

Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation
by David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011
(ISBN: 978-0-7456-4128-7). 260pp.

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Rural sociology, a relatively new strand of sociology, focuses on various aspects of life in rural areas, and has a comparative aspect to it due to rural conditions frequently being compared to urban ones in academic contexts. Over half of the world's population live in urban environments, and metropolitan societies such as the United States are a clear example of this. However, the rural minority is a large one, and living in rural areas negatively affects opportunities and life chances, with rural poverty and ill health constantly increasing (Kornblum, 2011). This makes the topic important to sociological research. Also, urban environments rely heavily on rural areas for energy and food security and therefore a nation's economic and social well-being as a whole. For these reasons, and the idea that where one lives plays an important part when it comes to one's 'identity', Brown and Schafft have in *Rural People & Communities in the 21st Century* chosen to explore change and persistence in rural economy and society today.

Rural People & Communities is well structured and clear in its arguments, outlining different aspects of life in rural areas: their communities and institutions, their populations and their economies. Rural and urban areas are compared and the development of rural environments over the years is outlined. The array of topics covered in the book is impressive and it is clear that the research done by the authors is vast and the level of detail is meticulous. *Rural People & Communities* comes across as spirited and almost

defensive at times, showing the great enthusiasm and interest Brown and Schafft have for the well-being of those living in rural areas. This results in an almost conversational tone being adopted amidst the hard statistical facts, making the book a pleasant read but slightly taking away from its sombre scientific tone. Nearly three decades ago Falk and Gilbert (1985, p.565) called for a rural sociology which directly engages with policy and debate in the way early rural sociology intended to do, rather than studying and aiming to preserve life in rural areas the way it is, with all its inequalities. *Rural People & Communities* is an answer to this call, as the main thrust of the book's argument is to show the challenges rural areas face and the conditions rural people live in. A rural policy in America that takes into account these factors is therefore needed.

The introductory chapters offer a description of basic understandings regarding rural and urban areas and what is meant by these, as well as an outline of the transition from rural to urban societies with a convincing argument that this transition is, in fact, only perceived rather than real. Brown and Schafft show that societies do not always transform from rural to urban in a linear fashion and that urban-to-rural transitions can also take place.

The second part of the book provides a discussion of communities in rural areas with a strong sociological and theoretical focus, covering several aspects of community and community theories. However, with the emphasis Brown and Schafft put on the importance of community and where one lives for one's 'personal identity', I do not feel it is appropriate to use such a vague and contested concept without clarifying what is meant by it in this context. The authors' use of 'identity' resembles that of a layman's as opposed to a social scientific category of analysis at times, leaving the discussion superficial and slightly unclear.

Taking a more scientific approach, the third part of the book deals with the life course of people in rural areas, as well as different minorities.

With a strong statistical focus that does not allow much room for theoretical discussion of these issues beyond overviews, it nevertheless paints a well-defined picture of the rural population and how varied it is.

Brown and Schafft move on to a clear demonstration of how people in rural areas make their living and what poverty in rural areas looks like. This is an intriguing part of the book that shows how poverty in rural areas differs from that in urban ones, both when it comes to its causes and its manifestations. As the authors note, poverty is reflected in the other issues discussed in the book and should therefore feature more prominently in the policy agenda of the United States. The authors show that the root causes of poverty must be addressed in order to tackle the problem. While this is true for both urban and rural poverty, Brown and Schafft convincingly demonstrate that due to the differences between the two, rural poverty should equally be dealt with in policy, taking into account its special characteristics.

The concluding chapter and, arguably, the most useful of the book when it comes to practical appliance of the study, succinctly outlines the conclusions of the different parts of the book, and, importantly, deals with how the results of the study should be interpreted when it comes to policy implications. This makes for a very convincing and clear conclusion with a focus on practical appliance. This is where the authors' passion for the protection of rural areas truly comes through.

Brown and Schafft adopt a dual approach in the book. On one hand there is a heavy reliance on statistical data regarding rural areas and a materialist place approach is largely used, due to the wide availability of data like this. This echoes the early positivist approach to rural research that sociologists in America adopted (Wilkinson, 1991). However, there is also an attempt to deploy a more constructivist approach to the topic; exploring subjective aspects of rurality because statistical data almost exclusively adopts

the view of rural areas being everything that is not urban, an inadequate description of rurality. The chosen approach can be seen as problematic due to the fact that while the authors repeatedly emphasise the inadequacies of (particularly official) statistical data, it is clear that the vast majority of the book relies on this very data. It would have been interesting to see the analysis being supplemented with more qualitative studies in order to gain a more holistic perspective on rural America. However, the book does offer a convincing starting point for attempts to develop an appropriate rural policy in the United States and the well-structured and systematic analysis of different statistical studies is an integral part of this.

This is directly related to the problem of the slightly shallow way sociological theories on the topics of the book are dealt with. Frequently Brown and Schafft merely touch upon older, 'classical' social theories without going into any greater detail on more contemporary views. The book would have benefited from greater length, in order to provide a more sociological view on aspects of rural areas. As so many of these aspects are covered in one book this is naturally problematic.

Rural People & Communities covers a lot of ground. For this reason it is ideal for those just beginning to develop an interest in the topic. The book is indeed intended for undergraduate and graduate students and, as such, provides a good all-around introduction, albeit not a particularly theoretical one. However, I would argue that the book should also be read by policy makers in the United States. I hope this book inspires experts in rural sociology in other countries to write books of such wide scope and detail in the future.

Bibliography

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