Journal of Research in Rural Education, Fall, 1993, Vol. 9, No. 2.

Book Review

Rural Policies for the 1990s. Cornelia B. Flora and James A. Christianson (Eds.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991, 361 pp. ISBN 0-8133-7816-8 (pbk).

Review by Paul M. Nachtigal
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Rural Policies for the 1990s presents the nonmetro world according to rural sociologists. It is the latest such effort of the Rural Sociological Society. A similar comprehensive look at rural America, *Rural Society in the U.S.: Issues for the 1980s* (Dillman & Hobbs, 1982), focused on rural research issues rather than rural policy issues. *Rural Policies for the 1990s* contains 27 chapters by 43 different authors, addressing the predictable topics of the rural poor, the aged, health care, education, banking, business development, soil conservation, forestry, and so forth. Not so predictable is a chapter on "Family Planning and Fertility in International Context," which seems to appear out of nowhere and resides between a chapter on "Rural Transportation" and "Water Quality and Agriculture."

The book is not an easy read, the readability problem being exacerbated by the authors' efforts to insure its scholarly nature. Some sentences seem to have more references than words. The chapters are very uneven, both in terms of how well they are written and what they have to say. Those chapters on my list of being least informative include Gary Green's chapter on rural banking, where the proposed policy options are "further deregulation and reregulation" (p. 44); William Friedland's chapter on agricultural labor, where the objective seems more to take on Cesar Chavez than to shed light on agricultural labor policy; and Doris Slesinger's chapter on health care in rural america, which advances school consolidation as a model for health care delivery but offers no guidance on changes needed at the policy level. On my "more interesting" list would be Patrick Mooney and Jess Gilbert's chapter on farmland tenure policy, which includes the notion of Community Land Trusts which, where implemented, challenges our fundamental beliefs about land ownership. Also on this list would be the rural education chapter, where Daryl Hobbs (a) very nicely positions rural education within the school reform context, (b) reminds us once again of the relationship between academic performance and socioeconomic status (especially germane given the fact that the nonmetro poverty rate is 50 percent above the metropolitan rate), and (c) ends by saying: "The most effective rural development strategy will likely be those that combine education and training with efforts to improve rural income and its distribution" (p. 163).

Each of the chapters follows a consistent format. First, the author provides a detailed description of the state of affairs in a particular area of rural. This is followed by a section on policy options that might be considered at the federal, state, or local level. Unfortunately, the editors have not provided a common thread or framework to help the reader make sense of the ideas presented.

The general stance of the authors toward solving rural problems is one of a gradual evolution from existing policies of an industrial society which has historically characterized this country. The bottom line is still production and economic competition, production and economic efficiency which is extractive in nature. The basic questions addressed are how rural America can compete and experience the same quality of life that statistically accrues to their fellow urban/suburban Americans while becoming a vital part of the global economy. Rural communities have served as the headwaters of this extractive society. Since this extractive paradigm has been largely responsible for the existing plight of rural America, one wonders how staying the course without changing the way we think about rural problems will make any significant difference.

The penultimate chapter, "International Development" by Conner Bailey, if couched in

broader terms and moved to the front of the book, could provide an alternative paradigm for looking at more radical policy options. In discussing the role of the U.S. government and nongovernmental assistance agencies in third-world rural development, Bailey suggests that, to be useful, such policies must contribute to goals of *equity, sustainability, and participation*. If such policy goals are appropriate for third world countries, why would they not also be useful for the rural sector of this country, which, all evidence suggests, is taking on the characteristics of third world nations?

Had other authors adopted Bailey's paradigm, which I would argue may be more appropriate, perhaps we could begin to move beyond arguments such as the following from Don Dillman's chapter, "Telematics and Rural Development:"

> The desirability of rural growth has also been questioned. Providing services (e.g., mail delivery, water lines, fire protection, and telephones) to people who live in rural areas probably costs more than providing services to residents in medium-sized cities. In addition, the labor of people located far from metropolitan labor markets is less valuable to employers than if employees were to move to an urban location. Thus, it can be argued that protecting people's right to live in rural areas is economically inefficient and, therefore, undesirable. (p. 296)

Is economic efficiency the *sine qua non* for existence on this planet? If so, to borrow a phrase from Wendell Berry, "What are people for?"

