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Rural Poverty*Ann R. Tickamyer***INTRODUCTION**

The majority of the world's poor are found in rural areas, including a substantial portion of the impoverished populations of the richest nations (World Bank, 2000). Yet, increasingly, the rural poverty in their midst is ignored by the postindustrial nations, rendered either invisible or irrelevant to the urban preoccupations of most analysts and policy-makers. In the rest of the world, rural poverty is the dominant mode of deprivation; in the postindustrial nations of the global north, while it no longer represents the majority of the poor, it remains disproportionately large and among the most desperate forms of economic hardship, but one that generates relatively little academic, public, or political interest. Social and economic policy both within and across nations largely neglects rural poverty and directly or indirectly supports efforts to turn the rural poor into the urban proletariat and underclass. This belies an assumption that rural and urban poor are only tenuously connected.

In fact, in the era of accelerated globalization, transnational linkages between the rural poor and the rural and urban poor dominate in particular locales and labour markets, creating economic regions that transcend national boundaries. Economic migrants, guest workers and refugees cross borders with and without proper documentation to supply cheap labour to both rural and urban industries as part of the accelerating transnational flow of capital, goods and labour. The effort to escape poverty, injustice or lack of opportunity in one location often results in finding new forms in another and inextricably connects the two places.

The United States (US) and the nations of the European Union (EU) are prime examples of both poverty in the midst of great affluence and the hidden nature of many of these pockets of poverty. Rural poverty is particularly difficult to uncover in these settings for both material and ideological reasons. The concentration of populations, policy-makers, scholars and the media in urban centres shifts attention away from rural regions and permits both neglect and romanticization of rural life and livelihoods (Cloke, 1995; Tickamyer et al., forthcoming). In the US poverty is conflated with the problems of inner city ghettos and their racial and ethnic minorities. In the UK and continental Europe, national and EU-wide concern with issues of social exclusion turns attention away from spatial dimensions of poverty to vulnerable populations defined on the basis of social and demographic characteristics (Atkinson, 1998; Barnes et al., 2002; Geddes and Benington, 2001; Hauser and Becker, 2003; Ott and Wegner, 1997; Philo, 1995).

The US serves as an instructive example of the neglect of rural poverty in the developed nations, as well as the often obscured but integral links between rural and urban poor both intra and internationally. The US is not unique in these spatial disparities, but the contradiction embodied in being the pre-eminent global power and the world's wealthiest nation combined with high levels of persistent poverty and spatial inequality underscores the importance of addressing the conditions and sources of poverty in the rural periphery. This article examines rural poverty in the developed world, focusing on the sources of poverty in peripheral regions and the ways these are connected within and across national borders, using the US as the primary example. This

approach is guided by the assumption that it is not possible to understand forms of poverty and inequality without attention to the historically specific patterns of development and linkages between different social institutions that create local culture and society. In other words, no one theory or even combination of theories can explain all rural poverty; rather, it requires a mix of theory and attention to unique features of place. Where appropriate, comparisons are drawn to comparable conditions in European nations, and the discussion concludes with a brief comparison of the state of knowledge about rural poverty in the US and Europe.

RURAL POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

For most of the twentieth century, rural poverty rates far exceeded urban poverty figures. As late as 1959, the percentage of poor people residing in nonmetropolitan areas was more than double the poverty rates for metropolitan areas, the jurisdictions that contain large cities and their suburban fringe (US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2001).¹ Even central city poverty, the urban slums and ghettos most often identified as the epitome of impoverished and degraded living conditions, did not compete with rural poverty until the last third of the century. In the mid-1970s, rural and central city poverty rates converged for the first time, and central city poverty overtook rural poverty by the end of the decade (RSS Task Force, 1993). Subsequently, rural poverty rates represented by nonmetropolitan counties continued to far exceed overall urban metropolitan areas, but have generally remained somewhat lower than central city figures, although the exact relationship between the two varies by time and place (US Census Bureau, 2001).

Depending on the time span examined, poverty rates can be viewed as either remarkably stable or part of a long-term downward trend. Poverty rates declined rapidly in the years following the Second World War until the 1970s. After that, changes in poverty rates levelled off and even reversed. For almost two decades they fluctuated from year to year with changes in the economy, but remained high for both rural and urban locations. In 1989 almost 16 per cent of nonmetro and 13 per cent of metro residents were classified as poor, using the official measures.² This represented approximately 9 million poor people living in rural areas. Then in the 1990s, poverty rates resumed their historic

decline. By the end of the twentieth century, all poverty rates had decreased substantially. In 1999, rural poverty was at 14.2 per cent, 3 percentage points higher than the urban rate of 11.2 per cent, but 4 points lower than central city poverty (Lichter and Jensen, 2000; US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2001). At 7 million persons this was 2 million fewer people than the previous decade and was the lowest recorded level since 1979. This decline accompanied the longest economic expansion in post-Second World War US history. Future directions undoubtedly are tied to changes in local, national and global economies. Continued improvement or even maintenance of lower levels appeared doubtful in the face of widening recession beginning early in the new century. Longer-term trends are not yet obvious, although they are clearly heavily dependent on economic conditions.

High rates of rural poverty are even more striking if the spotlight is placed on spatial distribution of poverty – the places that have extremely high concentrations of poor people. The most common way to distinguish rural and urban spaces, using metro/nonmetro county classifications, masks great variation within these boundaries. Because population densities permit finer spatial discrimination, and because social indicators of urban welfare carry great political weight, the differences between central city (often inclusive of but not necessarily synonymous with urban ghettos) poverty rates and those found in the remainder of counties designated as within metro areas are routinely reported. However, there are large differences within and between nonmetropolitan areas as well. Rural areas vary in their proximity to metro areas, population densities and history of economic development and activity, and each of these has relevance for poverty levels. Nonmetropolitan counties range from those located on the urban fringe that serve as bedroom communities for affluent commuters to jobs in nearby urban centres to the most remote and sparsely populated wilderness areas. They include a large number of counties that have been designated as persistently poor – nonmetro counties that have had excessively high poverty rates over long periods of time – 20 per cent or more for each decennial Census since 1960 (Nord, 1997).

