"Now Every Farm has Its Own Tomcat": New Dynamics in Social Cohesion and Cleavage in an Agriculturally Based Community in Rural Saskatchewan

JoAnn Jaffe and Amy Quark

ABSTRACT. Behind the apparent cohesiveness of rural community lies another reality. This article examines contemporary dynamics of social cohesion and cleavage in six rural communities in Saskatchewan. Today’s rural communities face considerable challenges in dealing with new demographic and fiscal realities. Ongoing processes of community formation and division are being affected by fuller integration with global and regional processes of socio-economic transformation. As a result, long-standing interests try to consolidate their hold over the fruits of community, while different axes of power are formed. New patterns of inclusion and exclusion are being created. Intercommunity rivalries are increasing. The growing importance of First Nations groups to many communities adds a new dynamic to the mix.

SOMMAIRE. Derrière la cohésion apparente de la communauté rurale se cache une autre réalité. Le présent article examine la dynamique de cohésion et de fragmentation sociales dans six communautés rurales de la Saskatchewan. Ces communautés contemporaines font face à de sérieuses difficultés dans le cadre des nouvelles réalités démographiques et fiscales. Un processus continu de formation et de division se trouve affecté par des phénomènes régionaux et mondiaux de transformation socio-économique. Il en résulte que les intérêts de longue date tendent à consolider leur emprise sur les fruits de la communauté, tandis qu’apparaissent divers axes de pouvoir. De nouvelles structures d’inclusion et d’exclusion sont créées. Les rivalités intercommunautaires augmentent. L’importance croissante des groupes autochtones pour de nombreuses communautés contribue encore à cette nouvelle dynamique.

Introduction

This article examines emergent issues in the contemporary dynamics of social cohesion and cleavage in an agriculturally based community in southern rural Saskatchewan. In light of what is seen as increasing rates of community breakdown and the inadequacy of the state to reverse that trend, planners and policy-makers have focused on the idea of social cohesion as a low-cost and low-intervention way to save communities from the ravages of the market. Rural Saskatchewan is being remade through an ongoing crisis in agriculture in which the increasing concentration of production has set off a cascade of demographic, social, economic and political effects. Furthermore, the provincial government has followed policies of fiscal probity for over a decade, which has led to drastically reduced levels of monetary support to rural communities in most areas of social services. Possibilities for development are also being shaped by fuller integration with global and regional processes of socio-economic transformation. Saskatchewan rural communities face considerable challenges in dealing with these realities.

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While conditioned by the constraints, resources, and possibilities of the regional, national, and global context, communities in southern Saskatchewan each have their own local dynamics of development based in their unique history, social forces, and contingency. This means that, while generalizations can be made as to the likely overall direction of development, any individual place will follow its own path rooted within its particular conditions and interests. This perspective regards the local as a set of complex and open systems that are hierarchically, complexly, and contingently nested in larger systems. This perspective is anti-reductionist in that it holds that the local is more than just a reflection of larger structures, as well as anti-determinist in that it recognizes that local conditions may develop their own direction of development through a unique combination of circumstances (Byrne, 1998).

In Saskatchewan, local, regional and global relationships are being redrawn as the placement of risk is concentrating on-farm and decision-making capacity and market share are shifting off-farm. In this way, local places are experiencing increasing economic and social tensions as local possibilities and opportunities for economic viability and social sustainability are severely limited by system-wide constraints. However, while local, regional and global relations are being realigned by national and international political and economic processes, one must note that room for local agency remains. This is not to say that the local can change the outcome of the present trajectory of the system as a whole. Instead, one must recognize that, just as local places in Saskatchewan have historically created webs of interdependencies to ensure their survival, the particular histories and social formations of any locality will again help to determine the unique trajectory of these places (Byrne, 1998). We contend that looking at processes of cohesion and cleavage that shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion within local communities can help us to understand the direction of this trajectory.

A Review of the Concept of Social Cohesion

The idea of social cohesion has its roots in the distinction established by Ferdinand Tönnies (1855/1887) between societies based on gemeinschaft, characterized by face-to-face interactions, kin, tradition, and craft industry, and those based on gesellschaft, characterized by anonymity, contract-based social relations, and urbanisation. Tönnies nostalgically opposes rural gemeinschaft community with its customs and cohesion, with urban gesellschaft society with its calculation and rationality. In the shadow of Tönnies, the concept of social cohesion is at once paradoxically a nostalgic look backward at the “good old days” and a critical perspective on a dehumanizing market that breaks down community, produces alienation and social isolation, and causes society to ignore basic social needs. It is this dual aspect of social cohesion which accounts for its contemporary appeal. Through this perspective, social cohesion becomes a guidepost for the future.

