification of the factors controlling the differential levels of favourable orientation towards change.[57] Table 1 is a summary of this distinction.

TABLE 1   Traditional and modern norms

Modern community	*Traditional community*
Positive attitude to change	Lack of a favourable attitude to change
Technologically developed	Simpler technology
High levels of education and science	Low levels of literacy, education and science
Cosmopolite; high levels of interaction with outsiders	Little communication with outsiders
Empathic; ability to see oneself in others' roles	Lack of ability to empathise

After: Rogers, E. M. and Burdge, R. J., *Social Change in Rural Societies*, Prentice-Hall, 1972, p 15

The rate at which social change takes place is of crucial significance for the functioning and structure of a community. A failure by a community to adjust fully to change can cause considerable problems of conflict and adjustment for the individuals involved. In systems language there are three basic states in which a community may find itself in attempting to adjust to change.[58] A stable equilibrium occurs when there is almost no change in the structure or functioning of a system.
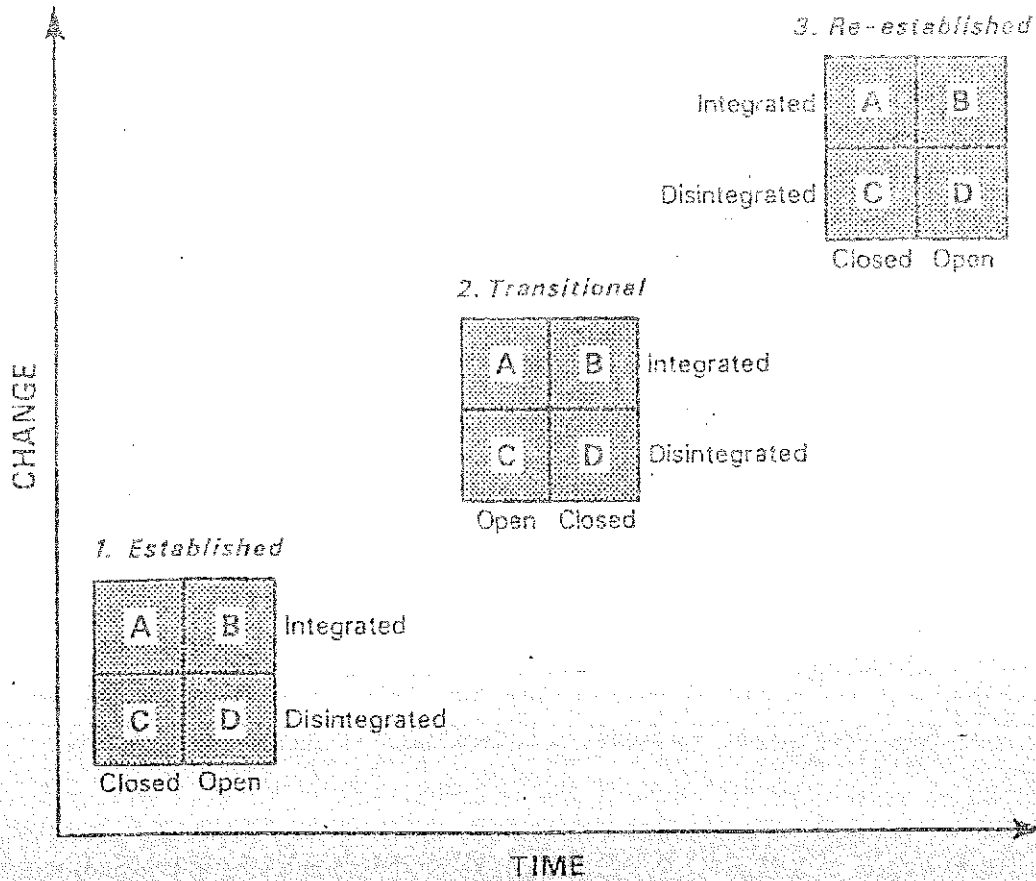
Figure3. A social typology of villages. (Source: Thorns, D. C., 'The Changing System of Rural Stratification', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 8, 1968, pp 161–78)

In rural societies this type of situation is most likely to be found among an isolated and peasant community. A typical case in point is the anthropologist Firth's classic study of the Tikopia, a small island community in the British Solomon Island Protectorate.[59] Apart from limited occasions no innovation has entered the community. As a result its economic and social structure are in an interrelated balance and it functions as a harmonious whole. A community may be in state of disequilibrium if the rate of change is too rapid to allow it to adjust. The features of such a community are clearly exemplified by the changes recently experienced by the Chimbu peoples of the New Guinea Highlands.[60] The introduction of commercial coffee growing has disrupted its previously smooth social relationships since conflict has developed between the coffee growers and the established peasant farmers. The community is split into the pro-change and anti-change cliques. A community may be in a state of dynamic equilibrium if its ability to cope with change is equal to the rate of social change. A typical example of such a community has been revealed by Williams in his study of Ashworthy, a small Devon parish.[61] Although man--land relationships have undergone considerable change during the past hundred or so years it has not been sufficient to disrupt the community's social relationships.[62]