Persistent poverty counties are primarily located in the rural South and West of the US, and typically have distinctive economic, socio-cultural and racial-ethnic histories and identities. The plantation South or Blackbelt (including the Mississippi Delta and Southeastern coastal plains), the Appalachian and Ozark highlands,

Indian reservations in the West and Southwest, and the colonias of the Southwestern borderlands, consistently exhibit the highest poverty rates, in many cases encompassing more than half the population (Nord, 1997). These places also have high rates of unemployment, low levels of human and social capital, lack of investment and infrastructure development, poor or non-existent service provision, and frequently inefficient or corrupt political and administrative institutions. Even as a homogenizing commercial culture submerges social and demographic differences, these 'forgotten places' remain distinct, mired in poverty with their populations exposed to high risk of economic deprivation and all its correlates. Specific sources and conditions vary, as do the primary groups at risk, but regardless of whether they are the descendants of African slaves located in the Blackbelt of the former slave-holding states, conquered and colonized Native Americans isolated in Indian reservations, both recent and longstanding Hispanic residents and migrant workers, or the old settlers and more recent 'ethnic' whites of rural Appalachia, they share common experiences of deprivation, exploitation, discrimination and subordination to powerful elites (Billings and Blee, 2000; Duncan, 1992, 1996, 1999; Eller, 1982; Fitchen 1981; Hyland and Timberlake, 1993; Lyson and Falk, 1991; Pickering, 2000; Seltzer, 1985; Snipp, 1996; Snipp et al., 1993).

The existence and persistence of large pockets of poverty located in rural hinterlands and often associated with distinctive racial and ethnic groups undermine common stereotypes about the rural poor that contribute to their obscurity and neglect. To the extent that it is considered at all, rural poverty is seen as less threatening than urban poverty, associated with hard luck and hard times rather than bad values and dissolute lifestyles. Popular attachment to romanticized views of rural landscapes and communities and imputed agrarian values of hard work and self-reliance create a more benign image of rural life and poverty that has little to do with its realities, but compares favourably to equally distorted stereotypes of the malignancy of urban social problems. The outcome is a highly nostalgic and romanticized view of rural life 'that glosses over rural poverty and that personifies its forms in the guise of white working class families who are seen as less threatening to dominant social values and elites' (Tickamyer et al. forthcoming). The reality is much more complex.

To a limited extent these stereotypes have a basis in social fact. Historically, the rural poor have been more likely to be white, to be found in traditional, married couple households, to have

lower rates of extra-marital child-bearing, to have fairly substantial rates of formal labour force attachment, and to have lower levels of welfare use (RSS Task Force, 1993). However, these differences are relative, belying the diversity that exists in rural America. In rural areas just as in urban centres, women, single-headed households, children, and race and ethnic minorities are over-represented, with growing convergence between the demographic characteristics of urban and rural poor (Albrecht et al., 2000, Lichter and Jensen, 2000; McLaughlin et al., 1999, Tickamyer et al., forthcoming). Women are at greater risk for poverty than men or their urban counterparts and continue to be particularly vulnerable if they occupy multiple risk categories. Race and ethnic minorities endure some of the deepest and most grinding forms of poverty, as is evident from their over-representation in persistent poverty counties in the South and Southwest. Even in the 'whitest' pockets of persistent rural poverty, such as are found in rural Appalachia, there is much greater race and ethnic variation than is often credited or documented (Billings and Blee, 2000). The demographics of rural poverty can only be explained in conjunction with theories of poverty.

EXPLANATIONS FOR RURAL POVERTY

Numerous theories have been offered to explain rural poverty. They tend to fall into two groups corresponding to the distinction between poverty of persons and poverty of place, or those that focus on individual characteristics and those that target institutional and structural conditions. Even within these broad categories, there is great variation (and confusion) between those that emphasize the correlates and characteristics of poverty, whether personal or spatial, while others provide theoretical exegesis. For example, poverty is often explained by reference to demographic characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity and marital status, or more theoretically, by culture of poverty models that purport to explain why these correlates of poverty status persist. Similarly, the spatial distribution of poverty is often attributed to characteristics of poor places such as high unemployment, low levels of human and social capital, and the prevalence of particular forms of economic activity, or to theories of development and dependency that also attempt to explain the sources and distribution of these characteristics of rural poverty.

These explanations are often posed as mutually exclusive or polarized models that must

be embraced to the exclusion of alternative approaches. While this has had great political success in driving policy debates and political campaigns, it has much less academic currency (Tickamyer and Duncan, 1990). The characteristics of poor persons and places are very real, and may provide a good way to predict the odds of being poor, but they have little explanatory power. Being female does not explain poverty, but the dynamics of patriarchal gender relations supplies the necessary understanding for women's heightened vulnerability. Similarly, being a member of a racial or ethnic minority may make it more likely to be poor, but its real significance is as a marker of ongoing social relations of subordination and discrimination that create that probability. High unemployment rates generate high poverty, but the reasons behind particular patterns of employment, such as deindustrialization, economic restructuring, uneven development, or globalization have much greater theoretical power.

To complicate matters more, the diversity that exists within rural places and spaces in the social, demographic, political and economic development of specific groups and regions means that no one theoretical approach will fit all cases. The 'new poverty' of the agrarian heartland differs sharply from the persistent poverty of portions of Appalachia or the deep South. Deindustrialization, economic restructuring and capital consolidation of formerly highly industrialized rural extractive industries have different sources and outcomes than found in locations lacking a history of industrial production and that have little more than subsistence economies and dependence on transfer payments of one sort or another. Thus understanding rural poverty requires sorting through a myriad of proximate and underlying causes, correlates, theories and explanations to emerge with a richer more nuanced understanding of the causes and consequences of different forms of rural poverty. Understanding particular instances of rural poverty requires placing these theories in both spatial and temporal contexts.

INDIVIDUAL EXPLANATIONS

There are numerous forms of individual explanations for rural poverty, generally involving some variant of individual characteristics combined with explanations for the prevalence of these traits among the poor. As indicated above, these generally begin by enumerating specific

demographic traits associated with high poverty levels, focusing on race, gender, marital status, education and labour force attachment. Female-headed households and their children, often black or brown, who possess few marketable skills and little labour force experience, are especially vulnerable to poverty, and these traits are elevated from the status of correlates to proximate causes. In turn these are given theoretical coherence by explanations that purport to show why these traits are so prevalent among the poor.

