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SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS
IN A DYING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports some of the findings of a broad-based community study of a small Oregon town that depends for its existence on one timber mill--a single plant in a declining industry. The community has been in decline for at least the last decade and prospects for reversal are not good.

Specifically, this paper explores the forces that shape the response of high school students and young adults who have grown up in the community to the decline, using survey, ethnographic, and archival data. Despite a clear understanding of the economic plight of the community, young people are not prepared for the changes they face. The research indicates that this is because of (1) a community culture that is fatalistic and highly individualistic and (2) a school system that has as its primary function the preparation of workers for the wood products industry. In this paper the community and its economy are described. Next, research findings on the culture of the community and on its school system are presented, along with their implications for the socialization of young people. Finally, the findings and implications are discussed in relation to the literature on dying communities.

By all accounts the structure of the U.S. economy will change dramatically before the turn of the century. Nowhere will the impact of these changes be more dramatic than in the wood products industry of the Pacific Northwest. It is an industry that virtually supports the region: forty-six percent of manufacturing jobs and ten percent of all jobs in the Northwest are in the wood products industry (Howard and Hiserote, 1978). The region faces the same issues as other old-line manufacturing areas: technological change and competition from other regions both in the U.S. and abroad are producing structural unemployment.

However, the Northwest is different from most other old industrial regions in one important respect. The Northwest wood products industry has been characterized by numerous small operations, usually located in small, isolated communities. In many cases a town depends on a single mill for its existence. For example, there are in Oregon today seventy-nine towns with populations of less than three thousand that rely on the wood products industry for their economic support. In sixty-two of these communities, more than eighty percent of the total manufacturing workforce is employed in the wood products industry (Weeks, 1982).

These towns are extremely vulnerable to the structural changes that their industry is facing. Important segments of the industry are moving to the Southeastern United States and to Southeast Asia, where labor costs are lower and timber is more accessible. Those firms that are staying are engaged in a course of modernization and centralization that is resulting in fewer, larger, more highly capitalized mills located in or near the region's important cities. As a result, an important restructuring of the region's spatial economy is occurring. Since 1976, more than ten percent of all the mills in the Northwest have closed permanently, and many of

those still in operation have introduced new equipment that makes possible the same level of production with fewer workers (Weeks, 1982).

In summary, dozens of small communities face the prospect of becoming ghost towns over the next two decades. Most of these communities are very aware of their plight. Despite this, not many of them have been able to marshal a response. This paper reports some of the findings of a broad-based study of one such community, a dying community that seems unable to save itself. Specifically, I explore the forces that have shaped the response to the decline of high school students and young adults who have grown up in the community. I first describe the community and its economy; then I present research findings on the culture of the community and its school system, along with their implications for the socialization of young people; finally, the findings and implications are discussed in relation to the literature on dying communities.

THE COMMUNITY OF OAKRIDGE

The subject of this study, Oakridge, is located at the foot of the Oregon Cascades about forty-five miles from the nearest metropolitan area. It depends for its economic base on a single large mill complex owned and operated by a diversified corporation with its headquarters in a major city, which has timber, real estate, and shipping interests throughout the Northwest and Upper Great Lakes regions. The mill was opened in 1948, to take advantage of the fact that Oakridge is located on a railroad main line, giving it access to both forest and markets. However, it was already an anachronism when it was built. The truck had entered the logging scene in the 1930's, making it more advantageous to build roads

into the mountains and truck logs down to lower, centrally located mills than to build logging rail lines and mills in or near the mountains.

Despite this, the new mill had a major impact on Oakridge. It grew from a sleepy railroad town of 520 in 1940, to 1,562 in 1950. It was thought that the mill would be the beginning of a new era for the community. New developments were planned and the population was projected to reach twenty-five thousand. This has not happened. Instead, the Oakridge mill -- which at its peak employed five hundred workers -- now employs about three hundred when all shifts of all units are working. There have been fewer weeks of full operation each year since 1978. However, the town does have other economic assets. It continues to be home to the railroad maintenance crews; a large number of National Forest Service employees are based in Oakridge; and it is situated on an important tourist highway route.

The population of Oakridge grew to 1,973 by 1960, but this is a bit deceptive. A large part of the community, including the mill, is located outside the city limits. To illustrate, the only major annexation since the town incorporated in 1932, occurred in 1966. It increased the population from about two thousand to about thirty-five hundred. Thus, the total community (in and outside the city limits) is somewhat larger than the official population.