Social change and the rural community

Too often social change as experienced by communities located in the countryside has been viewed within the rural–urban continuum. As a result of the continuum's failure to explain adequately the nature of rural social change Lewis and Maund[63] have, in their attempt to unravel the processes involved, presented an alternative framework (Fig. 4). Following the lead of Pahl[64] and Burie[65] they have conceived social change as a process of diffusion of new ideas and attitudes which involves the whole of society irrespective of geographical location. The diffusion path is socially and spatially
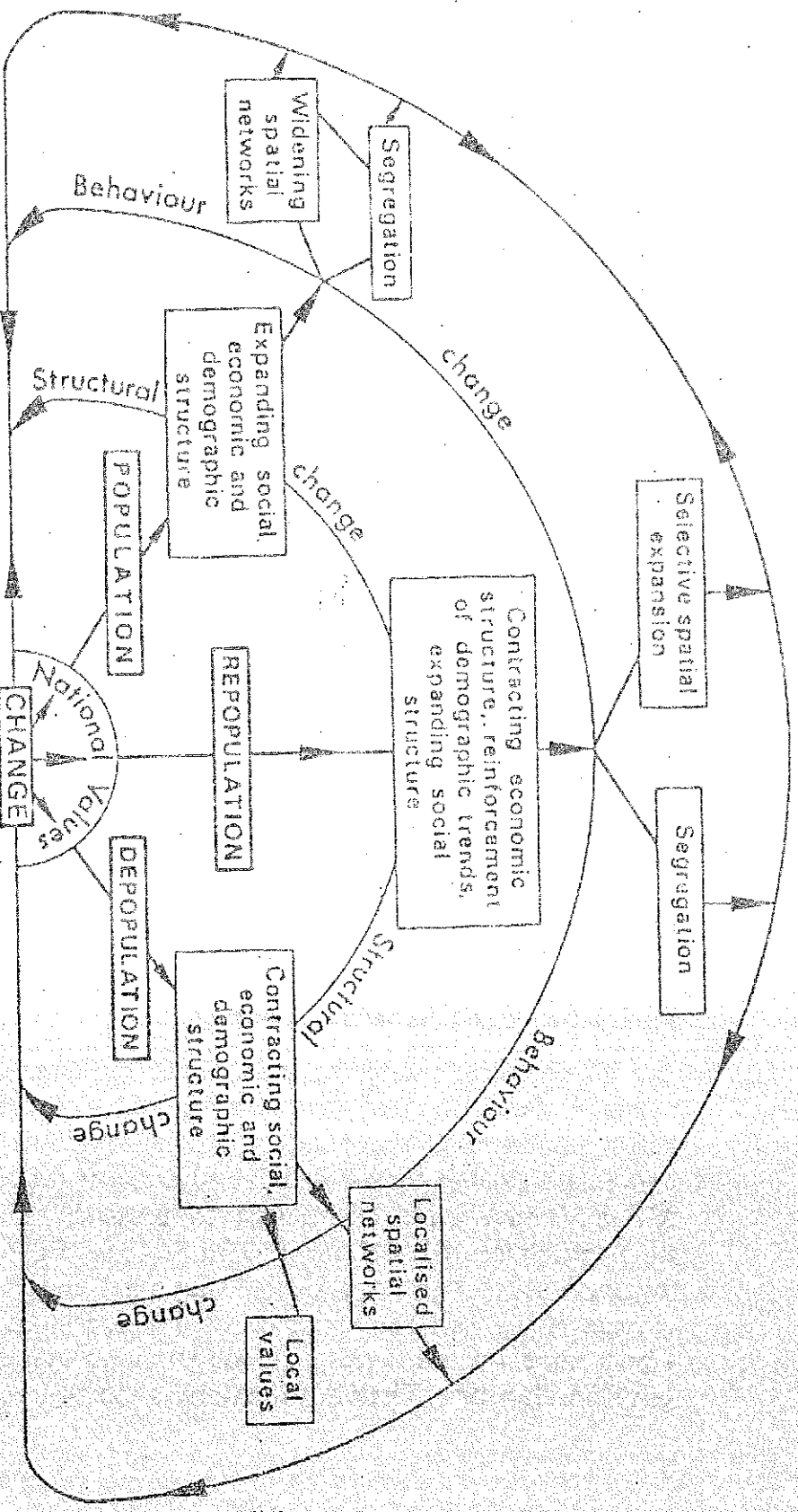
Figure 4. The components of an urbanisation system. (Source: Lewis, G. J. and Maund, D. J., 'The Urbanization of the Countryside: a Framework for Analysis', *Geografiska Annaler*, 58B, 1976, pp 17–27)

selective and consequently produces differential aspirations and codes of behaviour based upon social class and life-cycle differences. Such communities experience considerable change in structure and values the consequence of which is a change in behaviour patterns of the population in both their intra- and inter-community relations.