Culture of poverty

Apart from low-level empirical generalization that provides coherence to these descriptive findings, such as demographic and human capital models, the most popular theory used to tie these together, and the one with the greatest political weight, is found in variants of the culture of poverty. These vary from crude prejudices about the inherent laziness, lack of initiative and disregard for mainstream social norms and values found among some groups (almost *sui generis*) to more sophisticated formulations that posit initial misfortune, regardless of source, that is subsequently enshrined in originally adaptive but ultimately maladaptive behaviours and attitudes. The resulting 'culture of poverty' responds to economic hardship by reproducing irresponsible behaviours and beliefs. Thus the real or attributed prevalence of marital instability, family disorganization, extra-marital child-bearing and substance abuse is combined with attributions of character flaws that include lack of work ethic, hedonism, fatalism and inability to defer gratification to form a constellation of dysfunctional coping mechanisms used by poor people that directly contravene twentieth-century middle-class moralism and practice. These are hypothesized to form a culture (or more accurately a subculture) that explains how poverty is entrenched and perpetuated from one generation to the next. More recently, conservative analysts added welfare dependency to the list of both primary causes and consequences of the culture of poverty, perpetuating the circular logic embedded in this concept. Whatever the initial source of poverty in this explanation, the almost inevitable development of a culture of poverty ensures that it will trap its victims in a vicious cycle that is difficult if not impossible to exit.

It should be noted that culture of poverty theories are less frequently applied to rural poverty, and this is a measure of the somewhat ambiguous status of the rural poor. In fact,

because of its often highly pejorative application and its association with racial stigma, compared to the more benign view of rural poverty described previously, the rural poor are often explicitly or implicitly excused from its provisions. Nevertheless, as members of the larger class of poor people, they come under its embrace. Furthermore, when the focus is refined to refer not to rural poverty in general but to specific groups and pockets of rural poor, the interpretation shifts. Southern blacks and white Appalachians, for example, are widely treated as textbook examples of the culture of poverty (Duncan, 1999). In the latter case, views of the entire region are conflated with culture of poverty traits (Billings and Blee, 2000; Billings and Tickamyer, 1991).

Crude culture of poverty theories carry little weight in academic circles – in fact there is a large literature devoted primarily to debunking them – but they continue to have enormous impact politically. In a highly individualized culture, public opinion finds them congenial explanations for individual and group failure to prosper and a way to blame the victim rather than social conditions that could be ameliorated through public policy. This model also underpins the ‘war on welfare’ that gained ground in policy circles in the 1980s and subsequently became the basis of new public policy in the 1990s (Handler, 1995; Schram, 1995; Tickamyer et al., 2000). The notion that welfare use breeds dependency and the constellation of behaviours collectively labelled the culture of poverty became the driving force behind the political campaign to ‘reform welfare as we know it’ by dismantling the collection of Depression era New Deal and 1960s War on Poverty programmes that constituted the US safety net during the second half of the twentieth century. The success of this effort has had significant consequences for rural poverty and the rural poor.

STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS

Modernization

Structural theories take a number of forms, beginning with the dominant modernization paradigm that formed the basis of post-war development theory and practice to numerous variants of Marxist and neo-Marxist models of dependency, under- and uneven development that replaced it later in the century and culminating with the current dominance of globalization theories. The

commonly expressed idea that pockets of rural poverty were the forgotten places, the people left behind in the prosperity that came from industrial development and urbanization, directly expressed the notion that rural poverty was the result of the failure of economic development to unfold or to ‘take off’ in the linear fashion that characterized economic development in early modernization theories (Rostow, 1960). Although based on the highly developed and still enormously influential tenets of neo-classical economics, the crude applications of this approach were in many ways equivalent to the overly simplistic culture of poverty models, but in this case applied to regions and places rather than to individuals. Poor rural places suffered from inefficient and unproductive economies that failed to grow and thrive in a modernizing world, because of traditional values and practices that prevented successful adoption of new technologies and new institutions. Although initially most prominently applied to explain the impoverished state of the majority of the world’s non-industrialized and industrializing nations following the Second World War, this model was also coopted to explain internal development problems.

Again, Appalachia provides the quintessential example for this approach. Despite its long history of industrial production in resource extraction (mainly coal, but also timber and other minerals) and steel, textile and furniture manufacturing industries, Appalachian poverty was widely viewed by both scholars and policymakers as the outcome of a traditional local culture bypassed by the modern world and lacking the institutions and resources of a dynamic economy to compete in a highly industrialized and urbanized society. Other poor rural areas shared in this model to greater or lesser degrees, depending on the specifics of their economies and local history. In most cases, it was a distorted and partial view that failed to recognize the realities of local history and economic development.

Development paradigms

The failure of places such as Appalachia to properly conform to the development model promoted by modernization theory created a search for alternative explanations. Here too the theories that gained currency to explain widespread, persistent and in some cases deepening poverty among developing nations were adapted for domestic use. The rise of dependency theory, world systems theory and other variants of ‘the development of underdevelopment’ undermined

the notion that the problems of poverty were inherent in a stunted development process, hindered by adherence to traditional culture. Instead, poverty was posited to be the result of inequalities created and promoted by social relations of exploitation, domination and discrimination that enabled rich regions nations and interests, whether spearheaded by the state or by capital, to plunder natural resource-rich but otherwise poor regions for their wealth. In the process they distorted or suppressed local institutions and social relations, stunting their ability to grow and prosper. Numerous variants of these theories abound, but in the US for a long time the most popular approach used an internal colonial model to depict poor areas such as Appalachia, the deep South, Indian reservations, and Southwestern colonias as internal colonies, exploited and impoverished by powerful external global, national and regional corporate interests (RSS Task Force, 1993).

The model fits better in some places than others. There can be no doubt that the conquest of the original inhabitants of the Americas, the appropriation of their land and livelihoods, and their resettlement and restriction to reservations often located on remote and seemingly unproductive territories follows a classic model of the exercise of colonial power. On the other hand, in other areas, the template does not fit quite so well. There have been numerous efforts to depict Appalachia as an internal colony exploited by external elites, but in fact the perpetuation of inequality and exploitation was also widely and successfully practiced by local, indigenous elites (Billings and Blee, 2000; Duncan, 1999). Similarly, the extreme poverty and discrimination of the Mississippi Delta can be largely attributed to the success of local elites in preventing external influences, whether social, economic, or political, from gaining any foothold in the region. It is only in very recent times that a combination of federal legal interventions, reverse migration of African Americans returning to their places of origin with new resources at their disposal, and new economic development in tourism and gaming industries has broken the stranglehold of the white planter class on local conditions (Duncan, 1999). These elites not only thoroughly dominated local politics and exploited the large underclass, both white and black, but they used their power to actively discourage external investment in the area to maintain their positions of power and privilege. Other areas of persistent rural poverty have similarly complicated histories and patterns of underdevelopment (Tickamyer et al., forthcoming).

