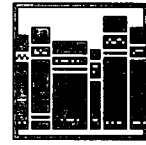


Book Review



Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places: Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America. Janet M. Fitchen. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991, 314 pp. ISBN: 0-8133-1115-2 (pbk.)

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In her recent book, *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places*, Janet Fitchen delivers on her promise to create a work that “provides the needed context and wholeness” (p. 1) for understanding the myriad changes currently affecting rural America and providing a sound basis for understanding their effects on rural people and rural places. Employing an anthropological research approach that included more than 400 separate interviews and observations in 15 counties in rural New York between 1985 and 1990, Fitchen documents the magnitude, complexity, and interrelatedness of these changes. Although she acknowledges that broad social changes have been impinging on rural areas for most of their history, Fitchen emphasizes that the threatened demise of rural America today is the result of the cumulative effect of these changes occurring in a “compressed period of time” (p. 2).

Fitchen has attempted to organize the book in a way that demonstrates the true complexity of the issues at hand, starting with one issue, the farm crisis, “then adding another and another as it became apparent that each change or issue was only part of the total picture, just one piece of the puzzle” (p. 281). As a result, the flow of the book may at times prove problematic to readers looking for a neat, clean, articulation of the forces impinging on rural America past and present. Just as the realities facing rural communities and citizens resist simplistic explanation, Fitchen’s book takes readers in and out among the issues while laying out a complex web of causes and effects to a place where the magnitude and complexity of the situation is indisputable. Notably, throughout the book, Fitchen takes pains to address the generalizability of each issue beyond rural New York.

The breadth of the author’s knowledge on matters related to the farm crisis and its effects on the fabric of rural life are well documented in Part I of this book. Fitchen argues that the community-level impacts include not only economic effects, so often emphasized in the media, but

social and cultural effects as well. While this point may prove intuitive to many a rural reader, it is the way Fitchen gives voice to the lived experiences of rural citizens that sets apart her work from others. At the expense of a research strategy that “played havoc with an original research design for selection of sites and informants” (p. 281), Fitchen pursued her study of rural change through firsthand accounts of the economic effects of the farm crisis to an exposition of what she describes as the most significant impact of farm losses, but the hardest to measure: “the assault on community identity and self image” (p. 45). Throughout the book, we are provided with ample evidence of Fitchen’s skills as a rural ethnographer. She documents for countless individuals the fact that the farm crisis represented not the loss of a job, to be remedied by the acquisition of another, but rather the loss of an entire way of life, and all that defined the individual.

For the news media and the public, the farm crisis was the most visible sign of the difficulty in the nation’s rural economy. According to Fitchen, “a greater cause of economic stagnation lay in . . . the restructuring of the labor force” (p. 63) as a result of the loss of manufacturing jobs. In Part II of the book, readers come to understand a side of rural life and rural change largely unexamined elsewhere. To an evolving picture of rural America that more closely resembles our images of metropolitan USA than our mythic notions of the rural countryside, Fitchen offers additional firsthand experiences depicting growing poverty, a greying population, households increasing in number faster than the number of people, out-migration of many of the most able, and in-migration of either those unable to make it elsewhere or “weekend people” (p. 101) who raise housing prices and the need for local services while contributing little to the local economy or community fabric.

Once the author has convincingly made the case for the severity of the rural situation, she goes on to underscore the immensity of the challenge in providing much needed services to rural citizens given the current realities. Fitchen cautions that rural service delivery must be judged by what it does for the people it serves, and not by how much it costs per person served—the latter being the yardstick used most often in measuring the success of urban service delivery efforts. Fitchen concludes that the most successful efforts at rural service delivery are those most highly integrated, collaborative efforts that utilize local talent, build local

capacity, and tap community problem-solving capacity, but are only supplemented by "judicious use" (p. 177) of outside experts. It is hoped that these findings might help rural communities resist the temptation to adopt a model of urban services delivery, but rather encourage them to design a service delivery model that is responsive to rural needs and strengths.

One of the most troubling sections of Fitchen's book deals with the notion of rural communities becoming "re-defined to meet the disposal needs of an urbanized society" (p. 241). Whether they are to be the recipients of a new state-of-the-art maximum security prison, another municipality's garbage, unwanted construction debris, incinerator ash, or toxic waste it appears that rural land presents a dumping ground for the waste of urban America. What is most problematic in these findings is the reality that because of growing poverty, unemployment and fiscal stress rural citizens are forced out of necessity to make decisions in isolation, without full knowledge of the ramifications of the decision. As it is, being "selected" for a prison or as a dump site is seen as a means of community survival.

Recognizing the magnitude of the rural situation, Fitchen, if somewhat timidly, approaches the policy ramifications by outlining new roles at the state and federal level. "The broad scale economic social and political forces behind the changes that endanger rural spaces are national, even international, in scope and thus beyond local control" (p. 266). In looking to the federal role in ensuring the survival of rural places, the author calls for a much needed national constituency for rural issues: a national rural policy. To date, rural development has meant attention to agricultural issues where "fixing the farm crisis is thought sufficient to take care of the rural America problem" (p. 267). Fitchen argues for much more. "Community development raises a community's ability to function in the multiple roles communities are supposed to perform for their residents, including adjustment to further societal change" (p. 267). Further, Fitchen chastises the state for what she refers to as overmandating and underfunding rural areas. She argues for funding that more closely matches her conceptions of effective service delivery, with adequate funding for health, education, and rural mental health are a must if rural places are to endure.

Beyond these rather general recommendations, and in spite of her earlier acknowledgement that the problems facing rural communities are "beyond local control" (p. 267). Fitchen places the greatest responsibility for ensuring the survival of rural America on the shoulders of the victims themselves. Much of what has happened to endanger rural America is clearly the result of market forces and, as such, is the problem rather than one of the solutions as Fitchen suggests. Disappointingly, Fitchen passes up the opportunity to make this work one of a kind desperately needed in

the field. Namely, she fails to give us a document that at once chronicles the lived experiences of rural citizens in their own voices *and* articulates the destructive effects of market forces on agricultural and non-agricultural rural America *and* identifies targeted rural policies that hold the possibility of viable solutions to the impinging devastation. Flora and Christenson (1991), while not attending to the rural voice, do capture the interplay between market forces and rural policies in *Rural Policies for the 1990s*,

The rural disadvantage is not inevitable. Public choices are made at the local, state and federal levels that can reverse current trends. While fiscal and monetary policy and general economic restructuring are major causes of the current problems, specific policies targeted to counteract them can make a difference. (p. 1)

One strategy for the development of rural policy not addressed by Fitchen, but that has the power of engaging local voices, is suggested elsewhere in the rural literature. Nachtigal, Haas, Parker, and Brown (1991) point out the advantages to both rural students and rural communities when the local community is made the focus of intense study. If that study was toward the development of national rural policy intent on safeguarding the viability of a rural way of life, rural students would have a powerful pedagogy as well as the motivation and means to guarantee their futures and the future of their rural communities.

As a nation we must decide what it is we choose for the future of rural community life in this country. If that choice is to be rural health, viability and sustainability, then the next steps are inescapable. The problems and issues in rural America outlined in this book cannot be rationally overcome without national planning in terms of policies, programs and funds.

References

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- Flora, C., & Christenson, J. (Eds.). (1991). *Rural policies for the 1990s*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.