During the 1970's, while the population of the surrounding county was growing by nearly twenty-five percent, Oakridge grew by only about nine percent, from 3,422 in 1970, to 3,729 in 1980. Since 1980, the town has been losing population. The present official estimate is slightly over thirty-five hundred, giving Oakridge about the same number of residents it had after the 1966 annexation.

The decline in Oakridge is visible in a number of ways. There are numerous vacant stores in the commercial "uptown" area. By one realtor's estimate, as many as a quarter of all the homes in the community are for sale. The municipal government has been hard-pressed to maintain services: the town has gone for months at a time without police patrols; the library is closed; parks are not maintained. The official annual unemployment rate for the town has been: 1979-13.4%; 1980-17.1%; 1981-19.9%; 1982-22.0%.

Even more telling are the age and income characteristics of the community. The percentage of the population aged 65 and over increased from 7.83% of the total in 1970, to 12.44% in 1980. In the same period, the percentage of the population aged 18 and under decreased from 36.29% of the total to 29.47%. As a result, the median age increased from 28.7 to 31.2.

The median family income in Oakridge is \$19,676, slightly under the national median of \$19,908 and the state median of \$20,028. However one-fifth (20.81%) of Oakridge families have an income of less than half the median; these people have an income of less than \$10,000 per year.

Oakridge is well aware of its decline and has been struggling, unsuccessfully and with growing frustration, with economic development since at least 1977. As a mill town it is a victim of its location and of changes in the wood products industry. On the other hand, it has numerous assets which should make possible the development of an alternative economic base in one or more aspects of tourism, Oregon's second-leading industry. To understand why the community has been unable to take advantage of its assets, it is necessary to look at the culture of Oakridge.

CULTURE AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN OAKRIDGE

Between December, 1982, and May, 1983, a research team from the University of Oregon conducted an analysis of Oakridge, with the full support of the community. As the City Administrator said in a preliminary interview for the project, "Oakridge is a town that needs to take a look at itself." Virtually every aspect of the social life of the community was investigated, from shopping habits to the municipal budget, using the full range of social research techniques. This paper focuses on one aspect of the research, the community's culture, and how young people are socialized into it.

Community Leadership and Learned Helplessness. In any community, but especially one facing serious problems, leadership is a critical element. To understand leadership in Oakridge, a reputational study was conducted. A standard snowball method was used to identify the community leaders. The people so identified were interviewed, using an open-ended questionnaire. The snowball method produced a group of seventy nominees; through interviews this group was reduced to seventeen people who were identified as core community leaders.

This large number of leaders in such a small community might be seen as an asset, but the community leaders themselves explain the matter differently. According to the leaders there are a large number of "committees of one" in Oakridge. The seventy nominees are not simply the leadership of Oakridge, they are virtually the only active people in the community. The seventeen core leaders commented that few people are willing to get involved, that "it is hard to get everybody to pull toward the same direction at the same time," and that many people have had frustrating past experiences that make them "once burned, twice shy." They described their community as apathetic, resistant to change, and hypercritical -- accomplishments

go unrecognized, but mistakes and failures are pinpointed and strongly criticized. These leaders see their community as pessimistic, fatalistic, and lacking faith in the future.

This view is supported and amplified by the results of a survey of a random sample of community households. In May, 1983, questionnaires were mailed to three hundred households in Oakridge, chosen randomly from the telephone directory. Prior to the mailing one hundred of the selected households were contacted by telephone and asked if they would be willing to complete the questionnaire. The response was so positive that the remaining households in the sample were not surveyed. One hundred sixty-eight questionnaires were returned in usable form, giving a response rate of 56%. The questionnaire contained a variety of questions about respondents' perceptions of their community. Of interest here are the respondents' views of their community's economy and leadership.

First, despite the fact that Oakridge was experiencing 22% unemployment, while the county in which it is located had "only" 12%, the vast majority of respondents (96/137 = 70.07%) believed that "the situation is about the same (in Oakridge) as in other small communities in Oregon in terms of the economic problems it is facing." Moreover, only a minority (57/127 = 44.88%) believed the situation in Oakridge was worse than for the nation as a whole, although national unemployment at the time of the survey was slightly over ten percent. They also felt, by a substantial margin, that the community's economy would improve (69/138 = 50.0%), or at least be no worse (30/138 = 21.73%), in five years.