Other structural approaches variously emphasize the operation of class, markets, political process, or social institutions, but they share a common concern with the social structures that create inequality and depress opportunity through institutions that dominate and exploit. The concrete outcomes of these processes are the creation of economies that cannot produce adequate employment or income for workers in the region, industries that cannot compete in regional, national, or global markets, crumbling or non-existent infrastructure that cannot attract new investment, livelihood practices that cannot sustain an adequate standard of living, and stocks of human and social capital that cannot compete in a global economy.

Economic change, restructuring and globalization

The notion that poor rural places have been left behind, frozen in an impoverished past, is countered by the nature of the ongoing processes that buffet them and that contribute to their current state. Economic restructuring in a variety of guises plays a major role in creating new poverty or perpetuating old forms. Here again, the specific forms and processes differ, but the outcomes are similar. The growth of highly efficient, capital-intensive technologies, whether in agriculture or in mining, in resource extraction or in manufacturing, have hit rural areas especially hard. Lacking diversified economies for the most part, the loss of jobs entailed in these processes, especially of high wage work, can devastate communities and even whole regions. The growth of service sector jobs, especially in rural places where these tend to be low-end positions in retail, tourism, or care work, does not substitute for declining old line industries. Thus the agriculture sector and its workers have suffered destructive losses in jobs and population from the explosive growth of corporate agriculture with its capital- and technology-intensive methods. The long-term trend is exacerbated by periodic crises of overproduction and deflation of land values, such as occurred in the US farm crisis of the 1980s. Similarly, capital-intensive mining operations have resulted in the precipitous decline of relatively high-wage, if hazardous, employment. Depletion of natural resources and environmental regulation such as found in the Northwest timber industry and coastal fisheries have similar impacts. Deindustrialization found in peripheral rustbelt communities of the upper Midwest and the Southern mill towns and branch assembly

plants, where the high costs of manufacturing have made industrial production non-competitive in the world economy, further depresses rural regions. Finally, the culmination and acceleration of all these trends in the internationalization and integration of global markets, where products and labour must compete not just locally, regionally, or nationally, but in a global market place where there is always some location with access to cheaper labour, less state regulation, or greater subsidies and incentives to relocate, make rural areas continually vulnerable to economic insecurity.

MID-LEVEL AND META-THEORIES

Intermediate between micro- and macro-level explanations for poverty are theories that attempt to link these levels of analysis. Theories that emphasize the relationships between processes that operate at different levels – such as those that examine the connections between gender, poverty, and work; or race, discrimination and employment; or the networks that create opportunity for individuals in particular places – serve as examples of efforts to connect people and places and the dynamics of individual opportunity and action with structural forms and processes. Finally, there have been efforts at deconstructing dominant discourses that prevail in scholarly and particularly important, policy debate about poverty and its causes. While these rarely address rural poverty directly, they have important implications for understanding prevailing patterns of poverty and inequality that are relevant by implication or extension to rural policy debates.

Gender and patriarchy

Feminist theories have been among the most influential sources of analyses of the high incidence of women's poverty and exploitation, both spatially and temporally. It is no accident that women and children have the highest rates of poverty in both core and peripheral regions and nations, although the specific processes vary by place as well as how they intersect with other sources of inequality such as class, race and sexual identity. At their most global, feminist theories of patriarchy have attempted to describe and disentangle the complex patterns of gendered privilege and exploitation that create greater risk of poverty for women and their children. More immediately, they focus on women's disadvantage

in the labour market and the household and the intersections of the two realms.

Women remain responsible for the majority of reproductive labour while increasingly required to seek forms of waged labour as well. Whether they are the sole sources of support in growing numbers of female-headed households or their wages are part of a household's income packaging as male claim to a family wage disappears in the post-Fordist era, women's waged labour is both necessary and normative. The outcome is a double or even triple day of work combining formal, informal and household labour. Although the evidence is not definitive, there is much speculation that there is a growing informal sector in advanced industrial and postindustrial nations, analogous to those found in postcolonial economies and that lack of formal employment opportunities increases women's informal economic activity (Tickamyer and Wood, 2003). Regardless of where it is located or how it is compensated, women's work both directly and indirectly supplies much of the cheap labour that fuels rural industrialization, first in depressed areas of the core's rural regions and then increasingly in industrial enterprise zones established in rural areas of peripheral regions and nations. In both places, women's unpaid work subsidizes the reproduction of the household and the labour force. Their paid labour supplies necessary income, but also is the major source of labour power in rural areas (Dickinson and Schaeffer, 2001).

In rural areas in the US, women's traditional concentration in unpaid reproductive, informal and family labour results in work histories that are not competitive for jobs that provide a living wage or benefits, even in the rare event that such employment is available in rural places (Tickamyer and Henderson, 2003; Tickamyer et al., 1993). Ironically, and somewhat contradictorily, women's poverty has been exacerbated by both industrialization and deindustrialization. Women, like other rural residents, benefited from the relocation of manufacturing industries to rural areas, seeking cheap land and labour. Even poorly paid work in manufacturing can supply economic stability to both individual workers and communities. However, in those places where rural industrialization created relatively stable jobs, women were typically relegated to the least desirable and lowest paid jobs (Fink, 1998). Whatever advantage was to be gained from steady employment has disappeared as capital moves offshore or to border lands to find a cheaper and even less demanding labour force, generally, young unmarried women, exporting patterns of rural poverty

and exploitation from the global north to the southern periphery.