The nostalgia of Tönnies sets the emotional tone for much of the thinking on social cohesion, but the actual theoretical frame of reference is provided by Durkheim. In The Division of Labour in Society, Durkheim (1897/1893) posited that the economic development of society—accomplished through progressive specialization of labour—would be accomplished by the development of social cohesion based on interdependency (organic solidarity). In these societies, cohesion is guaranteed by the values engendered through interdependency. According to
Durkheim, it is this process of integration which creates society as a coherent whole, in spite of, and uniting across, the differences between individuals.

Norms and values are critical to this view of social cohesion. One should note that the internalization of society's norms and values is what produces social cohesion, assuring a kind of equilibrium and stability to society. "Social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community" (Maxwell, 1996: 13). According to this definition of social cohesion, frequently used by researchers in Canada, the action of government is critical to guaranteeing a basic measure of economic equality and equity. It highlights the importance of material conditions in building cohesive communities, as well as a sense of belonging. Equality, however, has been interpreted to mean equality of opportunity, not equality of condition or outcome. The Canadian government does not even go this far (Bernard, 1999), but more commonly uses definitions that highlight values and a sense of belonging such as the definition by Jensen (2002) of the Canadian Policy Research Network:

1. Social cohesion is a process.
2. Social cohesion involves a definition of who is in the community.
3. Social cohesion involves shared values and also good conflict management in a pluralist society.
4. Social cohesion involves expressions of solidarity within a community.

Therefore, social cohesion is built in part by good citizenship practices.

The idea of social cohesion is also related to perspectives of classical Liberalism that hold that social welfare and the common good result from private behaviour in non-state institutions, such as families, communities and markets. Originally resuscitated by European governments, the idea of social cohesion drew attention to the perils of neoliberalism and what was seen as the failure of states to promote effective citizenship to all within their borders. The strengthening of social cohesion was meant to take the place of state action and provide a foundation for the social and economic development of rural communities. It is clear from this that concepts of social cohesion are related to those of social capital (Putnam, 2001; Coleman, 1988), which hold that community and democracy are maintained through group activities and civic engagement. Social capital may be of the "bonding" sort, in which internal group ties and action are strengthened, or of the "bridging" variety, in which relations between groups are built up. The presence of social cohesion in a community implies that citizens have found a way to make decisions in a fair or democratic fashion.

According to students of social cohesion, the state in complex societies helps to produce social cohesion through the process of citizenship formation. Different states have distinct regimes of civil society leading to different forms of citizenship and social cohesion. The literature contrasts citizenship regimes that emerge from distinct political-economic formations. According to Jensen (2002), society is changing from a "societal rights Fordist citizenship regime" to a "social investment LEGO citizenship regime." Under Fordist citizenship regimes, the key cleavages in society are "class and hierarchical social relations." Under the "LEGO" regime, key cleavages are "inclusion and exclusion." We claim that, contrary to new social cohesion researchers, class and hierarchy and inclusion and exclusion are overlapping
constructs; who is included and excluded has everything to do with class, race, gender—in other words, power in all its material and discursive forms.

In fact, in spite of the Durkheimian nature of the concept of social cohesion, it may be an idea well-suited to more conflict or power-centered theories. In this case, one might speak of anti-social social cohesion. The cohesion of dominant groups can be based on the stigmatization or scapegoating of others. This common phenomenon is implicated in racist practices across the globe, and is currently part of the ideological package making up attacks on the welfare state. In times of social transformation, this dominant group cohesion/stigmatization process will help to determine how the “goods” and “bads” of change are distributed. Opportunity hoarding also commonly centers on defined groups that are able to maintain privileged access to “goods” through the constant patrolling of the definition of who’s in and who’s out (Tilly, 2000).

In some communities, livelihoods or access to resources may be dependent on maintaining personal relationships with those who have “privileged” control over those resources. This is a sort of vertical social cohesion—at the expense of solidarity of those in like circumstances. The limits of the socially cohesive group may constitute an exclusive boundary in which social exchanges take place, disadvantaging those left out of potential benefits. One can think of the ability to call upon the resources of social cohesion as power—it is an “exclusive good.” “Those within the networks of contacts ... do not want to extend the privilege of this access to the point where it risks diluting the benefits” (Hall, 1997).

