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Rupert B. Vance, Space and the American South. *CSISS Classics*

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Publication Date

2006



Rupert B. Vance: Space and the American South By Matt Schroeder

Background

From his Arkansas birthplace to his lengthy career at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, sociologist Rupert Vance lived almost his entire life in the American South and witnessed a stunning set of transformations in his native region. When he was born in 1899, as Reed and Singal (1982) note, the South was a largely agricultural region bleeding population to the North and West; when he died in 1975, the region was well on its way to becoming an industrial and technological powerhouse that attracted migrating Americans. Although his research was not limited to the South, he focused his attention on the causes and effects of these socioeconomic upheavals, combining rigorous social and demographic analysis with intricate knowledge of Southern politics and culture. *Human Factors in Cotton Culture* (1929), a revised version of his doctoral dissertation, and *Human Geography in the South* (1932) explored the differences between the South and the rest of America. During the 1930s and 1940s, his work (notably the essay "The Old Cotton Belt" [1936] and *All These People: The Nation's Human Resources in the South* [1945]) took on a more demographic orientation and explained how Southern population processes both affected the region's economy and fed migration within and out of the region. Later in his career, he considered the impact of Southern urbanization and its consequences for the definition of regions, co-editing volumes on *The Urban South* (with Nicholas Demerath, 1954) and *The Southern Appalachian Region* (with Thomas Ford, 1962).

Innovation

Although he is not known for explicitly spatial analyses, Vance paid close attention to the patterning of economic and demographic factors across places. This allowed him to challenge prevailing theories about the American South and make three main contributions to understanding his home region that loosely follow the contours of his career: ecological and geographic factors in Southern exceptionalism; the spatial basis of Southern migration; and a deeper consideration of regionalism.

First, why was the South different from the rest of America? Other analysts had pointed to cultural factors such as fatalism and laziness that kept the South mired in poverty, but Vance located these in economic life. In his first two books (Vance 1929, 1932), Vance noted patterns that clustered together in certain Southern counties: tenant farming, low farm values, high fertility, and low levels of livestock farming and vegetable production for home consumption. Yet these associations were strongest in counties that devoted most of their farms to cotton. Why? Vance pointed to the nature of cotton agriculture. Cotton was a labor-intensive crop, requiring long hours in the fields to pick it. Consequently, child labor was an economic necessity (which accounted for high birthrates), and cotton crowded out the growth of other staple food crops, particularly during times when cotton commanded a high price in the world market. Indeed, the cyclical nature of the market combined with the seasonally variable work patterns of farming to deny cotton farmers any source of steady income and push many into debt and tenant farming, especially in counties where the soil became exhausted and required expensive commercial fertilizer to replenish the nutrients. The result was poor diets, low educational attainment, and frequent bouts of poverty in these counties as well as high population turnover across the region. Others before and after Vance made more forceful arguments that a plantation-based colonial economy dominated the South; but Vance's contribution here was to lay out the basic mechanisms by which interactions between humans and their physical environment could explain distinct societal and cultural patterns that varied across space.

Second, what were the consequences of cotton culture for Southern population trends? Vance's works on Southern migration (Vance 1936, 1945) showed that the Southeast (particularly South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi) had evinced by far the largest net population loss by nativity. That is, those born in the Southeast were moving out, while those who were born outside the region were not moving in. This was due in part to the land pressures created by the South's high fertility rate discussed above (528 of the 555 counties in the cotton belt had birth rates above the national average). But the constraints on cotton farmers in the early twentieth century—boll weevil plagues and declining cotton prices on the world market—meant that the consequences of the surplus youth population would fall most severely on areas where cotton was costly to produce. As cotton expanded in the new cotton belt (Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas), where land was flatter and farms larger, competition forced a decrease in farmer-owned farms and sharp increases in tenant farms in the old cotton belt (South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama); the result was high outmigration from these Southeastern counties (see maps below). Again, Vance's attention to the spatial dimension led him to analyze migration less as the deterministic outcome of high fertility than as the product of the contingencies of cotton agriculture.

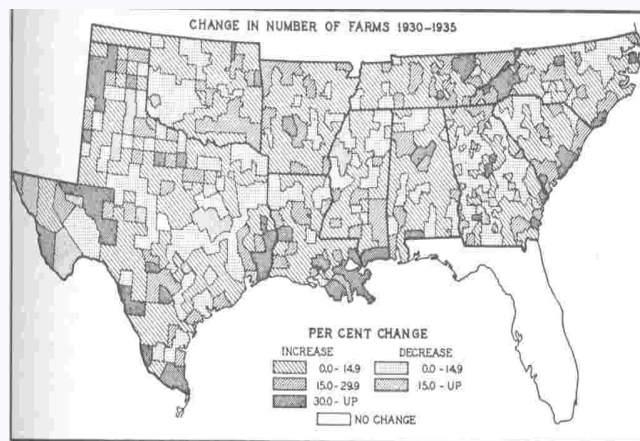
See Map 1, p. 109 from Vance 1936; Map 2, p. 132 from Vance 1945.