Race and ethnicity

These also play prominent roles in explanations of some forms of rural poverty. Race and ethnic minorities are often concentrated in rural regions that share histories of extreme class stratification and political disenfranchisement created by both legal and extra-legal oppression, exploitation and discrimination, although these are place- and population-specific and vary dramatically in their forms if not their outcomes. The specific dynamics often are inadequately researched (Snipp et al., 1993). While slavery, the plantation system and their legacies both in the rural South and their connections to urban ghettos have received great scrutiny, other forms of racial and ethnic subjugation in rural America do not garner similar attention. Thus the history of the reservation system for subjugating American Indians, ranging in their early history as virtual concentration camps to their current status of rural ghettos, while well-documented, nevertheless remains under-studied (Pickering, 2000; Snipp, 1996; Snipp et al., 1993). Similarly, the enormously complex history of diverse Hispanic populations in the US, both native and migrant, is not systematically scrutinized or well understood. Connections to rural poverty run the gamut from expropriation of Hispanic communal lands in the Southwest to the more recent development of colonias of impoverished rural residents (Maril, 1989; Montejano, 1987; Saenz and Ballejos, 1993). Migrant farm workers, both native and foreign-born, documented and undocumented, are among the poorest and most exploited of Hispanic groups and demonstrate the complex connections that link the rural poor of the global north and south (Tardanico and Rosenberg, 2000). The removal of the meat packing industry and other food processing plants from urban centres to rural areas has also contributed to the growth of new populations of Hispanic workers in rural areas that formerly had little ethnic diversity. In all these cases, it is not that good research is entirely lacking, rather it is case-based, episodic and frequently not focused on or integrated into an understanding of both the structures and dynamics of rural poverty.

Political power and social capital

Many of these approaches explicitly or implicitly refer to individual and group position in the

labour market, seeing poverty as the outcome of lack of jobs and employment opportunities. Labour market factors are not sufficient to explain rural poverty, however, especially if the focus is on place-based poverty. In many poor rural places, individual deficits in human capital that create labour market disadvantage are reinforced and exacerbated by lack of political power, lack of social capital and lack of institutional support for the most disadvantaged groups in the community. The public sector is absent or controlled by a small economic elite, and it is dedicated to their interests. The inadequate public sector is accompanied by exclusion from community institutions that range from the schools and churches to stores and credit sources. This pattern reinforces economic inequality, suppressing opportunities for both individual mobility and community and regional development. The limited amount of social capital that can be mobilized by poor persons tends to be family-based, failing to provide the larger linkages that would give access to larger institutions and opportunities, thus only reinforcing disadvantage (Duncan, 1999, 2001).

Again Appalachia and Southern plantation regions such as the Mississippi Delta serve as quintessential, although not unique examples. In both regions, the history of violent enforcement of a politics of exclusion has kept power in the hands of a local elite, has kept new investment from penetrating local economies or providing competition for control of resources, and has kept both local and external institutions from mobilizing opposition. Alternatively, in places where historically, local institutions are less class based and biased, such as rural New England, rural poverty is less virulent and persistent. Possibilities for individual mobility transcend the limited assistance possible from family sources, and civic engagement, social capital, public infrastructure and investment are available to assist the poor as well as the power elite. Not coincidentally, these places tend to be more demographically homogeneous, and class relations are less overlaid with historical divisions by race, ethnicity, or labour unrest (Duncan, 1999).

Current preoccupation with social capital as an engine of development, poverty alleviation and the spread of democratic institutions takes numerous forms (Saegert et al., 2001). On one level, it merely serves as an extension of individual resources, extending notions of human capital to include the less tangible connections and networks that link people to opportunities beyond their immediate circles. At another level, it provides a means of conceptualizing and

measuring community-based resources and ways to link individuals to those assets. However, wide variation in both the measurement and conceptualization of this concept and a tendency to conflate it with other fundamental conceptual tools, ranging from social class to civic engagement and community make it a promising but under-developed tool for analysing rural poverty.

Rural-urban links

Often forgotten in the 'forgotten places' view of rural poverty are the connections to urban poverty. Historically, rural and urban poverty and inequality are inextricably connected as migration streams flow back and forth between rural and urban places, depending on a variety of push and pull factors ranging from local political, economic and even climatic conditions to the vagaries of the global economy. This is especially true of the agricultural sector where the long pattern of increasing concentration, industrialization and corporate ownership has disrupted rural livelihoods. This historical trend further impoverishes already poor residents and creates new categories of rural poor who then migrate to urban areas seeking alternative employment. Thus the urban black ghettos of the northern industrial centres were populated by the displaced sharecroppers and agricultural workers of the plantation South and their descendants after the mechanization of Southern agriculture following the Second World War. These groups maintain ties to their rural roots, returning home in good times to contribute to family and communities who need their help and in bad as a refuge from hard times (Duncan, 1999; Falk, 2003; Stack, 1996). The farm crisis of the 1980s in the rural Midwestern grain fields created new poverty among family farmers, many of whom lost their farms and livelihoods and ultimately migrated to urban centres in search of new lives and livelihoods.

While the general flow is from rural to urban centres, it is not always unidirectional, as the example of African-American movement demonstrates. Appalachian coal miners and subsistence farmers also migrated to urban industrial centres, especially in the automotive industry, but often maintained close ties to places of origin and travelled back and forth depending on the relative state of the urban versus rural economies. Downturns in the industrial sector or increased demand for coal have led to reversing migration streams, often transferring poverty from one location to another. The ongoing demand for cheap labour in both farm and food processing

industries pulls migrant workers into rural areas, often recruited through intermediaries in urban centres. Thus the meat packing industry of rural Iowa recruits from the barrios of Los Angeles with little regard for whether these are native or migrant, documented or undocumented workers (Fink, 1998). These jobs are difficult, dangerous and poorly paid, keeping already poor people poor, providing little avenue for mobility. Finally, on a more macro level, the operation of the global economy shifts populations as capital shifts investments and bases of operations, seeking cheap inputs and large returns. The result is to enrich some and impoverish many others. The wholesale movement of the textile and garment industries to peripheral regions in the world economy means economic hardship for rural Southern textile communities, long centred on this industry.

Migration and globalization

Increasingly, transnational movements of capital, goods and labour characterize the links between the rural poor of the periphery and both the rural and urban poor of the core. Many of the examples already alluded to exemplify this trend. Migrant farm workers and food processing workers from Mexico and Central America supply a large proportion of the labour force in the US agricultural sector. Their remittances in turn support the rural villages and families who remain behind. The loss of rural industry to peripheral regions with cheaper labour and lax regulation, whether in peripheral regions of the US or in the industrializing nations of Asia or Latin America, impoverishes abandoned communities and motivates new rounds of migration.