Processes of cohesion and cleavage, thus, play a key role in the development of relationships based in unequal material power. It is also important to note, however, that cohesion may be as oppressive as cleavage. Social cohesion may mask the domination of those who do not fight back or even recognize their oppression. In this case, the lack of discord may be taken as evidence of cohesion when conflict would be a sign of a “healthier” or more humane society.

As with social capital, promoters of social cohesion rarely urge societies to correct the growing inequalities and inequities of neoliberalism, but rather recommend volunteerism, compassion and a return to values in its stead. We would not want to downplay the importance of volunteerism and compassion. At the same time, we would like to point out that the emphasis on social cohesion and the solidarity of civil society is entirely consistent with the neoliberal perspective on the State that denies its duty towards redistributive justice while downloading social welfare responsibilities onto families and the volunteer sector. Furthermore, participation beyond a certain threshold, particularly if uneven, may weaken democracy as organisations and factions—that have neither been elected nor have democratic accountability—advocate for projects or put forward special interests that may in fact act to exclude or disempower other citizens (Godbout, 1983).

The Context: Global and Regional Processes of Socio-economic Transformation

Saskatchewan agriculture, which since its inception has set the stage for the development trajectory of the province’s rural communities, has historically been dominated by a “single-family, private ownership” system established by the Canadian government at the time of settlement (Jaffe, 2003). This agriculture has been oriented to export and the international market since the beginning, with its original and continuing reliance on grains as the primary commodity. Throughout
the years, these independent family farms have been situated in a web of relationships characterized by increasing "concentration, centralisation and internationalisation of capital" within the agrifood system, creating new and changing opportunities and constraints on local livelihoods (Knuttula, 2003).

In the early years of Saskatchewan agriculture, the effects of corporate control on farmers and farming communities were mitigated by farmer-led movements to create cooperative institutions and to partner with and influence government policy. The Canadian Wheat Board, although not without its critics (the strongest of whom has collapsed in recent months), provided bargaining strength for farmers against large agribusiness corporations through central-desk selling. The farmer-owned Federated Co-op offered competition in the area of farm supply inputs, while the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, a cooperative grain elevator system, supplied an alternative to the corporate cartel (Warnock, 2003). These institutions survive to the present, although the Pool has recently turned public despite bitter farmer opposition.

Further, at various points during this period, the Canadian government specifically intervened against market forces to support small-scale agricultural producers and to shelter them from the ravages of free market capitalism through subsidies and equalising programs such as the Crow’s Nest Pass Rail Rates. The Crow Rate, as it is known, was originally instituted as a return for generous bonuses provided to the Canadian Pacific Railway to build a line to allow the company to exploit the rich mineral resources in south-eastern British Columbia, and ultimately made universal to require the railroads to compensate the public for the generous land grants they all had received during the settlement period. It had the important effect of equalizing transportation costs across space for producers. These examples of solidarity and collective efforts to secure and protect rural livelihoods and a way of life, however, were consolidated during the Keynesian welfare-state era following World War II, and have been substantially destroyed with the rise of the neoliberal regime of free markets, free trade, and ever-intensifying capital accumulation. Under the "rhetoric of deregulation, fiscal responsibility, and freeing the market from the fetters and burdens of government intervention and interference," (Knuttula, 2003: 294) the Canadian government has adopted neoliberal rhetoric and policies. Enforced by international bodies such as the WTO and agreements such as NAFTA and GATT, the neoliberal laissez-faire agenda has restructured national agricultural policy in favour of a diminished role for the state and an increasing dominance of market forces.