By small majorities, respondents did not believe that their community "has the kind of leadership (either elected officials or other community leaders) that will allow it to successfully respond to the challenges it faces" (70/134 = 52.23%); or that there is

anything they themselves "or other residents like (themselves) can do to improve the local economy" (68/126 = 53.96%).

Thus, to summarize, respondents seriously underestimate the gravity of the economic difficulties their community is in, and doubt both their own and their leaders' ability to respond effectively. One can conclude from the leadership study and survey results that Oakridge manifests the characteristics of learned helplessness. People have no faith in their own or their community's ability to act effectively on the world. They see themselves as passive observers rather than active participants, and they display an unrealistic assessment of the world and their place in it.

How does a community find itself in this situation? The specific answers are no doubt peculiar to each place, but the general answer is in how a place reproduces its culture and society. The schools provide a clear view of social reproduction in Oakridge.

The Social Reproduction of Helplessness.

In a typical year nearly forty percent of Oregon high school graduates go on to college; in Oakridge, about twenty-five percent do. In two control communities used for this study -- both small, isolated, depressed mill towns like Oakridge -- about thirty-five and forty-five percent respectively of high school graduates go on to college (Oregon State System of Higher Education, 1979). Our own tracking of the Oakridge High class of 1982 affirms and fleshes out this pattern. The class of '82 graduated into an extremely difficult local economy; as noted, the official unemployment rate was 22%. Despite this, one year later nearly sixty percent (41/69) were marking time in town. They were unemployed (8/69) or underemployed, working in such jobs as fast food service, grocery sacker, and the like.

Only twelve had gone on to a four-year college. Six had entered the military and four had found jobs out of town.

To gain an understanding of how these young people's goals and aspirations were shaped, a participant-observer was placed in Oakridge High School. The researcher was a certified teacher. Unstructured interviews were conducted with the superintendent, principal, vice-principal, school counselors and teachers, and students; an open-ended questionnaire was administered to eighty-seven students; and the researcher taught a unit on the economics of the wood products industry in a variety of courses, to stimulate a discussion on the future of Oakridge. No effort was made to conceal the researcher's identity or disguise the nature of the project.

The administration has a very clear goal in view for Oakridge High. The principal stated this as "preparation to go into the work situation." The vice principal commented that the purpose of school is "to make the students dependable citizens. Scholarship is of secondary importance." In keeping with this, the teachers' handbook stresses attendance and discipline. The school rewards those students who always come to school on time: plaques are put up in the hallway recognizing the achievement and those who maintain good attendance records are dismissed for lunch ten minutes early. The administration wants to instill the skills to "go to work each day, and be on time. Life is a day-to-day routine."

Teachers describe the principal as an uncompromising authoritarian who does not listen to the opinions of others and quickly vetos that with which he disagrees. In this environment, students seldom challenge authority. The vice-principal reports that

the reaction to punishment "is not to be angry or find blame," since students are socialized to accept that he is simply following the rules: "They don't question my judgment."

Both the principal and vice-principal describe the focus of their school as "the individual development of the students in becoming functioning adults in society," rather than the development of ideas or critical thinking. They are most concerned with teaching that "hard work leads to success and how to accept failure." "Too many educators are just interested in the subject matter. We are interested in the kids."

Parents evidently give passive assent to these goals. They generally do not involve themselves in the schools, except as athletic boosters. They rarely attend school functions. There is little interest in such activities as PTA. The school counselors spark no friction when they channel students away from college.

The result of this is reflected in the open-ended surveys. On them, students were asked what they hope to be doing when they are twenty-five years old. Two-thirds of those completing the questionnaire indicated a general understanding of the economic problems facing Oakridge. Many wrote such things as "there isn't (sic) enough jobs." One wrote that Oakridge is "a town for retiring people but not for those with young families." Nevertheless, their answers indicate a very narrow vision of the options available to them. Sixty percent hope to be living in Oakridge. Regarding career preferences, most put down jobs requiring little or no training or education, such as hair stylist, working in a store, or driving a logging truck. Those who expected more of themselves still seemed limited to their immediate world: nurse, mechanic, teacher, welder.