Pursuing policy goals of equity, sustainability, and participation would also get us beyond the empirically unsubstantiated claim by David Brown and Nina Glasgow, in their chapter "Capacity Building and Rural Government Adaptation to Population Change:"

> Many rural areas . . . resist school consolidation despite clear evidence of the economic benefits of scale in education (Fox, 1980) and general agreement that larger schools deliver more comprehensive, if not better, education. (p. 197)

Here the authors have clearly gone beyond their area of expertise. The same William Fox argues:

> (S)ize economies results must be applied cautiously, and with full recognition of the unique characteristics of each place, because considerations, other than the findings that size economies exist, are vital to determining the cost implications of policy decisions. (Fox, 1981, p. 290)

When transportation and other administrative costs are figured in, there is no conclusive evidence that there are economic benefits to be had from school consolidation. Concerning the issue of quality of education, Fox quotes James and Levin:

> Thus, all the studies that have tried to relate school or school district size to education outcomes have found either no relationship or a negative one between student enrollments and the level of education outcome. (Fox, 1981, p. 287)

Rural Policies for the 1990s is a useful source book because it describes in detail the current state of rural America. The policy options, for the most part, are predictable. For example, in his chapter on Soil Conservation, Ted Napier concludes, "Removing economic incentives to keep highly erodible cropland in production will facilitate soil conservation efforts" (p. 255). Mooney and Gilbert conclude their chapter on farmland tenure policy with the statement, "We need a land policy" (p. 268).

Rural Policies for the 1990s, however, does raise important issues that should not be ignored. In his chapter, "Rethinking Biotechnology Policy," Frederick Buttel points out that biotechnology has become the classic case of means-ends confusion in policy discourse. That is, a technology that should be a means for achieving particular goals is typically seen as an end in itself, a solution in search of problems. Furthermore, the resources for conducting biotechnology research are more and more in the hands of the private sector. Thus the research is primarily for the purpose of furthering the interests of big business rather than farmer's needs.

As I stated at the outset, this is rural America through the eyes of rural sociologists. While this is an important perspective, it is not the only one. Rural America is complex and varied. Many of the current woes are the result of generic policies that overlook multiple perspectives and regional dif-

ferences. I would hope that, as we begin to formulate new policy options for the nineties, other voices, as well as perspectives from other paradigms, would be heard—voices that view the world through different academic eyes and voices that come from a deep understanding of a particular region. Charles F. Wilkinson's *Eagle Bird: Mapping a New West* (Wilkinson, 1992) is one example of such a regional-sensitive work. Just as rural policy needs to be different from urban policy, rural policy for the West must be different from that in the rural Northeast, the Southwest, or the Mississippi Delta. No single book from a particular academic discipline can capture the complexity of rural America, much less prescribe a comprehensive set of policy alternatives. *Rural Policies for the 1990s* attempts to do too much.

References

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Community and the Politics of Place. Daniel Kemmis. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990, 150 pp. ISBN 0-8061-2477-6 (pbk)

Review by Paul Theobald
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Now and then, a book is published that becomes an indispensable source for an audience the author might have never considered. This may be the case for Kemmis' *Community and the Politics of Place*. I would put this book in the company of Jonathan Sher's *Education in Rural America* (1977), Paul Nachtigal's *Rural Education: In Search of a Better Way* (1982), and the recent *Small Districts, Big Problems* (1992) by Patricia and Richard Schmuck as one of the most significant books in the field of rural education for the past half century.

Community and the Politics of Place is a beautifully written treatise on rural political economy. It represents one particularly lucid account, out of a growing number of communitarian critiques, of the highly individualistic republicanism promoted by the dominant versions of the western liberal tradition. Whereas this description sounds highly theoretical, the book is, in fact, very readable and imminently practical. Focusing for the most part on the rural west, especially his native Montana, Kemmis writes about the forces contributing to a "deepening failure of public life" while developing a vision for building on the "common-unity" (or community) that can serve to reinvigorate it. Although schools are rarely mentioned in the book, it takes little imagination to envision the role they might play in this process. Before discussing that role, however, I delineate a few of Kemmis' central themes.

The first distinction Kemmis makes is between an 18th-century Jeffersonian republican vision for America and an 18th-century Madisonian federalist vision. Whereas Jefferson believed that a cultivated "civic virtue" widely dispersed among the people was the key to democratic living and the public good, Madison believed just the opposite. In his view, the people could not be trusted to put the public good before individual interest. Madison's response was to create what Kemmis calls the "procedural republic," the complicated series of checks and balances that enable individuals to pursue their own interests without the bother of considering the public good. (Here, Kemmis borrows from Michael Sandel's (1984) notion of "the unencumbered self" as an integral part of modern liberalism.) According to Madisonian theory, the public good results "without anyone willing it to happen." It is easy to see connection of this kind of political theory to Adam Smith's economic treatise published just 11 years before our constitutional convention. In economics, according to Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, the "invisible hand" of market forces creates the greatest economic good. For Madison, it was an invisible hand of human nature that would create the greatest political good. "It may be a reflection of