The new global order redistributes populations as well as goods and wealth. This movement is accelerated by the trade agreements that constitute the new global order, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA 'binds together Mexico, the United States and Canada in a neo-liberal regime of denationalized, reciprocal regulation of trade, investment and associated affairs (Tardanico and Rosenberg, 2000: 3).' Although the movement of people remains formally restricted, the opening of borders inevitably rearranges populations and materially affects the fortunes of sending and receiving groups with profound consequences for the wealth and well-being of different regions and sectors in the participating nations.

The NAFTA example illustrates this process and the resulting emergence of new regions from the reorganization of economic relations that

integrate disparate populations. In this case, especially noteworthy is the juxtaposition of the southern states of two of the three signatories – the US and Mexico (Tardanico and Rosenberg, 2000). These linked regions are part of the new global division of labour that restructures the material fortunes of places, regions, and nations. While the two souths have very different locations in core and periphery and divergent development trajectories, they share a number of characteristics including histories of high poverty rates, repressive labour practices, exploitative race relations and dependence on primary commodity production that make comparison of the development outcomes of free trade and globalization particularly instructive (Tardanico and Rosenberg, 2000). The impacts on inequality and poverty of different groups and regions within each country is as important as the differences in each nation's rank in the global world order (Sernau, 2001). Rural peoples and places are especially susceptible to increasing impoverishment and inequality in both rich and poor nations alike.

Policy and development discourse

A number of analysts have scrutinized both domestic poverty and international development policy as discourse, examining the practices used to define, marginalize and stigmatize the poor and ultimately contributing to the construction of policies that recreate and reinforce existing power relations (Escobar, 1995; Schram, 1995). This approach uses textual deconstruction techniques to decode the discursive practices that underlie how poverty has been conceptualized and politicized. The representation of social reality becomes the primary means by which new understandings are forged and old forms of inequality are reproduced. Scrutiny of the historical and situational context provides insight into how the issues are formulated, the way problems are defined and the tools and policy instruments selected to guide interventions. Discursive practices – the words and texts and theories applied to a given issue – are not only representative of power relations that disadvantage certain groups and places, but also the currency that creates them. In Escobar's words, development is

a historically singular experience, the creation of a domain of thought and action, by analyzing the characteristics and interrelations of the three axes that define it: the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects,

concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice; and the forms of subjectivity fostered by the discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped. (1995: 10)

Escobar's analysis applies to the construction of the theory and the reality of the 'third world', 'underdevelopment' and the poverty of developing nations. While the mechanisms by which these meanings were created, enforced and ultimately employed to further impoverish the subjects of this discourse are necessarily specific by time and place, similar analyses have been applied to the poor of developed nations, but in very few cases have these specifically examined rural poverty. In the US the subjects have focused on the poverty establishment, welfare dependency, welfare reform, and the feminization of poverty (Fraser, 1989; Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Schram, 1995). In Britain, Cloke et al. (1995, 2002) analyse how concepts of deprivation and disadvantage are juxtaposed with an idyllic view of rural life to construct distorted notions of rural poverty and homelessness, but this is a rare example of analysis focused specifically on *rural* poverty in a Western nation.

RURAL POVERTY POLICY AND THE RESTRUCTURED WELFARE STATE

Thus explanations for the persistence of rural poverty are not merely academic but have significant implications for the forms devised for policy interventions and programmes designed to ameliorate economic distress. Decisions to target individuals or structural conditions, to focus on people or place-based policies, to use positive or negative sanctions, rest partly on understanding what causes poverty and therefore where leverage can be effectively applied. Alternatively, policy can deliberately or inadvertently create or increase hardship for particular persons and places. In the US a highly individualistic interpretation prevails and one that tends to be punitive toward the poor. However, the virtual absence of a rural poverty discourse or even a more general view of rural life, means that poverty policy overlooks the conditions of poor people and places outside the metropolitan core. There has been little systematic rural economic development policy and few efforts to tailor more general safety net programmes to the particular problems of the rural poor. In the absence of formal rural development policies, a mixture of

industrial and agricultural policies affect rural fortunes and livelihoods, but largely by default and to the advantage of large corporate interests rather than struggling families and communities (Buttel et al., 1993; O'Connor, 1992). Similarly, safety net programmes have either ignored spatial variation or disadvantage rural peoples and places, more by default than by design (Tickamyer et al., 1993).

Rural development policy

There is little independent rural development policy in the US. Instead, there are agricultural policies, primarily focused on creating more efficient agricultural production and providing price supports for particular commodities and their producers, and there are a handful of infrastructure and industrial development programmes that target persistently poor regions. Commodity programmes are designed to benefit large-scale corporate agriculture and have been accused of hastening the demise of small producers and family farmers. They certainly do nothing to boost the fortunes of poor rural peoples and communities. Efforts have been made to end or scale back these programmes, especially as they come head to head with pressures to end subsidies and support free trade as part of globalization. However, currently there is little evidence of any serious movement in this direction. In fact, the most recent policy legislation restores and enlarges subsidies that had been previously cut back or eliminated. Infrastructure investment projects such as the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Commission and more recent enterprise and empowerment zones, while targeted at poor places, also have little direct impact on rural poverty, although they have selectively improved roads, hospitals, and similar basic economic development infrastructure. Furthermore, with few exceptions (cf. Glasmeier and Fuehart, 1999), there has been little systematic evaluation to assess their impacts. For both types of programmes, effects on rural communities, residents and their living conditions have been indirect, haphazard and often inadvertent, and there has been little interest among policy-makers in creating more general rural development policies. In fact, every effort to create a broader policy for the agricultural sector, beginning in the depression era, has met with little support and often strong opposition, even though programmes were generally modest and based on the widely accepted modernization paradigm that

prevailed in economic development circles (O'Connor, 1992).

Safety net programmes

The provision of social welfare programmes in the US historically has been organized by gender, race and spatial factors (Gordon, 1990; Tickamyer, 1995–96). For example, the single most effective programme in reducing poverty, the social security programme, first implemented as part of safety net provision in the Depression era New Deal legislation, excluded farm workers, effectively eliminating large numbers of the poorest rural residents, including many racial and ethnic minorities. Later, in the 1960s, War on Poverty expansions of New Deal programmes³ extended access and created new forms of assistance. However, they still had a limited focus primarily on female-headed households and their children, again disadvantaging rural households who were more likely to be in traditional families and to be part of the working poor.