The behavior of Oakridge High's recent graduates, and the goals and aspirations of present students seem consistent with the sense of helplessness found in their parents. Having grown up around the mill, the community's dominant culture is an adaptation to the demands of mill work: be punctual and reliable, but don't aspire to too much, and -- above all -- don't question authority or the status quo. This culture has served Oakridge well. Two generations of millworkers, their families, and neighbors made a good life for themselves with it, and it is not surprising that the school should have as its goal the perpetuation of the culture.

However, Oakridge bought its good life at a price. The cost of accepting the status quo, of never learning to question, is a loss of the critical faculty of adaptation. The community of Oakridge functioned well as long as no creative adaptation was required of it, but now that change has become necessary the community and its members are helpless.

Looking at the matter another way, the culture of Oakridge fosters and perpetuates -- through the schools and other mechanisms of socialization and reinforcement -- adult work roles that constrain the types of personal development necessary for creative adaptation to new situations. Believing, with some justification, that their long-term interest coincided with that of the wood products industry generally and with the local mill specifically, community members actively embraced the cultural norms and values associated with the blue-collar work roles available in heavy industry. In so doing, they implicitly rejected other norms and values. Now the industry is abandoning their community and region. It is not a simple matter of finding another, similar, job in a different plant; it is not even a matter of finding another, similar, job in a different town. These people have made a commitment to a way of life in a particular place, and now

their commitment has turned on them. Their culture is actively dysfunctional in dealing with their situation.

DISCUSSION

To put the Oakridge case into perspective, it is helpful to relate it to other studies of dying communities. One of the earliest and best-known is W. F. Cottrell's (1951) study of Caliente, a railroad town whose fate was sealed by the technological change from steam to diesel locomotives. The town owed its existence to the jobs created by the railroad and the conversion to diesels made it obsolete, just as technological changes are doing to small isolated mill towns such as Oakridge.

Cottrell draws two related inferences from the experience of Caliente that seem particularly relevant to Oakridge. First, he observes that their own obsolescence was not projected by the people who made a community in Caliente. Like the people of Oakridge, they were enmeshed in a technological and economic system that they took for granted.

Based upon the "certainty" of the railroad's need for Caliente, (people) built their homes there, . . . at the cost, in many cases, of their life savings. . . . Those who built (the community's homes, businesses, churches, hospital, schools, parks) thought that their investment was as well warranted as the fact of birth, sickness, accident, and death (Cottrell, 1951:358).

For the people of Caliente, the continued use of the steam locomotive was a given, as accepted a part of life as any aspect of their physical environment. Similarly, the people of Oakridge have -- until recently -- taken the wood products industry for granted. In Caliente and in Oakridge, then, people made a

commitment to a technology and economic system beyond their control and, perhaps, their understanding. In the process they committed themselves to building a community, not only materially, but in a cultural sense. Sadly, those whose behavior most nearly approximated the ideal have had to pay the highest price: the more strongly people adopted the norms and values of the community, the more difficult has been their ability to respond to its impending dissolution.

Closer to Oakridge, in both time and place, is Patricia Marchak's path-breaking study of the the wood products industry in British Columbia. Her findings, in a survey of 557 mill town residents, supports Cottrell. Her study is very comprehensive; of interest here is her inquiry into the ideology of her respondents.

Marchak takes ideology to be a set of generally shared beliefs which offer explanations for the social experiences of people that persuade them of the legitimacy of existing social arrangements. The explanations do not have to be "true" in any objective sense; in fact, large populations have often been convinced of explanations that diverged from the available evidence. However, the explanations must be linked to the everyday experience of people and be sufficiently comprehensive, if they are to be credible.

Those who control the productive machinery in an economy also have the power to determine, to a large degree, the prevailing ideology, according to Marchak's argument. They may do so directly, through the media, propaganda, and so on. More importantly, they do this indirectly because they have the power to establish the way society is organized and the relative rewards its members will receive. If the system is sufficiently beneficial to its members -- if it provides well materially and is not overtly oppressive -- its explanations are generally adopted.

Marchak's data indicate that what is apparently true for a particular population is taken as a general truth. For example, if her respondents are dependent for their employment on large corporations, then it follows -- for them -- that large companies are essential to employment. "The daily life of a community structures versions of the social world" (Marchak, 1983:297). What community norms and values does Marchak find in towns like Oakridge?

