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Book Review: Rethinking Rural: Global Community and Economic Development in the Small Town West

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Book Review

by Karen Harper-Dorton

Rethinking Rural: Global Community and Economic Development in the Small Town West

Don E. Albrecht

2014

Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press

232 pages

Softcover, \$17.09

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In *Rethinking Rural*, D. E. Albrecht, Director, the Western Rural Development Center, Utah State University, eloquently and concisely guides the reader in revisiting the evolution of the American West as a vast, isolated, and unsettled region rich in natural resources that attracted fairly self-sufficient settlers to remote and previously unsettled areas. In Section One, the author presents the challenges of early settlement of the rural West up to the mid twentieth century in the first three chapters. The reader is reminded of various federal land acquisitions and resource management efforts germane to so many parks and recreation areas that support tourism. Human dependence upon the biophysical environment is no better depicted than in the settlers' early struggles to establish homes and communities amid forests, mountains, and plains regions that were mostly devoid of water. Arid plains and great distances would eventually be crossed mostly by rail. Rich in minerals and their mining, the lack of water proved to be a significant obstacle despite eventual development of dams and irrigation. Indeed, as much as fifty-five percent of the land of thirteen western states came under federal jurisdiction protecting some remote regions and harnessing resources to better serve arid territories.

Growth in transportation, manufacturing, newspapers and television partially fueled transitioning from the early Small Town in Isolation Era to the Mass Society Era of the 1950s to 1980s. The rural west experienced less dependence on natural resources and agriculture as communication and manufacturing increased. Changes such as reducing open range areas for livestock grazing, increasing pesticide usage, conserving water through various dams and irrigation projects, clear-cutting forests, and mining minerals such as uranium provided employment and protected some natural resources, but also produced negative ecological consequences. Furthermore, sparsely populated areas isolated by distance only continued to be at great disadvantage for employment as well as resources.

Moving to Section Two, the remainder of the book, Albrecht notes that location becomes less relevant as the transition to a Global Society Era gathers momentum. Internet, online employment, changing communication and change processes for goods and trades may bring new avenues for growth to rural areas.

Chapter four continues discussion of resource management by the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While resource and wild-life preservation are important goals, there are both positive and negative

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implications of ecological protection in view of political issues and inadequate funding or in stances of public demand for purposes of new or different land usage. Based on strategic roundtable sessions with thirteen states in the western region, Albrecht identifies three major concerns for families and communities in the rural West in anticipation of opportunities the Global Society Era may or may not hold. First, appropriate uses of natural resources need to be addressed. Second, employment opportunities for place-bound persons and vulnerable communities must be identified and developed to mesh with changing technologies. And third, rural development to improve leadership, reduce inequalities and enhance human capacities is essential. Place-bound rural people need to build local communities in order to experience meaningful participation on any other level.

Chapters five, six, and seven address resource concerns of Western water, energy, and biodiversity respectively. Important to agriculture, water continues to be at the core of concerns and demands as population and consumption increase raising issues of harnessing water power without adequate protection for salmon and other food sources or allowing contamination from chemicals and invasive species. Water and energy are interdependent in producing and cleaning processes. The rural West is rich in coal, oil, and natural gas that while abundant, carry the risk of contamination from greenhouse gases as well as the depletion of resources for future generations. Resource utilization and protection are critical concerns to the balance of life forms in our ecosystem. Preserving biodiversity requires attention to issues such as pollution, extractive industries, population growth, and protection of noninvasive species for the future of the West as part of the era of the global society. Easy and immediate solutions for this mix of resources are not readily available in the obligatory and ongoing effort to protect natural resources.

Place-based economic and rural development are addressed in chapters eight and nine and include creative recommendations for growth. Being part of an increasingly global society, the rural West is confronted with changing and inadequate employment opportunities as agribusiness adjusts to rural, place-based economies either because of large-scale operations elsewhere or due to out-sourcing to international entities. Larger population centers offer specialization opportunities on a much broader scale. One example given in *Rethinking Rural* is the concentration of health care specialists in metro areas versus the small-town doctor. Indeed, rural residents in need of specialized care must seek such help in larger population centers.

Nevertheless, the Global Society Era includes those who seek community connections and can contribute to improving employment opportunities. Specific recommendations include: (1) increase local production such as fresh, nutritious, organic foods; (2) encourage entrepreneurs who have special skills and interests; (3) attract workers who value rural living and perhaps work at home via internet; and (4) develop regional clusters for development such as partnering with rural development centers and local universities. Capitalizing on the region's beauty and resources, some high-end developments offer exquisite views and are markets for many in search of relocation in advantaged, less metropolitan communities. Disadvantaged communities lack amenities, may be home to undocumented immigrants, and have language and education disparities. The West is home to many Native Americans, stripped of their land that is now owned by the Department of Interior. Disadvantaged by lack of ownership, financial security is not really within their reach. Education is one avenue to explore toward better employment and security.

Chapters ten and eleven raise issues of retaining and increasing human capacity as out-migration of the brightest and best is a resource lost. Community development and leadership programs and opportunities are needed but are costly and challenging for rural community participation in the global society. Rural poverty with accompanying lack of education, employment, single parenthood, isolation, and lack of opportunities continues since the days of the Great Depression and the War on Poverty. Albrecht sites research findings confirming increasing levels of inequality and poverty. Cultural and structural changes are called for but without strong political and financial support are unlikely.

Concluding remarks call for appropriate use of natural and sustainable resources, increasing employment opportunities through development and innovation, and building human capacity through education and growth. Tending to community development at home is important to the future of the rural West. Participation in the Global Society Era may very well foster new insights and strategies for quality of living in small towns and rural areas in the West as well as other areas of the U.S.

As a social worker with Appalachian roots and experience in delivering services funded by the 1960s War on Poverty, I would enjoy using this book as a text for a doctoral seminar. The succinct history of rural policy development in response to natural resources utilization and preservation provides rich information for policy debates, economic research, and recommendations for leadership in so many small towns and rural areas. The final chapter could have addressed the importance of rural relationships, interconnectedness of people and places, and the importance of understanding a rural culture. However, this comment likely reflects my social work values more than the economic and policy concerns that are central to *Rethinking Rural*.