

Book Review

Rural People & Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience & Transformation

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David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft's *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation* joins the voices calling in recent years for national dialogue on an inclusive and coherent rural policy. Brown and Schafft contend that rural people and communities merit consideration in a wide range of social, economic, and environmental discussions at both local and national levels. The work compiles and analyzes data on persistence and change in rural communities, particularly addressing how rural people contribute to the American economy amid the challenges of rapid urbanization, outmigration, and farming decline—forces that have sorely tested the economic flexibility and fortitude of rural regions. Brown and Schafft offer a well-informed, tightly organized, and compact analysis of the continuous transformation of rural communities, demonstrating the importance of their histories to the social, economic, and environmental forces shaping the new millennium. The authors most particularly contribute to rural sociology and national policy studies, but their work is also fundamentally relevant for a wide range of scholars interested in community development, education, and social action. Providing numerous insights into the ways rural communities perceive themselves, the work also serves as an excellent introduction to rural Americans' conceptions of their relationships to the nation at large.

Brown and Schafft's book is arranged into five parts employing a sustained and prominent theoretical framework that provides a clear, systematic examination of various aspects of rural life in the twenty-first century. The work focuses especially on the ways forces of social controls such as institutions like (local) education, church, government, and economy, along with family and kinship,

shape community and personal relationships. The authors examine such analyses in the context of demographics, geography, and the socioeconomic well-being of rural populations. Complementing the work's narrative, along with theoretical analysis in each chapter, the authors present graphic materials and statistical information that illustrate the lived reality of contemporary rural areas. The straightforward and accessible presentation of data raises many thought-provoking issues for future studies.

The book's introductory section, "Thinking About Rural Places in Metropolitan Society," draws upon social scientific theory to examine rurality in relation to urbanization, and discusses measuring and conceptualizing the growth and contraction of urbanization. Contrasting the characteristics of the urban and the rural, the authors focus on how individual identity and self-perception emerge in rural and urban spaces. Focusing on the transformation and perseverance of rural communities during the last several decades, the authors discuss the challenges and opportunities rural people have faced as a result of changes within economic, societal, and environmental structures. Central to this analysis is the synthesis of two frameworks defining rurality: a quantifiable analysis generated by statistical agencies and policy makers, and a definition based on collective memory, nostalgia, and other socially constructed modes of the rural ideal. While such approaches are often seen as fundamentally opposed, the authors affirm that they may be synthesized harmoniously in a complementary, multi-dimensional approach. Acknowledging throughout this section the lack of scholarly consensus about the definition of rurality, the authors nevertheless affirm the power of vigorous academic debate to inform the public on policy that addresses the social and economic ills plaguing both cities and rural areas.

Such conclusions set the agenda for the second section of the book, "Rural Communities, Institutions, and Environments," which is a richly suggestive review

of contributions from diverse fields, including policy-making and governance, education, community restoration, sociology, and the physical sciences. Comparing the meaning of community in rural and urban settings, the authors draw on sociological theory to discuss relationships among community organization, receptive institutions, and strong social cohesion. They conclude that rural communities with deep-seated social ties, low levels of inequality, and responsive institutions endure most successfully, contrasting them with communities lacking the collective strength and overall well-being provided by social, economic, and environmental supports. Two highly informative chapters in this section, “Understanding Community in Rural Society” and “Community Institutions in Rural Society,” explore how social solidarity emerges among members of cultural groups, focusing specifically on the ways community partnerships and local governance initiatives shape health care, religion, and education.

This section closes, with a third chapter “Natural Resources and Social Change,” by exploring the meaning of social systems in an environmental context, exploring how the physical amenities of rural communities stem from the strength of natural resources. Seeking to move beyond a quaint, nostalgic perception of the meaning of rivers, oceans, and farmland in rural ecosystems, the authors reframe relationships among rurality, environment, and national identity. For example, they conclude with a discussion of the ways that changing forms of energy resource development and food production in rural America have reshaped social systems in both urban and rural spaces, particularly tracing how such transformations are likely to affect the economic future of rural areas.

Part three, “Rural Populations,” employs a less theoretical approach, focusing on statistical analysis around themes of youth, aging, and the life course of individuals in relation to diverse ethnic and racial identities within rural communities. This section explores how the diversity of rural populations informs contemporary challenges such as “brain-drain,” educational attainment, aging populations, rural outmigration, criminal behavior, and access to social support and health care. Such analyses become a springboard for the fourth part of the book “Rural Economy and Socioeconomic Wellbeing,” which examines poverty, farming, and socioeconomic well-being in contemporary rural societies. Establishing how rural people have carved out livings for themselves throughout the past four decades, despite economic and political restructuring, the authors, pessimistically but realistically, forecast how current income and job growth trends will limit economic prospects of rural communities. In this context, the authors then turn to questions of state and national policy to address rural community development and restoration, focusing on the distinct meaning of poverty in rural environments due to social constructs, logic, and geography. They conclude that the prevalence of poverty underpins many of the challenges

facing rural areas, demonstrating clearly the need for greater consideration of rural poverty in national policy.

The final portion of the work, “Conclusions,” distills several aspects of Brown and Schafft’s analysis, providing a comprehensive overview of possible rural policy initiatives illustrated by an examination of “rural bright spots,”—rural areas with amenity-based economies that thrive despite familiar constraints (p.222). At the same time, the authors continue to emphasize the causes of rural poverty, urging national policy that fundamentally addresses such forces. In an instructive comparison, the authors compare the United States and European nations, where rural policy is central to national agendas that “promote civic engagement and rural renewal” (p.234).

The power of such analyses and other strengths, such as the forthright and pragmatic tone of the book, far outweigh its weaknesses, but the reader must note that the authors principally employ only statistical data, for instance collected from federal sources, and often exclude qualitative studies. The resulting perspective is broad and encompassing, but having sifted through combined, unabridged data, the authors’ analysis can lack specificity, a fact the authors themselves acknowledge in a defense of their research methods. Similarly, the work fails to account for many differences among various rural regions, but this lack of nuance helps focus the work’s central themes: scholarship and collective action to improve rural conditions throughout the United States. The authors ultimately affirm to readers that rural challenges afford opportunities to build a consistent and unified public rural policy. Brown and Schafft’s book is thoughtfully composed, and their information presents an up-to-date resource for scholars who believe in the vitality that rural communities can bring to the American economy. The book successfully contributes to scholarly endeavors to improve lives and sustain the significance of rural places for future generations.