(I)t appears that the resource labour force resident in single-industry towns and dependent on corporate employment has neither particularly creative and challenging work nor creative and challenging leisure; it is provided with a fairly high material standard of living. . . . For many, the response is acquiescence: . . . not attempting to establish long-range life goals, not hoping for too much, not being disappointed . . . (Marchak, 1983:300).

Oakridge is beginning to take focus, in the mirror of Caliente and the B. C. mill towns. Its ideology and consequent community norms and values are shaped by the firm that controls the town's economic base. People believe the mill will take care of them if they take care of it. Taking care of the mill means creating a local community of hard-working and conscientious, but unambitious and uncreative people. In return, the mill offers a good supply of well-paid, low-skill jobs. However, those who were most loyal to the ideology shaped by the mill were the most heavily penalized when the mill stopped holding up its end of the bargain.

What, then is likely to happen in Oakridge? The literature suggests two related answers, one economic and one social. With

respect to economics, it is currently fashionable to argue that migration will take care of the problems facing declining communities. The assumption is that as the demand for labor fluctuates geographically, so should the supply. Migration will raise income for migrants and increase job opportunities for those left behind, according to this viewpoint.

Arthur Ford (1973) took a hard look at this policy contention in the context of Appalachia, a region remarkably similar in its economy to the rural Pacific Northwest: both are dominated by extractive industries that produce a good for export from the region, a good that is about played out; in both, the industries support large numbers of small, single-industry towns; and in both, the industries tend to be controlled by large corporations.

Ford found that these towns lose young, well-educated males and concluded that there are three important economic consequences of this migration. First, the community experiencing the loss accumulates a population with high economic dependency -- the aged, the young, and the less well-educated. Second, local returns to educational investment are lost. And third, the community experiences severe income constraints as it loses its most productive workers. Thus, outmigration does not produce an equilibrium at a lower level of population. Rather, it exacerbates community decline.

The social response to this downward spiral seems to be the rise of what some anthropologists (Padfield, 1980) have called a nativistic movement. The concept is based on the symbolic rituals, for example the Sundance, that arose among American Indians in response to white oppression. By glorifying selected cultural elements of an earlier and

happier day, it was hoped that cultural survival would be assured. They were symbolic demonstrations against the hopelessness and powerlessness the Indians felt.

Such symbolic demonstrations have become common in the declining communities of rural America. They include flamboyant displays of symbols of a potent past -- the supercowboy, the pioneer day celebration, and the aggressive bumper sticker are all examples. Big favorites in Oakridge are the superlogger and the superindividualist; the Annual Treeplanting Days; and the anti-environmentalist bumper sticker, "Sierra Club Hike to Hell."

They also take the form of action against perceived "conspiracies." Two such events have occurred in Oakridge recently. The first was the protest against the replacement of the local phone company office with a contract station. People were still able to order service and pay their bills locally and in person, but viewed the change from a company-owned to a contract office as part of the larger assault on the community. The second action was a literal witch hunt. A high school girl claimed to be a member of a coven of witches. Some of the local churches organized a protest that went on for about six weeks, focused on their demand that the school board investigate the presence of witches in the schools and, if any were found, to rid the community of them.

These symbolic demonstrations are manifestations of the quest for a return of the power and autonomy of a bygone era, and they may be the best that a community such as Oakridge can hope for. To return to our central theme, the norms and values used historically to cope with their situation operate to mystify their existing circumstances. The denial of powerlessness and loss of autonomy are held by Padfield (1980) to be the price people pay for maintaining their cultural and class identity.

As a way of rationalizing their lives, they blame themselves instead of the social system for community economic failure. In so doing, they make impossible a realistic assessment or effective response to their community's situation.

CONCLUSION

This is not a policy analysis. I have sought only explain why a community such as Oakridge does not respond to its dilemma. Prescriptions for change must be developed in the context of the larger debates that are currently going on over national industrial policy. As victims of the forces that exploited and are now trying to discard them, it would seem that there is little the people of a place like Oakridge can do to save their community. However, any viable national industrial policy must recognize that these communities and their people are the repositories of a worldview and a set of values that contribute much to society. They add a diverse dimension that should not be lost. That is, industrial policy must be built from the bottom up, starting with concern for the economic viability, social vitality, and political validity of communities and regions. To do otherwise will only exacerbate the structural transformation of the economy as more and more communities find themselves in the situation of Oakridge, while at the same time we lose the diversity they contribute to society.

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