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Rural America in a Globalizing World: Introduction and Overview

Conner Bailey, Leif Jensen, and Elizabeth Ransom¹

This is the fourth in a series of volumes produced roughly every ten years under the aegis of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS). Beginning with Dillman and Hobbs' (1982) *Rural Society in the US: Issues for the 1980s*, these decennial volumes have given readers a forward-looking, policy-relevant, state-of-the-art understanding of rural people and places and the challenges they face. Following the example of our predecessors Dillman and Hobbs (1982), Flora and Christenson (1991), and Brown and Swanson (2003), we asked authors to draw on current research without ignoring work of the past, to identify new and emerging issues related to their topic, and to discuss policy implications that emerge from their work. In a real sense, the decennial volumes have provided an opportunity for the RSS to take stock not only of conditions in rural America, but also of how we as scholars understand these conditions, identify needs for further research, and, where appropriate, recommend policies to address problems that have been uncovered.

Each decennial volume shares commonalities. First, they all focus geographically on North America, not because of some parochial vision of a separate destiny, but in deference to the enormity of the dynamics and complexities of rural change in just this one region. Also, a quick glance at the tables of contents of the four decennial volumes reveals a common concern for perennially important issues. Authors in each volume have grappled with problems in agriculture and natural resources, complex issues of community and population change, and how rural America relates to the rest of the world. Each volume has devoted considerable attention to questions of family, race and ethnicity, and rural health. These broad themes are repeated in this volume, providing a measure of continuity. Yet even within this continuity, the chapters in this volume reflect the dynamics of change sweeping contemporary rural North America. The subject

of fracking—high-pressure fracturing of shale formations to release hydrocarbons—was a non-issue in previous decennial volumes, but has emerged as an important problem in several parts of the United States, as Kinchy and colleagues describe in chapter 14. Other new subjects that compelled our attention include the Hispanic immigration to rural North America and questions of vulnerability and resilience in small coastal communities. And of course structural changes in agriculture since the first decennial volume was published mean that the issues addressed today are not the same as those of the early 1980s. We recognize that the full range of topics—including topics near and dear to the hearts of the editors—did not make the cut, but we are confident that those covered represent the most current thinking on some of the most salient problems and prospects for rural North America.

Decennial Themes

North America in the second decade of the twenty-first century is a very different place than the early 1980s. During the 1970s the long decline in rural populations had reversed and there was a sense of a rural renaissance as commodity prices for food, energy, and other natural resources climbed to unheard of levels. Several authors in the Dillman and Hobbs (1982) volume drew attention to changes in the structure of agriculture but none predicted the economic recession of 1981 to 1982 and the ensuing farm crisis that swung the rural pendulum back away from growth in population and prosperity. At the beginning of the 1990s, Flora and Christenson (1991, 2–3) linked changing fortunes in rural North America to global trade and macroeconomic policies, but these themes were prominent in only a few chapters in that volume. The theme of rural restructuring and the impact of global forces came into sharper focus in Brown and Swanson (2003), with greater attention being given to the diversity of rural economies.

We believe that globalization and neoliberalism are forces having profound impacts on not only rural North America but also the rest of the world. We invited our authors to speak to these themes in their chapters. By globalization, we mean the increased global interconnectedness of social and economic life brought about by rapid changes in information and transportation technologies. The ideology of neoliberalism has created political conditions that favor deregulation of financial markets and consolidation of corporate power. In the context of globalization, the ideology of neoliberalism has been used to justify the removal of barriers to trade and the flow of financial capital. Few parts of the world are immune to these combined forces, which have changed the course

of North American agriculture from a system based on family farms to global commodity systems dominated by multinational corporations and, in combination with government policies, have impacted agrifood systems globally. Neoliberalism and globalization have also led to the rapid decline in both rural and urban manufacturing employment over the past two decades, and have created increased inequalities in society. Not every author engages with these two themes to the same degree, but their pervasive qualities are evident in much of this volume.