Even though the War on Poverty was prompted in part by disturbing images of rural poverty, specifically the hardship and deprivation clearly visible in Appalachian and deep South landscapes, their primary focus quickly turned to urban ghettos, especially in the wake of the civil unrest and urban disturbances of the era. Problems specific to rural residents receded in public interest and few efforts were made to tailor safety net programmes to the specific conditions of the rural poor. Not only did the demographics of the rural poor disqualify them from some forms of interventions but they also suffered from greater isolation, lack of transportation and information that limited access to services. Furthermore, while eligibility was determined by national policies, benefit levels for most programmes were set by states. The regions that include the largest concentrations of persistent rural poverty coincided with states with the lowest benefit levels, the most punitive policies and often the most corrupt and discriminatory local administrations. Finally, in many places, the rural poor are more reluctant to use safety net services even when eligible. This reluctance has been attributed to greater stigma attached to their use in rural areas, whether from cultural reasons or the lack of privacy in small rural communities. Whatever the reason, the outcome is less access and less use of social welfare safety net programmes among the rural poor.

The restructured welfare state

Growing dissatisfaction with the contours of the welfare state and its safety net programmes surfaced and gained strength among both the political right and left. Conservative analysts argued that poverty and its correlates were the outcome of an overly generous welfare system that encouraged welfare dependency and other antisocial behaviour. More progressive critics pointed to the inconsistencies, inefficiencies and inequities embedded in welfare bureaucracies that undermined their effectiveness as well as individual initiative and work effort. Both views conflated poverty and welfare dependence and played on popular prejudices and stereotypes about the poor that equated poverty with deviance and deprivation.

The movement to restructure the welfare state gained momentum in the 1990s, culminating in the successful passage with bipartisan support of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996. This legislation ended the 60 year history of New Deal and War on Poverty entitlements, eliminating the primary programme of cash assistance, and put new limits on eligibility for and receipt of assistance.⁴ The purpose was to move welfare recipients off assistance into work, either by carrot or by stick, incentives or sanctions, and to devolve specific authority for safety net programmes to state and local jurisdictions. Programmes varied dramatically from state to state and in some states from county to county, reflecting different priorities, politics and opinions about the causes and remedies of poverty. However, the overall approach and the dominant position in most states was to view poverty as a national and urban problem, responding to the greater numbers and visibility of the urban poor.

Even though devolution implies that welfare policy theoretically is responsive to local needs, the invisibility and lack of knowledge of the specific problems and issues of the rural poor meant that few programmes acknowledged and planned with their needs in mind (Tickamyer et al., 2002). Yet the rural poor face specific obstacles to moving from welfare to work that frequently differ from urban populations. While these vary by place, they include lack of employment opportunities, lack of living wage jobs with benefits, lack of transportation, lack of childcare, lack of human and social capital, lack of local institutional and organizational capacity, and general lack of infrastructure investment and support that could supply these missing ingredients.

Mirroring the lack of interest in rural poverty in policy circles, there has been relatively little formal scrutiny of outcomes of welfare reform in rural communities. With few exceptions (see Weber et al., 2002 for one of the most comprehensive collections of research on the subject), studies that document impacts have ignored rural peoples and places or have only looked crudely at metro–nonmetro differences, ignoring the variation that exists within and between rural locations. Overall, there is good reason to expect that the rural poor may have a particularly rough time meeting the requirements of welfare reform, but as yet this is largely speculative.

IS THE US UNIQUE?

US exceptionalism is often assumed in a variety of historical and developmental contexts, so the question arises of whether conditions and sources of rural poverty are also a uniquely American phenomenon. Obviously, the specific social and spatial landscapes are necessarily unique as are the historical, social, political and cultural configurations that construct the American experience. However, it can be argued that, in a number of significant ways, there are at least as many similarities as differences, and rural poverty in the US is just one manifestation of rural poverty in postindustrial nations. Areas of known similarity include the relative invisibility and neglect of rural poverty with concomitant concern with urban and aspatial perspectives; the tendency to view rural poverty through an ideological and idealized lens; the importance of economic restructuring, de-industrialization, global competition and the changing nature of natural resource extraction and livelihoods in rural poverty. Additionally, many other areas require further investigation, such as the influence of public policy and the shape of the welfare state on the rural poor.

The invisibility of rural poverty in postindustrial Europe is a case in point, witnessed by the lack of interest in specifically rural poverty in the major studies and assessments of current poverty in European nations. For example, reports from waves of the European Community Household Panel (ECHP), a major effort to collect and analyse comparable longitudinal data across the members of the European Union, emphasize multi-dimensional, dynamic, life course analyses, but with few exceptions provide little subnational information by type of place (Barnes et al.,

2002). Regional differences can be inferred in part from national differences. Thus poverty rates vary widely across nations (from 9 per cent in Denmark to 29 per cent in Portugal in the first wave of the ECHP), with poorer, less developed countries with higher levels of agriculture employment displaying high rates of poverty (Barnes et al., 2002; Van Den Bosch et al., 1997). Within-country regional differences in the UK (Cloke et al., 1995; McCormick and Philo, 1995) and parts of Europe (Barnes et al., 2002) also may partly reflect variation in rural industrial development, similar to distressed regions in the US. Thus parts of southern Italy, the former East Germany and regional divisions in Britain present suggestive profiles of poverty and exclusion.

European concern with 'social exclusion' bears a limited resemblance to the American focus on aspatial social characteristics of the poor. Accounts of disproportionate poverty among children, elderly, disabled, women, single-parent households, substance abusers, unemployed youth, immigrant and ethnic minorities and crowded housing developments echo similar concerns and findings in the US (Barnes et al., 2002; Geddes and Benington, 2001; Hauser and Becker, 2003; Ott and Wagner, 1997). However, there is greater emphasis on the impediments to full participation in society and the ways these are manifested. Poverty itself is defined to emphasize this social and relational aspect of poverty. Thus the European Commission Council statement of 19 December 1984 defines poverty as 'persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the member states in which they live' (as quoted in Atkinson, 1998: 2). Furthermore, the extent to which social exclusion or its manifestations are spatially correlated or distributed intranationally is not given a high priority in these analyses, and the implicit assumption of national and urban priority appears to dominate European scholarly accounts as in US analyses as well.