Vance's analyses of Southern exceptionalism and migration patterns show his careful attempts to make distinctions within the region, and this remained true throughout his life. Early in his career, Vance was concerned with the importance of diversity within regions; he maintained that the South was "a complex of interrelated subregions" (Vance 1932:23) that "can be different without being a unit" (Vance 1932:21). Dividing the South into seven geological subregions and numerous cultural regions within each state, and drawing attention to early industrial efforts in the Appalachian valleys and foothills, he effectively destroyed any propositions of a unified regional economy and culture. Later, however, Vance turned his attention to refining the conceptual meaning of regions as entities. The industrializing and urbanizing South led Vance to challenge the prevailing definition of the South as a collection of internally homogeneous subregions. Instead, he (together with Sara Smith [1954] and Charles Grigg [1956]) rethought the South as "a constellation of communities, each with its own hinterland of influence" (Vance and Grigg 1956:191). Vance and Smith (1954) applied to the South R.D. McKenzie's theory of metropolitan dominance and subdominance, according to which hinterland communities compete to gain resources from the dominant metropolises. But this pattern took a long time to develop and was in no way determined by geography; despite the early growth of cities along the fall line like Richmond and Montgomery, poor overland transportation relative to the North, and the decentralized cotton economy (the refining and storage of cotton took place in smaller communities around the region) combined to keep urbanization relatively low in the South. As industry grew along with the national financial system, however, Atlanta and Dallas came to dominate the South; and Vance and Smith analyzed sales and manufacturing data to place Southern cities into the hierarchy of dominance and subdominance (see map below). Furthermore, Vance and Grigg (1956) tied the dominance of metropolises to migration: hinterland counties lost population to their urban centers during the 1940s. Thus, although the physical environment exercised an important influence on settlement and cultural patterns, geography was not destiny; human action (both emergent and purposive) also played a role.

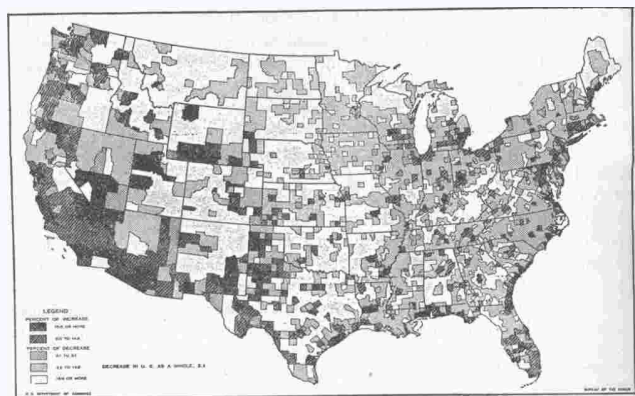
See Map 3, p. 133 from Vance and Smith 1954.

Convinced that Southern problems needed to be solved with intelligent policymaking, Vance devoted his career to understanding them and making recommendations for remedies. In doing so, he left a deep imprint on the discipline of sociology, in part by serving as president of both the Southern Sociological Society and the American Sociological Society (later renamed Association), and helped lay the groundwork for the nascent disciplines of Southern studies and Appalachian studies.

Vance Maps



[Map 1](#)



Source: Bureau of the Census, United States Department of Commerce, Release P-44, No. 3 and No. 6, February 15 and March 23, 1944.

[Map 2](#)

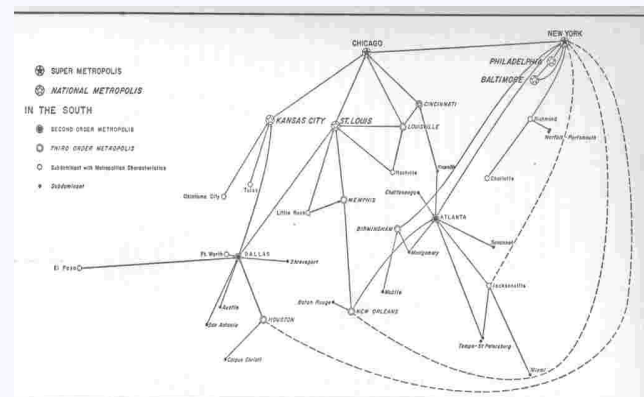


Figure 2. Metropolitan Organization of the South, with Orders of Dominance and Major Lines of Integration

[Map 3](#)

Publications

Vance, Rupert B. 1929. *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Vance, Rupert B. 1932. *Human Geography of the South: A Study in Regional Resources and Human Adequacy*. New York: Russell and Russell.

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Related Works

Vance, Rupert B. and Charles M. Grigg. [1956] 1982. Regionalism and Ecology: A Synthesis. Pp. 185–196 in John Shelton Reed and Daniel Joseph Singal, eds., *Regionalism and the South: Selected Papers of Rupert Vance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Reed, John Shelton and Daniel Joseph Singal. 1982. Introduction. Pp. ix–xxii in Reed and Singal, eds., *Regionalism and the South: Selected Papers of Rupert Vance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

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