Globalization and neoliberalism are hallmarks of the contemporary world. In asking our authors to consider how these forces influence their topics, we sought to establish a conceptual coherence to this volume without imposing intellectual uniformity. We believe setting a common conceptual framework has helped authors address underlying causal forces driving change in rural North America. In an increasingly globalized economy, rural textile workers compete on unfavorable terms—from the perspective of corporate decision-makers—with workers in the global South. The dramatic decline in manufacturing employment in the United States is as much a rural as it is an urban phenomenon, a reality that has largely been missed in most discussions of economic restructuring. At the same time, dramatic increases in production of agricultural commodities have been spurred by new opportunities for international trade.

Organization of this Volume

This volume is divided into five broad sections, detailed below. Each section opens with a framing chapter. These framing chapters are not meant as introductions to the rest of the chapters in the section, but rather as thoughtful overviews of important themes within each sub-field. We asked authors of these framing chapters to be provocative in their critiques of the existing research and to provide their vision of future research needs in their respective fields.

The Changing Structure of Agriculture

The first section addresses a long-standing concern of rural sociologists, the changing structure of agriculture. In his framing chapter, Alessandro Bonanno calls attention to five key themes that to varying degrees need further investigation and inquiry in rural sociological studies of the agrifood system: (1) the reorganization of time and space under globalization and the implications of these phenomena for the sector; (2) the crisis of the nation-state; (3) the increasing financialization and securitization of the sector; (4) the legitimization crisis of neoliberalism; and (5) the recent lack of scholarly attention given to

agrifood laborers, which Bonanno observes has incongruously occurred as the conditions of workers worsened under globalization.

The next three chapters in this section outline the contours of how farming has changed in recent decades and what the sector looks like today. In chapter 1, Doug H. Constance, Mary Hendrickson, Philip H. Howard, and William D. Hefernan discuss concentration and vertical integration in the agricultural sector. Building on a thirty-year history of studies focused on the agrifood sector concentration, labeled the Missouri School, they reveal that fewer farmers are in the business because their choices of where they source their inputs and where they sell their commodities have become limited. Constance et al. argue that the consolidation of actors in the agrifood chain is better understood by focusing on power than on efficiency.

In chapter 2, Amy Guptill and Rick Welsh extend Constance and colleagues' discussion by demonstrating that in both the United States and Canada, mid-sized commercial farms continue to experience dramatic declines. Midsize farmers are usually those that earn anywhere from \$10,000 to \$250,000. Interestingly, compared to the United States, Canada has not seen as much growth in farm size below \$10,000, but both the United States and Canada have seen a growth in the largest farms, defined as over \$500,000. Echoing Constance et al.'s discussion, Guptill and Welsh emphasize that mid-level farms are not just losing ground numerically, but also are losing market power and government support. In chapter 3, rounding out the picture of what farming looks like today, Douglas Jackson-Smith and Peggy Petrzelka examine land ownership in US agriculture and the implications of changing trends for agricultural decision making, environmental behaviors, and local community. While national trends suggest that the total proportion of farmland that is owner-operated land has hovered near 60 percent since World War II, data from an Iowa study shows a pronounced decline in the proportion of land under owner operator status (dropping from 55 percent in 1982 to 40 percent in 2007). There has also been noticeable growth in the role of absentee farmland owners, and while we know very little about landowners in general, we know even less about absentee owners. Ultimately, Jackson-Smith and Petrzelka emphasize that there is a lack of data on land ownership and a significant opportunity for a new generation of rural sociologists to revisit theory and research traditions focused on the implications of land ownership patterns for farm structural change, rural community well-being, and environmental behavior.

In chapter 4, Eric B. Jensen focuses on Mexican-born farmworkers in US agriculture and engages with Bonanno's call for more research on agricultural laborers and directly links to Guptill and Welsh's discussion of declining

mid-size farms. Jensen reveals that as farm size has grown, so too has the use of Mexican-born farmworkers across a growing range of agricultural commodities, the most recent of which is dairy. He explains declining availability of Mexican-born farmworkers as an issue caused by the confluence of factors, including increased return migration to Mexico, enactment of strict immigration laws, and increased employment of Mexicans in other sectors (e.g., construction). Jensen concludes with a series of important research topics for further study, including the challenges Mexican-born farmworkers arriving in new rural destinations face, the ways in which continued agricultural restructuring will shape demand for foreign-born labor, and whether country-of-origin composition of immigrant farmworkers will change if the availability of Mexican-born farmworkers continues to decline.