Rural Saskatchewan, like many parts of the world, is undergoing radical changes as a result of this fundamental shift in the international environment and national policy—thus the qualitatively different reality facing rural communities. While these international and national pressures have affected many different rural places across Canada and around the world, it could be argued that these developments have been more significant to rural Saskatchewan than to any other rural place in North America, precisely due to high levels of state involvement in the establishment and maintenance of these areas. Locally, the consequences of neoliberalism in rural Saskatchewan are painfully clear. Although the Wheat Board survives, the Crow Rate is gone, as are most subsidies and support programs for Saskatchewan agriculture. In the last decade the provincial government has embarked on a program of rural revitalization, however, despite their social
democratic party line, they have taken a conservative, neoliberal approach. So-called revitalization has rested on fiscal austerity and private investment with or without public partnership. Educational and healthcare services and facilities in rural areas have been cut back or closed, while the province has pursued partnerships with international capital and large-scale projects, such as ethanol plants in tandem with intensive livestock operations. Further, political and economic centralization have translated into cutbacks in government funding and services, leaving municipal governments with greater financial responsibilities, while at the same time moving the locus of decision-making out of local hands. Neo-liberalism has stripped “community” of all but its economic meaning, and, where the “social” survives, it is most clearly invoked in the service of the economic.

Progressive rural depopulation continues to be an issue as the number of farms across the province is declining while remaining farms grow in size and become increasingly land extensive and capital intensive, requiring fewer people on farms and in rural areas (Jaffe, 2008). As one older farmer-informant to this research stated, contrasting the high era of family farming (1950s–1970s) to today, “Now, every farm has its own tomcat.” The bimodal pattern of ownership that is developing, with a few very large farms and a number of small ones, suggests that this unequal pattern will continue. Further, as narrow profit margins and insecure futures make intergenerational transfer of farm operations difficult or even impossible, young people fail to stay in or return to their rural communities and instead seek education and employment in urban centres, often outside the province. Conversely, the remaining population is aging, creating a growing dependency burden, particularly of elderly women, in a context of declining health and care facilities. This declining and aging population base not only threatens the rural tax base and the maintenance of services and facilities, such as for education and healthcare, but also undermines formal and informal networks of mutual aid and volunteerism that have traditionally created a sense of community and, in fact, facilitated the viability of individual family farms. Further aggravating these concerns is the growing trend towards farm service-centre centralization, the closure of small elevators in favour of giant inland grain terminals, and the loss of rail lines (hastened by the loss of the Crow), as well as the concomitant tendency for people to drive to large centres to shop. As a result, fewer and fewer communities have been able to support much commercial activity (Jaffe, 2008).

Methodology

For the most part, the data used in this paper were collected through qualitative field research conducted by the authors. In light of our focus on social cleavages, we undertook what might best be described as an analytical snowball sample within the community. Our strategy was to interview a range of individuals based on their positions in reference to differing lines of inclusion and exclusion with the communities, and to continue to build our list of potential interviewees as we became more aware of the issues we wanted to follow through our interviews. Such divisions included income inequality, “race,” ethnicity, language, gender, newcomers vs. old-timers, class and class fractions, and “Main Street” differences. Attempting to speak with both insiders and outsiders along each relevant community division, we specifically endeavoured to interview the “unusual suspects”—those people whose views are generally least likely to be sought and, therefore,
often those who are most difficult to locate. In this light, we began our snowball
survey by speaking with members of the local clergy under the assumption that
they would be aware of who might belong to such marginalized groups. From there
we chose our sample with the aim of interviewing people across these various lines
of cleavage, both "insiders" and "outsiders."
To conduct the interviews, we utilized semi-structured interview schedules. We
used three different interview schedules, depending on the role and position of
the interviewee in the community. In particular, one schedule focused on informal
social groups, networks and differences; the second surveyed the role of formal
social organizations; the third targeted the social implications of economic enter-
prises and developments in the area. A key set of questions were asked of each
interviewee, however, these questions were generally open-ended, allowing the
interviewer to probe for further information. We also asked some informants to
draw "social maps" to help us better comprehend how they understood who the
different groups were that made up each community.

Diefenbaker: Case Study of a Classic Community of Agricultural Producers

Since its inception, the majority of residents of Diefenbaker have been primar-
ily involved in agriculture—mostly grain but also mixed farming—and related
activities. Few businesses exist that do not directly support the local agricultural
economy. However, in recent years, as the farm economy has faltered, many local
farmers have struggled to keep their heads above water, and the community has
gradually lost many of its businesses and services. As one semi-retired farmer
explains: "There were 7 machine dealerships here. Now all are gone...
Diefenbaker did have two manufacturing plants. Now just [one]. The other one
went bankrupt—20 people out of a job." With a declining population base and an
increasing percentage of elderly women in particular, serious demographic chal-
enges intensify economic insecurity. In a state of slow but steady decline, the
community's efforts towards revitalization largely emulate provincially defined strate-
gies. The community is currently considering the development of a feedlot, is
involved in an ethanol project and is promoting tourism in the area. As the com-
community panics to stave off its seemingly inevitable extinction, one wonders what it
means to be a "community" under such circumstances.