Social change in these terms is associated with the process of industrialisation which established a number of long-term trends of considerable significance for the countryside. Industrialisation, defined in simple terms as the process whereby a subsistence economy gives way to a market-oriented one, leads to the systematic and scientific advance of technology and the development of a means of exchange based upon a monetary system. A major consequence of such a change is an increase of economic opportunity, with the growth of tertiary employment and a reduction in the primary. An expanding and diversifying tertiary sector offers an increase in employment opportunities and creates new aspirations for more people. Since such opportunities tend to be located in specific places then migration results. This is assisted in the countryside by the pull force of tertiary employment and the push force of a contrasting primary sector. Even change in agriculture 'is accompanied by a set of changes which affects the rural population itself but also human society as a whole. The technological and economic changes have an influence on culture and social structure'.[66]

In post-industrial societies these processes are well established. Since they affect the young and socially ambitious first they can be examined through the concepts of social class, life-cycle and mobility patterns. In the countryside a series of population movements have been effected. First, *depopulation* as a result, primarily, of net outward migration. At a later stage, the nature of the community may be changed by a growth in *population*[67] as a consequence of a net in-migration of adventitious population at an early stage of the life-cycle. Thirdly, there is *repopulation*, which refers to the retirement to the countryside by people in a late stage of the life-cycle.

The social selectivity of such movements initiates significant

structural changes within the communities involved (Fig. 4).
The immediate effect of *population* is not only to increase their
population but also to alter their social, demographic and
economic structures. Such in-migrants, though acquiring rural
residence, still retain urban employment and tend to be rela-
tively young and wealthy, often middle-class in life-style and
usually divorced from rural society. The increment in the
middle-class element has significant social implications for
leadership within a community, and is usually reflected in an
increase in the number of voluntary social organisations. Simi-
larly, *repopulation* is age-selective, but such movements tend to
take place at a late stage in the family life-cycle and contribute
towards an ageing demographic structure. However, although
repopulation also involves an increase in the middle-class ele-
ment resident in the countryside, it does not necessarily mean
an increase in urban dependence. In contrast, *depopulation*
involves the younger and better qualified elements of rural so-
ciety moving to the cities, creating an ageing demographic
structure and a weakly developed, pyramidal social structure.
Such changes are also associated with changes in the value
system, the traditional values being slowly displaced. Theor-
etically, it can be argued that the essential characteristic of
rural values is that they are *local* in nature. Each rural society
tends to have different sets of values and attitudes, and there-
fore there is little uniformity in values over a wide area. In con-
trast urban values are more *national* since they are more
uniform irrespective of location. These national values are
ones in which prestige is given to those who have been materi-
ally successful in the world, and therefore socio-economic
characteristics determine their status levels within urban com-
munities. Higher status, allotted to those who have received
advanced education and have a non-manual occupation, will
determine community leadership. Therefore, the changing
value system involves either the addition of the national value
system, with consequent conflict, or complete displacement of
the local by the national. The rate of such changes markedly
affects the personal contacts created by the three types of

population movements identified above. *Population* and *repopulation* would appear to accentuate the demise of the local value system, whilst *depopulation* contributes to its eventual collapse. In any event rural society is increasingly being assimilated into the total society.

Such structural and value-system changes have a marked effect upon the behaviour of the population, both inside and outside the community (Fig. 4). Within a rural community the segregation of the inhabitants is based upon the local values, but the effects of the introduction of a more socio-economic value system is to create two forms of society, middle-class and working-class, each of which has its own life-style. Even within a small community, such groups are often socially and geographically more segregated than groups formed by the local value system. In addition, such processes affect the behaviour patterns of individuals beyond the community. In a traditional rural society behaviour is essentially spatially restricted for most members: the employed work locally, kinship and friendship relationships are locally oriented, and migration is generally short-distance. In contrast, the spatial connectors of an urban population are more extensive and vary with individuals. Greater mobility potential allows wider migration and kinship distances, while at the same time there is a tendency for work and residence to become separated and for friendship ties to become more diffuse. Therefore, a new behavioural pattern is created for the whole of society, not only for rural communities. However, the rate of such change is accentuated by personal contacts created by the nature of the population movements into and out of the rural communities. *Population* and *repopulation* would appear to create a more segregated and behaviourally extensive society whilst *depopulation* contributes to a collapsing society. The energy for this social change is provided by value changes which result in structural and behavioural change, each of which is capable of feeding back into the value system and modifying it further.

paper

This/ has examined ways in which the process of social change is affecting the rural community and suggests a framework through which it might be viewed. In doing so it has attempted to break away from more traditional frameworks as exemplified in the rural–urban dichotomy/continuum models. Such models and their associated concepts are now thought to distort and inhibit progress in this field. Though the terms rural and urban often refer only to physical appearance, size and land use, this has suggested a different perspective, as yet little developed, of emphasis upon socio-economic structure, behaviour and value systems in contrast to the more familiar morphological and landscape approaches.

NOTES

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67 The term *population* can be used in three ways: '1. An inhabited place; 2. the degree to which a place is populated or inhabited; hence, the total number of its inhabitants; 3. the action or process of peopling a place or region; increase of population'. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, 1968, p 1546. Population is defined here as 'the action or process of peopling a place or region'; see Lewis, G. J. and Maund, D. J., *op. cit.*, 1976, pp 17–27