In chapter 5, Leland L. Glenna and Christopher R. Henke focus on the impact of agricultural technologies on the structure of agriculture. Despite longstanding rhetoric that connects agricultural science and technology with progress for farmers and society in general, they observe that reality has been more nuanced and even ironic. They detail the historically situated structures that have promoted the emergence of contemporary agrifood systems, while also considering forces that are accelerating past trends and perhaps promoting new ones. One of the trends they identify is erosion of the public sector's research and development (R&D) infrastructure in the midst of the dominance of the private sector's agricultural R&D. They note that the commercialization of science has exposed the fallacy of pure science, which may create opportunities to advocate for the democratization of agricultural research. Glenna and Henke conclude that intellectual property policies and flat funding may be stifling agricultural innovation in North America and that the biggest opportunities for innovation may exist in other parts of the world.

The final three chapters in the agricultural section look at reactions to the industrial agrifood system. Picking up on the theme of technology, in chapter 6 Michelle R. Worosz and Diana Stewart focus on the governance of our food safety system and call attention to the ways scholars have historically set about theorizing it. They observe that the changes in our food safety system have largely been "technological fixes" as opposed to solutions that recognize the problem with concentration in the industry—fewer sources of contamination impact a larger number of people. They emphasize that many significant changes in regulating food safety have occurred primarily to the detriment of small producers and processors, as the costs of compliance proves too much for small operators. Finally, they argue that future research should focus on previously ignored structures (subnational states) and actors, particularly the representation of less

powerful actors (poor, women, elderly) and producers impacted, either directly or indirectly (loss of consumers), by foodborne illness outbreaks.

In chapter 7, Jeff Sharp and Dani Deemer analyze the rise of farm animal welfare legislation. Ohio is now one of nine states that have created livestock care standard boards, which are generally tasked with determining state standards for farm animal treatment. Sharp and Deemer observe that there may be a public ambivalence toward agricultural animal welfare, which means that the public tends toward an uneasy tolerance of modern farming so long as it is not provoked into a response (i.e., a video exposing farm laborers abusing animals). At the heart of Sharp and Deemer's analysis is the recognition of the interplay between the public, state, and capital interests in food system change and development. In the case of Ohio, the state may at times appear to act in the interests of industry; but there is also effective action by nongovernmental organizations that challenge the state to account for noncapital interests as well.

Finally, in chapter 8, Clare Hinrichs and John Eshleman explore the agrifood movements that have grown in visibility and diversity in the past two decades. They argue that individual action—in contrast to collective action—enjoys special openings and appeals in the context of global neoliberalization. Both conceptually and practically, individual action, especially when limited to market engagements, conflicts with classic understandings of social movements. Directly engaging with Bonanno's opening essay in this section, Hinrichs and Eshleman stress the lack of attention that workers in our food system have received in the context of the agrifood movements. They review the transformative impacts of various agrifood movements. They also identify promising areas for future research on agrifood movements including the need to improve our knowledge of current and historical agrifood movements in terms of accomplishments, as well as organizational declines and dead ends.

Natural Resources and the Environment

The sociology of natural resources and the environment represents a long-standing field of enquiry for rural sociologists, who in the early 1970s were the first professional social science society to organize a research interest group dedicated to the topic. In their framing chapter, Louise Fortmann, Merrill Baker-Médard, and Alice Kelly observe that in the decade to come the issues with which rural sociologists will grapple will surprise many of us. As they note, who could have foretold a decade ago that fracking, bioenergy, or even climate change would be many rural sociologists' central concerns? They argue that complexity and surprise are the hallmarks of contemporary change and that our ability to deal with change will depend on our ability to connect

with the knowledge of others—not only credentialed scientists but also those whose sources of knowledge have nothing to do with universities, libraries, or books. Similar to the themes Bonanno raises, the authors identify several issues relevant to the next decade, including the financialization, global land grabs, and labor in the forestry, fishing, and mining sectors.