The focus on social exclusion may be related to an ideological dimension of the invisibility of rural poverty. In the UK, one of the few countries with extensive research on rural poverty and lifestyles, the idealization of the rural countryside has served to obscure the existence of poverty and hardship in its midst. Paul Cloke and his colleagues (Cloke, 1995; Cloke et al., 1995a, 1995b; Milbourne, 1997; Philo, 1997; Woodward, 1996), based on extensive investigation via the Rural Lifestyles Project, argue that the rural

'idyll' or idealization of rural landscapes and lifestyles denies the existence of serious deprivation or marginalized populations in the British countryside, despite substantial evidence of serious need. It is not clear whether this discourse also prevails in other European nations. However, it is suggestive of the power of rural romanticism that in the two places with relatively extensive rural poverty research records – the US and the UK – discursive practices serve to obscure the extent and reality of rural poverty, by distortion in the US and denial in the UK (Cloke, 1995).

Debates on the causes of exclusion also share similarities to US accounts, centring on the dynamics of post-Fordist economic restructuring and globalized capitalism versus the deficiencies and failures of government policies and welfare systems (Geddes and Benington, 2001). Geddes and Benington (2001: 18) argue that the highest rates of poverty are found in European regions with a large proportion of the population employed in agriculture, but the largest numbers of poor people are found in more industrialized countries that have experienced de-industrialization and high unemployment. Certainly, industrial and agricultural restructuring is implicated in poverty, including rural poverty in all postindustrial nations.

Similarly, arguments have been mounted that state welfare policies have a major role in perpetuating poverty and exclusion (compared to fear of dependency in the US). Similar to the US, some blame welfare policies as the source of the problem, rather than the correlate, consequence, or solution to poverty. Welfare programmes are seen to reinforce cultures of exclusion and inhibit initiative, while providing inadequate and fragmented services that are far removed from community contribution or participation (Geddes and Benington, 2001). Others see the dismantling of the welfare state as implicated in problems of poverty, especially poverty in isolated rural areas (Meert, 200).

Generalizations are not easy to make given the wide variation across developed countries in the types of welfare system, ranging from those that fit Esping-Anderson's (1991) standard categories of corporatist, social democratic and liberal to 'rudimentary welfare states' with minimal welfare provision (Millar and Middleton, 2002). However, it should be no surprise that some of the highest rates of poverty are found in liberal or neo-liberal systems such as the US and the UK as well as in the rudimentary welfare states (that is, in the less developed nations of the EC). By definition, the latter will have fairly high rates of rural

poverty. The relationship of type of welfare regime to the spatial distribution of poverty requires greater scrutiny, although accounts of poverty policy in both the US and the UK (Cloke, 1995, 1997; Cloke et al., 1995a, 1995b; Milbourne, 1997) are highly suggestive of the value of this inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The processes described are not unique to the US but common to many nations, both in the core and the periphery. It would be presumptuous and inaccurate to say that rural poverty in the developing nations is strictly analogous to counterparts in the core, but in an increasingly interconnected and globalized economy, many of the same processes can be predicted or are already under way. The parallels described by Tardanico and Rosenberg (2000) between southern regions of Mexico and the US under NAFTA, despite huge differences in their national economies and politics, point to the direction that development may take under globalization. Similarly, concerns about decentralized rural programmes in Mexico mirror the questions about capacity that ensue from devolution in the US. 'A particular problem of decentralized rural development programmes is the typically limited capacity of local governments to improve policy outcomes (Fox and Aranda, 2000: 189). 'Poverty or development' are not two parallel universes but rather interrelated processes whose intersection enriches some, impoverishes many, and which are particularly problematic for rural people and places. Future research must scrutinize these connections, assuming the difficult task of documenting historically specific conditions while analysing the increasingly complex processes that link people and places across physical and cultural borders.

NOTES

- 1 US counties are classified as metropolitan or non-metropolitan, depending on population size and proximity to a large population centre. The county is the basic administrative unit used to collect and report official statistics and social indicators, and it is the geo-political area for which the most consistent and comparable data are available. Strictly speaking, however, the metro/nonmetro designation is not synonymous with urban and rural. It is possible to have extensive rural areas in metropolitan counties and some nonmetro counties may be integrated into urban economies but not yet captured and classified as part of the metro area.

- 2 The US government has calculated an official measure of poverty based on income poverty since the mid-1950s. The poverty threshold uses a formula to determine a minimum subsistence level based on cost of living data, family size and composition that is adjusted annually for inflation. Persons residing in families with incomes below the appropriate figure are classified as poor. In 2001, the poverty line was approximately \$9,000 for a single individual and \$18,000 for a family of four. This compares with median income in 2000 of almost \$51,000 overall (\$41,000 in rural areas; \$62,000 for a family of four and \$21,000 for a single individual; US Census, 2002). The establishment of an absolute poverty threshold contrasts with the approach used by European Community nations to measure income poverty, which typically uses some variation on half the average income per member nation (Atkinson, 1998).
- 3 The term 'War on Poverty' was coined by President Lyndon Johnson in his inaugural speech in 1964 and became a primary focus of his domestic agenda to build 'the Great Society'. However, the original idea to mobilize vast resources in 'a comprehensive assault on poverty' originated in the Kennedy administration (Katz, 1996: 262). War on Poverty programmes entailed numerous extensions and expansions of existing programmes and the creation of many new services to assist the poor, improve health, nutrition and welfare, and extend access to safety net provisions to previously omitted groups. Additionally, it marked the mobilization of numerous grass roots social action efforts, community organizations and civil rights campaigns that materially affected US politics and policies (Katz, 1996).
- 4 The PRWORA legislation eliminated the federally mandated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a programme that entitled anyone who was eligible to aid and substituted Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a time-limited programme with a maximum eligibility of five years. It was funded with block grants to states, and an important component of the restructuring was to devolve major responsibility to states to design and implement programmes in response to local needs and knowledge. This included authority to determine length of eligibility which varied across states from two years to the full 60 months maximum allowed in the authorizing legislation.

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