Contrary to familiar notions of rural communities as cohesive, close-knit, and
homogeneous, as demonstrated in Diefenbaker, "community" encompasses con-
tradictions and conflicts that must be managed. "Community" is not a condition
that lacks conflict or division, but, rather, represents a set of relationships that must
be negotiated. Sometimes interpersonal injury must be swallowed or buried in
order to keep the day-to-day functioning. There are times it does not work that
well. A just, inclusive and cohesive community represents a normative, rather than
a natural, condition.

In rural agricultural areas like Diefenbaker, many contradictions and incon-
gruities must be contended with, particularly as the capitalist character of
Saskatchewan agriculture exerts greater and greater discipline on production.
While originally established to fulfill external economic ends, Saskatchewan com-
munities soon developed a strong social fabric. In fact, the community and its net-
works of mutual aid and volunteerism became critical for maintaining families in
farming, in spite of the myth of the individual family farm. However, "community
is a contradiction that needs to be actively managed as farmers compete with their neighbours—particularly via land markets” (Jaffe, 2003: 143).

While the myth of the individual family farm has always been a feature of Saskatchewan rural areas, the contradiction between the community and its members is becoming ever more apparent in the current economic and political climate. While other communities shaped by the same national and global forces may react very differently, as the competition to survive among individual farm households intensifies—straining the community networks and institutions that quietly maintain the family farm—conflicts emerge among farmers in Diefenbaker. Farmers struggle between depending on their traditional social networks, if in a distorted form, and giving over to the competitive and self-interested nature of the capitalist land market in order to survive:

We have seen farms go down. Some stay but most have left. Farmers turn into vultures, they want land as cheap as possible, regardless of friendship and family relationships. There is a stigma, a shame factor for those who go under, even though for most it is not their fault but rather due to the prices and to drought. Whoever gets the land is considered to have won—good for them, they got such a good deal… My brother-in-law and sister are out of grain farming now. Their neighbour got mad—why did you sell to someone else and not me? But this guy was just waiting for the price to drop and didn’t approach them. He expected them to sell at a cheap price to him rather than to someone else who offered them the price they were asking. (Female wage-earner)

Further, paralleling typical peasant agricultural societies, a context of increasing competitive pressures soon becomes construed as a zero-sum game. This may not be so far-fetched as many proposals for community development call for some to lose, so that the community—or a small specially selected group—can win. Furthermore, in some areas like Diefenbaker, rapidly increasing concentration has been accompanied by high rates of on-going farm bankruptcy. The image of the limited good comes to govern the understanding of the costs and benefits to success in Diefenbaker. From this perspective, individuals and groups struggle for possession of and control over finite resources; thus, for someone to win, others must lose: “you can have some rich and some poor or all poor but not all rich” (large farmer). Under this discourse, economic and social levelling mechanisms emerge in attempt to keep some people from pulling ahead, substantially or at least in appearance, at the expense of others. As one large farmer relates:

I know a wealthier guy who could buy a new pickup every year. He would buy the same colour every year and wouldn’t bring it to town for a few months until the gloss was off—he didn’t think he would be accepted otherwise. In Diefenbaker, it is easier to be poor than well-off in terms of acceptance.

Some view this “tall poppy syndrome” as having negative connotations:

In Diefenbaker it is not negative to be without, to be a have-not. This is an obstacle to success—there is no glory for success, beat down those who can and encourage those who won’t. People in Diefenbaker want to make sure no one really gets ahead; they want a more homogeneous population. People would rather have everyone poor. (Large farmer)
Yet often overlooked is the important role such levelling mechanisms play in dampening inequalities and thus maintaining community ties. Socio-cultural levelling mechanisms can work to maintain greater equality in terms of access to resources and decision-making and may make social and environmental concerns more relevant to how resources and decision-making are distributed.