Lois Wright Morton and Tom Rudel address the subject of global climate change and how it might affect rural communities in North America in chapter 9. They describe climate change as being characterized both by slow incremental changes that “press” coupled human and natural systems and by more sudden and dramatic “pulse” events such as hurricanes, floods, and droughts that can rapidly change social and ecological systems. They illustrate the impacts of climate change using three case studies, including wildfires in the western United States, floods in the Midwest, and rapid temperature increases that affect indigenous populations in Alaska. Morton and Rudel raise concerns over rural communities resiliency as rural people dependent on farming and natural resources face direct threats to their livelihoods and may have fewer personal or institutional resources from which to draw while recovering from disaster. They argue that social scientists can make important contributions to such research to increase the resilience of rural people and communities in adapting to climate change.

In chapter 10, Courtney G. Flint and Naomi Krogman take on water, another big issue, and build on key ideas from the framing chapter by Fortmann and colleagues. Flint and Krogman open with the simple but powerful statement that “water captures the inseparability between society and nature,” and note further that nothing lends itself to interdisciplinary research as much as water. They describe the commodification and privatization of water and the use of hydraulic technologies to dam and otherwise control water in generating power, both electrical and political. Water resources are of vital importance to the people of rural America, but control over these resources is often in the hands of powerful forces in urban centers. They conclude with a discussion of contending forces of globalization, privatization, and local governance of watersheds by civil society, suggesting that water-related issues are likely to become central foci of research for rural sociologists in the decade to come.

Resource dependency has been a consistent theme of rural sociological research, though as Richard S. Krannich, Brian Gentry, A.E. Luloff, and Peter G. Robertson point out in chapter 11, the nature of resource dependency has changed over time. They review literature detailing cyclical patterns of growth and decay that for decades have destabilized the social and economic fabric of resource dependent communities. They suggest that increased economic

diversity in rural economies has reduced the pathological consequences of resource dependency in some parts of North America, but in other areas (e.g., associated with fracking) the nature of contemporary resource dependency bears striking resemblance to previous decades. Krannich and colleagues also foresee changing societal and political priorities favoring environmentally friendly technologies such as wind and solar power, representing new forms of resource dependency that will generate limited employment but may produce valuable income and tax revenues in rural areas. They conclude by noting the need for continued research on the impact of globalization and multinational corporations on ownership and production of natural resources.

Few regions in North America have the diversity of natural resources found along the northern Gulf of Mexico. Rural sociologists have tended to focus their energies on dry land and devoted limited attention to coastal peoples, communities, or resources. In chapter 12, Robert Gramling and Shirley Laska provide a broad overview of the Gulf coast and in so doing help us understand the relevance of coastal issues to rural sociology within the context of renewable natural resources, ecotourism, energy production, international trade, and exposure to natural and anthropogenic disasters. They show that the range of topics that remain underexplored by rural sociologists in the coastal United States is enormous.

The next three chapters focus on energy, a topic of increasing importance to rural sociologists. In chapter 13, Theresa Selfa and Carmen Bain examine the promises, pitfalls, and uneven local impacts of biofuels development. They document how government policies in the United States and elsewhere were instrumental in the rapid expansion of global ethanol production and that in general governmental mandates gave advantage to corporate investors instead of local biofuels developers. Selfa and Bain present case studies from Kansas and Iowa to describe employment and income benefits but also local concerns over water and other resources. They determine that the real beneficiaries of biofuels development have been large corn farmers, not the ethanol industry or the refineries' host communities. They conclude with a discussion of how sustainability standards might be incorporated into biofuels development to promote a broader rural and economic development impact.

Abby Kinchy and colleagues draw on the boomtown literature of the 1970s and 1980s to describe local enthusiasm for and opposition to natural gas development through fracking in chapter 14. Researchers who work on this unconventional form of natural gas development deal with a different institutional setting than in decades past. In previous decades governments were intent on developing and enforcing environmental regulations, but the regulatory will

and resources of governments have now thinned. Landowners and local governments may benefit from income and tax revenues generated by fracking, but many residents may feel that environmental pollution and the rise of non-local energy companies have violated their sense of place. Kinchy and colleagues document the environmental and public health problems associated with fracking and suggest that researchers need to devote more attention to examining questions of environmental governance, equity, and land use conflict.

