

Imagining the Rural Future: A Response to Howley, Clifton & Howley

Jason A. Cervone
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

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I am pleased to be given the opportunity to respond to Howley, Clifton, and Howley's (2018) essay review of my book (Cervone, 2018) not only because the authors examine, critique, and expand on ideas beyond the viewpoint from which I wrote it, but also for the opportunity to revisit my own work and see what remains valid to me and where my own perspectives have changed. It has been a year since its publication and nearly two since the bulk of the work was completed. To say that much has changed politically in the United States in that time would be an understatement. To provide some context, this book began as my doctoral dissertation and was completed in the winter of 2016, with my defense coming three weeks after the election of Donald Trump. When the authors of the review refer to my critique as timely, it may be more apt than they know, as I was updating my drafts almost daily with each piece of legislation that Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos tried to push through.

Of course, this book is not about Trump or DeVos, but their ascendance was timely in that as I was researching the ways rural areas are prone to anti-democratic ideologies, an anti-democratic candidate was working his way to the presidency with a tremendous amount of support from White, rural Americans—Americans in whom Trump was able to tap into deep-seated fear and anger. Herein, I would like to recognize an area that now stands out to me as a glaring error on my part. As the reviewers note, I claim, "racism seems normal far too often to rural Americans." This statement is accurate in that racism is not inherent to rural areas and rural people, but it is far too prevalent, though I do not center my analysis on racism. While writing the book, I had the perspective that while Trump used race to rile up his base, I did not believe it to be the centerpiece of his popularity. While I did not deny that

racism and White supremacy were major issues in rural America, I did not believe it could galvanize so many people the way that it did. However, the tremendous rise in threats and assaults on non-Whites immediately following the election; actual White supremacist rallies, like those in Charlottesville (Neiwert, 2017); and simply the number of swastikas I see with my own eyes (I think I have seen more since Trump was elected than in the rest of my life, and as a Jew, I remember swastikas when I see them) would have changed much of the commentary. If I were writing again today, I would not approach racism as something stoked by the problems created by capitalism, but rather as a driving ideology in its own right, which is employed and focused by capitalism to create something worse than both, much in the way religious fundamentalism and capitalism are discussed in Chapter 3.

Returning to Howley et al. (2018), they write that what my book, "leaves out in presenting the synthesis, though, is the past (history) and the future (an effort of imagination, perhaps for science fiction)." They provide an extensive summation of the former, though it is the latter to which I would like to respond. I have said more times than I remember that I am much better at pointing out problems than offering solutions, and I do that intentionally as it would be arrogance on my part to think I alone know the way to make things better. It may be vague and sound somewhat like a cop-out, but the solution I often suggest is that educators provide young people with the ability to determine their own solutions. These solutions though, must go far beyond the kind of solutions generally offered in education today, such as increased AP and dual credit, options that do not necessarily mean a better education. I hesitate to even use the word "solution," as it conveys some kind of final result. What is needed is for educators to take on an "imaginative project" (Howley, et al., 2018) to redefine not only school, but society itself. The nation-state, like corporations, desires uniformity and standardization (Scott, 1998). My book covers at some length the ways that standardization, regardless of its source, diminish and erase rural spaces, so I will not rehash that here.

All correspondence should be directed to Jason A. Cervone, 36 Frank Road, Weymouth, MA 02191 (cervonej@gmail.com).

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The real questions then, are what is the future of rural spaces, and how can education produce active rural citizens in a rural democracy? Obviously, a true understanding of history, as discussed in the review, would be paramount. Giroux (2014) describes America as willfully amnesiac, with critical thought having become a liability. Despite often being derided as stupid, many of Trump's most racist and fascist supporters actually show a tremendous ability to seek out and absorb information (Niewert, 2017), so it is not that this is a population that is unable to learn. The problem of course, is that it is bad information that is being learned, and they lack the ability to question what they are learning or to seek out alternative viewpoints. History is too often taught in a similar manner, a simplistic listing of events leading to the conclusion that America is fundamentally good and on a righteous path; and anything negative is an aberration perpetrated by a few bad people and that those wrongs were soon righted. Even vocabulary obscures the violence behind America's actions, with terms like manifest destiny and expansionism obscuring militaristic colonialism, and the slave trade being termed the "middle passage," hiding the violence inherent in capturing, selling, and torturing human beings. Without understanding the violence inherent in capitalist expansion and America's history, it becomes very easy to brush off criticisms of the country as simply being anti-American. This line of thinking creates the opportunity for fundamentalist thought (religious and nationalistic) as a lack of understanding makes it much easier for one to assume they have absolute truth or morality. Fundamentalism, in all its forms, tends to be anti-public and anti-democratic, as both must be open to diverse viewpoints and a diverse population.

To combat fundamentalisms, rural schools need to provide not only the critical understanding of history, but also need to define and provide a democratic education. By democratic I refer specifically to the kind of education that embraces plurality and pushes back against fundamentalist thought; not only the religious and market fundamentalisms described in the book, but nationalistic as well, that are pushing isolation and anti-democratic authoritarianism. Nationalism in this sense is used in regards to White nationalism and American exceptionalism, which is perpetrated by an uncritical history that whitewashes the violent past and present (Ali, 2003).

Defining democracy will be a complicated endeavor, as it will mean questioning the things foundational to the United States. First, democracy must be recognized as an action, not just a word. It is something that occurs through negotiation between citizens. Democracy cannot be as it is in the current state of affairs, where public power exists only to the extent that citizens are able to choose the ultra-rich person they wish to lead them for the next four years. Democracy requires an active, engaged, and educated public

that understands it is not a fixed state of form of government, but rather something that is constantly in flux and must be designed and redesigned as the needs and makeup of the community change. These ideas are described by Mouffe (2005), who describes democracy as occurring from incompatible and irreconcilable logics, as well as constant tensions. The goal cannot be to eliminate tensions, but to recognize that democracy is complicated, and there will always be issues that need to be worked through.

One major tension for rural places that must be reconciled is how to maintain local strength, both in rural schools and their communities, without isolation. Again, like the struggle over democracy, there is no end point. There is no utopia where everything is figured out. Rather, creating a rural future cannot be an end, but creating a community where citizens are educated and engaged, and focused on the well-being of that community, can be. This requires an anti-fundamentalist education, one that overcomes fear and the desire to declare oneself as superior, either through religion, or race, or geographic locale, or tries to instill a simplistic worldview where there is one true way. That outlook creates zealots who only believe in their particular viewpoint and refuse to engage with anything else (Giroux, 2005).

Of course, anti-intellectual, fundamentalist anti-democracy is not native or isolated to rural places, but rural places are often produced in a manner that is normalizing them (Cervone, 2017). Building off Howley et al. (2018), rural places can arguably exhibit strong community ties and a form of solidarity and freedom, even within the confines set by capitalist production. However, whether that reality is currently true or not, is not really the issue, as it is more important that these are the ideals that rural educators aim for. This is the crux of the *right to the rural* that I discuss in the book, a vague term based off of another vague term, Lefebvre's (1991) *right to the city*, which is not a particular way of being, but is a call to constantly define and redefine what rural is and what rural will be according to the terms of the people living there. Howley et al. (2018) write, "the work of educators in the grim world is to foster thinking." I cannot agree more with this statement, even though it may be somewhat frustrating to anyone looking for solutions. Unfortunately, the only thing educators can do is to keep asking questions, and teach our students to keep asking questions. There may not be any easy solutions, but fostering imagination in rural youth can determine a new rural future.

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