Under the rapidly changing and increasingly difficult economic and political environment created by neoliberalism, however, a qualitative change is occurring, influencing the economic distribution within Diefenbaker, its resulting social differentiation and therefore the efficacy of such socio-cultural mechanisms. According to the 2001 Census of Agriculture, small-sized farms (0–1,119 acres) account for 50% of the total farms in this crop district. Medium-sized farms (1,120–3,519) make up 41% of the total, and large farms (>3,520 acres) represent less than only 8% of the total farms in this district (Statistics Canada, 2002). Put together with the observation of one large farmer who notes that “there are several people in the area who farm 15,000–16,000 acres,” it becomes clear that the majority of land in the area has become concentrated in the hands of few, due at least in part to the advantages of intergenerational transfer:

There are two families ... that seem to endure in the Diefenbaker area when others have disappeared. I think this difference is attributed to the fact that the older generation didn’t have to be bought out by their kids. They had enough to give them land. (Medium farmer)

As land ownership continues to dichotomize and inequality widens, these changes resound within the community, producing a qualitative change in class relations. Whereas once levelling mechanisms were important to facilitate social acceptance and to smooth local business transactions, the extremes to which landholdings have become concentrated mean that these few households are farming at such a large scale that local social and economic networks are no longer necessary. Some people in the community still find themselves deeply embedded in overlapping social and economic networks, as a small farmer describes:

I don’t get along with one of the park board members that well, but you can’t piss anyone off too much in a small town or you lose a volunteer. And if you piss off someone in a volunteer interaction, it may have effects on business interactions later on in such a small community. You may need his service later—he won’t want to leave his beer and his ball game on a Sunday afternoon to get you a new hydraulic hose.

However, these same community ties do not constrain the upper class minority. In fact, levelling mechanisms become ineffective as “tall poppies” can effectively uproot themselves from the fabric of the community—economically and socially, if not geographically. As one large farmer describes:

I don’t know if we’re really socially part of the community... I don’t belong to any service clubs. I don’t know everyone in Diefenbaker... Not a lot in Diefenbaker affects my business... I buy chemical and fertilizer from Diefenbaker at the old elevator. I get repairs done in Centretown. I do my banking in Centretown—my parents are there. I see myself as smack in the centre of Saskatchewan’s three biggest cities—not on the edge of anything.

Instead, the local “winners” situate themselves in the global “community,” no
longer harbour a vested interest in maintaining local community networks or even services, and lack the concern for community decline that others hold:

We have as many social contacts as others but they may not all be in Diefenbaker—it’s a global world, we send Christmas cards to Kuala Lumpur. We’re not socially active in the same circle as have-nots. We care about transportation systems, hospitals, education but not as much about the social infrastructure of the community as the have-nots do. We can land on our feet socially in a wider variety of circumstances, so we’re not as shocked when the local elevator, business or café shuts down. It didn’t affect us when the local bar burnt down but it really affected others in town. (Large farmer)

In essence, this means that the contradiction within the local community is resolved for large farming households. A balance between community and competition need not be struck as community has become superfluous. One large farmer explains: “There are a lot of people who really need Diefenbaker … but I’m not one of them. It wouldn’t bother me if economics and Darwinian theory took Diefenbaker off the map.” Not surprisingly, this disinterestedness generates animosity among the wider community, which is struggling to survive:

there are other people who don’t care about the community and will bad-mouth projects that they are not in favour of. This negativity comes from people without any community spirit. These are the same people who do not support the town businesses. No one concerned with the future of Diefenbaker would outright oppose a project. (Town employee)

Moreover, that some essentially pull out of social and political life in this way fundamentally changes class relations within the community. Boosterism has historically been an integral theme in the development of rural communities as the upper class attempts to capture main street investments and political processes to further their own ends. However, today the concentration of production and restructuring of land tenure in rural Saskatchewan under neoliberalism means that the local elite are so big that they have no need to chase main street investments:

I’m not familiar with the town council. On the RM council, some are not too bad, but most have never been successful at home but have control over public funds. I don’t have a high opinion of them, though I shouldn’t complain if I don’t want to fix it. They generally win by acclamation. (Large farmer)

While the disinterestedness of the local elite in this context appears beneficial in terms of facilitating more equal participation in local decision-making, this development also seems to leave a decision-making void:

Have-nots are not outcasts but social pivots—“poor and darn proud of it”… There are capable people here. There are los … well, no, just a few. But they don’t get involved because they meet resistance. This is frustrating for anyone with money, education and initiative to organize. They are accused of trying to run the place, take over and serve their own interests—watch that rich group doesn’t rip you off. (Large farmer)