The rise of biofuels and fracking are relatively recent developments in the energy field, but the same cannot be said for coal. Coal has been the source of power for industrial development in Europe, the United States, and more recently China and India. In chapter 15, Suzanne E. Tallichet helps us understand how processes of globalization and neoliberalism affect the economics of energy and therefore the people and places that house these energy stores. She documents trends in coal production and employment, showing the rapid rise of surface-mined coal production in the West compared to Appalachia and coal beds stretching from Iowa to Oklahoma known as the Interior Basin. More recently, development of mountain top removal in the Appalachian region has replaced deep shaft mining while requiring far less labor. Tallichet describes human health impacts of coal mining, including black lung disease affecting underground miners, the impact of impoundments holding coal sludge or ash, which fail, as well as the environmental devastation of mountain top removal. She describes conditions of poverty in Appalachian coal communities and urges researchers to focus their attention on questions of ownership and power and to develop partnerships with coal mining communities that empower local people.

Population Change

The third section of this volume draws attention to population changes in rural North America. In the framing essay, David L. Brown places rural demography in global context by stressing how population change and dynamics are at once consequence and cause of other regional, national, and global forces. Of the myriad transformations at play in rural areas, Brown explores ongoing processes of industrial restructuring, the trend toward devolution of responsibility to lower levels of government, and the increasing intensity and asymmetry of global-local linkages to inform his treatment of three rural population dynamics: urban-rural population redistribution, rural population aging, and the shifting ethnoracial composition of rural America. A key message is not only that population dynamics and institutional change affect one another but also that institutional contexts from the local to the global level affect the impacts of demographic change.

The next two chapters set the stage by providing complementary overviews of key demographic trends. In chapter 16, Kenneth M. Johnson focuses on the 2000 to 2010 period and shows slower rural population growth compared with the 1990s when the economy was thriving. The abated growth was due principally to reduced migration, especially to rural counties adjacent to metropolitan areas, a reflection of the Great Recession. With migration contributing less, natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) was contributing proportionately more to rural growth, but even here Johnson points to the increasing prevalence of counties in a state of natural decrease. Finally, Johnson notes that while Hispanics and other minorities account for only 21 percent of the rural population, they contributed to 83 percent of overall rural population growth in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Taking a more regional perspective, in chapter 17, John Cromartie and Timothy S. Parker detail nonmetro demographic trends within nine diverse regions of the United States, with emphasis on patterns in the most recent decades. They find that the attenuation of rural population growth in the first decade of the twenty-first century documented by Johnson is seen in all nonmetro regions, but that the South and West show greater growth than regions stretching from New England through the Plains. What rural growth there was within regions was fueled considerably by increases in the Hispanic population. Cromartie and Parker also document considerable regional diversity in elderly population dynamics, an issue Nelson elaborates on in this section. Finally, they reveal an intriguing and unprecedented regional convergence in rural population growth trends, with very little difference separating the fastest and slowest growing regions.

The remaining chapters in this section focus on rural families and households, children and youth, elders, and immigrants. In chapter 18, Jessica A. Carson and Marybeth J. Mattingly offer analyses of US Census Bureau data from 2000 to 2010 to describe household and family composition, size, and demographic characteristics. The authors take on the conventional wisdom that rural places, the rural United States included, represent a bastion for traditional family structure. They find that by 2010, the demographic character of families and households in rural areas increasingly resembled that found elsewhere, including a disconnect between marriage and childbearing, cohabitation, single headship, and same-sex partnering. Carson and Mattingly view this as a change, not a decline, in the rural family.

In chapter 19, Diane K. McLaughlin and Carla Shoff shine a spotlight on rural children and youth as we look ahead to 2020 and beyond. Rural children and youth tend to have higher poverty rates than those in urban areas, but were

spared from the worst impacts of the Great Recession in this regard. A positive trend is the higher percentage of youth ages sixteen to nineteen still enrolled in school and the increase in the share of youth not enrolled who had completed high school between 2000 and the 2006 to 2010 period. Finally, McLaughlin and Shoff illustrate that rural places are experiencing the greatest losses of youth and young adults in recent years, an indication that ongoing problems of the brain drain of rural youth remain with us today.

The loss of youth inevitably raises concerns about the other end of the age distribution. Peter B. Nelson takes a geographic perspective in his analysis of 2010 US Census data in chapter 20. He finds that the rural parts of the Great Plains, South Atlantic, and Pacific census divisions have greater concentrations of elders than do other rural places, and that the most rural regions also are grayer. Nelson draws particular attention to the different forces (youth out-migration coupled with aging in place versus retirement in-migration) that give rise to elderly concentrations and how these vary by region.