Under current economic and political circumstances, we see in Diefenbaker that development and social cohesion are critically and dynamically linked—as one process develops, it affects the trajectory of the other. This is a time of increasing inequality and concentration, yet no real growth is occurring, especially at the local
level. In this context, the “limited good” is not just an image, but a local reality for many. Further, those few “tall poppies” who are benefiting from neoliberal economic growth appear to be withdrawing from processes of community cohesion. As individuals and households within this geographical space can withdraw from Diefenbaker as a socio-cultural place, implications for social cohesion and the community’s development trajectory follow. The defection of the local elite is preventing boosterism and allowing others in the community to pursue alternative ideas for community social, economic and environmental sustainability. However, the decision-making void accompanying this phenomenon complicates alternative community development efforts and breeds resentment. Furthermore, alternative strategies seem risky, older people and others who clearly will not benefit are suspicious of development projects that appear to raise tax levels without an immediate guarantee. The result is that the community falls into emulation of what appears to be tried and true provincial strategies, such as building hog barns.

Conclusion

In spite of work that tends to treat social cohesion as a linear phenomenon—either a community has it or it doesn’t, either it has the cohesion of similarity or of interdependency—this investigation of Diefenbaker has shown that cohesion is a multidimensional concept fundamentally related to processes of material and discursive power. This paper has illustrated how the quality and type of cohesion in Diefenbaker has affected the type of development that has occurred in the community, including helping to determine in whose interest development proceeds and how the “goods” and “bads” of social change are distributed. We have seen that the dynamics of inequality in a context of community decline and changing economic distribution—primarily via land markets—are critical in this agricultural community. Under current economic and political circumstances, we see in Diefenbaker that development and social cohesion are critically and dynamically linked.

Contrary to familiar notions of rural communities as cohesive, close-knit, and homogeneous, we see that “community” is not a natural condition that lacks conflict or division, but, rather, represents a set of relationships that must be negotiated. As the competition to survive among individual farm households intensifies under neoliberalism—straining the community networks and institutions that quietly maintain the family farm—farmers struggle between depending on their traditional social networks, if in a distorted form, and giving over to the competitive and self-interested nature of the capitalist land market. Inequality and concentration are increasing, yet no real growth is occurring, especially at the local level. In this context, the “limited good” is not just an image, but a local reality for many. The progressive development of capitalism in agriculture and deepening of the global market has not led to the social cohesion of interdependency as Durkheim had thought. Rather, in Diefenbaker, rising inequality and concentration in the context of no growth has resulted in a social “split” that sees elites withdrawing from the community altogether. This “defection” is allowing room for social and economic alternatives to develop, but is also resulting in great difficulties for the community in general.

Notes

1. If society is not cohesive, then it can only be because the division of labour is “anomic” or “forced.”

This would not necessarily be unusual in capitalist society, however, as disparities in wealth or privilege
left over from earlier times—particularly exacerbated by inheritance—if not dealt with would be expected to produce problems in cohesion.

2. This brings us to the other attractor of social cohesion to contemporary theory: the elective affinity of social cohesion with popular (min) conceptions of "undisturbed" ecological systems as being equilibrium-seeking systems. This is also reminiscent of the neoliberal emphasis on market equilibrium as the normal state of social life.

3. Although related to social capital the term "human capital" usually refers to characteristics such as the levels of education and "status" that individuals possess.

4. So called because the LEGO brand represents much more than just play. "Play" in the LEGO sense is learning. By helping children to learn, we build confident, curious and resourceful adults. For their future. And ours. Just imagine... The company and its products adopted the name LEGO, formed from the Danish word "LEg GODt" ("playwell"). Later, it was recognized that in Latin the word means "I study" or "I put together" (Jenson, 2002).

5. The data analyzed in this study have been collected as part of the SSHRC funded project entitled "Rural Adaptation and Social Cohesion for Sustainable Development of the Prairies." This project is affiliated with and administered by the Canadian Plains Research Center of the University of Regina. This three-year project has involved eight researchers and their assistants, cutting across a range of disciplines, including sociology, physical and historical geography, education and economics. The focus of this project has been to utilize transdisciplinary cooperation to analyse issues of social cohesion and cleavage in six communities in rural Saskatchewan.

6. This does not sum to 100% due to rounding.

7. For examples from southern Alberta see Voisey (1981, 1988).

Literature Cited


Appendix

Saskatchewan Rail Network, 1975. Adapted from Saskatchewan Highways and Transportation.

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