Martha Crowley and Kim Ebert conclude this section in chapter 21 by focusing on new rural immigrant destinations. They examine the push and pull factors at play in the formation of rural immigrant enclaves, the impacts of these settlements as localities struggle to accommodate them, and the nature of inter-group (immigrant-native) relationships in new rural destinations. Crowley and Ebert chart a course for future research that needs to focus on the rural political landscape and exclusionary policies in particular, the circumstances of children of new rural immigrants, and the role of globalization as shaping the formation and nature of new immigrant destinations in rural areas.

Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class

Expanding on the demographic trends occurring in rural North America, the fourth part of this volume focuses attention on diversity, power, and inequality in rural North America. Carolyn Sachs sets the stage for this section by focusing on the impact of globalization and neoliberalism on diversity in rural communities, calling our attention to the possible future consequences of climate change and international human rights campaigns in rural locations. She reminds scholars that all rural places in the United States are not the same, and we therefore need to give further attention to how class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality differentially shape people's lives. In particular, she notes the so-called benefits of globalization seem to have passed by many rural communities. Government cut-backs in particular have undermined possible solutions for reducing the high concentration of poverty found in the Southern Black Belt, as well as in rural spaces inhabited by Native Americans and Latinos.

The next three chapters examine changes affecting the status of African Americans by John Green, the impact of Hispanic migrants at state and local levels with illustrations from Idaho by J.D. Wulforth and colleagues, and Native Americans by Sarah Dewees. In chapter 22, using the livelihoods theoretical framework from development studies, Green explores the status of African Americans in the rural United States. Findings demonstrate that the presence of African Americans in rural areas continues to be a largely southern phenomenon. While published research shows some improvements in quality of life among rural African Americans, disparities remain relative to their counterparts in metropolitan places and whites in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. From the existing research, Green concludes that policies that seek to improve human capital through education and workforce development should continue, but are not sufficient for resolving structural and institutional factors that contribute to inequality and poverty. Moving forward, more place-based approaches, including regional initiatives, need to be advanced to overcome inequality and pursue justice.

J.D. Wulforth and colleagues provide both global context and a detailed case study to help us understand the impact of Hispanic migrant labor in chapter 23. They note that over the past decade, Hispanic migrants have spread out across the United States, from the South to the Mountain West. Increased visibility of migrant workers has led to political and cultural resistance. Wulforth et al. contrast popular media depictions of the social costs associated with new migrants with data showing that the impacts of migrant workers are complex, but have had an overall positive impact on the US economy. They present a case study of Hispanic workers in the dairy industry of southern Idaho, which is the third-largest dairy producing region in the United States. This industry is heavily dependent on migrant workers' willingness to do jobs that others in the local labor market would not.

With over 565 federally recognized tribal governments and many more non-federally recognized tribal communities in the United States, Dewees sets out to explain and explore reservation economic development. While Native American nations' internal governing powers have been recognized, their sovereignty has also been steadily curtailed. Due to their unique economic, cultural, and social organization, the policies of many Native nations continue to prioritize the collective (tribal government) over the individual (tribal citizen), which contrasts with neoliberal policies of scaling back government services. With Native Americans faring poorly by nearly all measures of economic and social well-being, Dewees overviews key reservation development strategies moving forward. She concludes that in the coming decade there will likely be

an increasing emphasis on free-market economies among federal policy makers and Native American leaders.

Gender and sexuality are topics taken up in the next two chapters. Cynthia B. Struthers focuses attention on the changing status of rural women in chapter 25 while Julie C. Keller and Michael M. Bell address sexuality in rural America in chapter 26. Struthers reviews the major issues rural women confront based on previous decennial volumes. She then focuses on the contemporary issues rural women and their families face. Women's labor market activities have changed and there has been an increase of rural women engaged in alternative social movements, such as sustainable agriculture. Neoliberalism combined with the economic recession of the 2000s has reduced public services like education, health, and social services in rural areas. Ample research suggests that these cuts will disproportionately impact women. In conclusion, Struthers asserts that we know much more about rural places and rural women than we have in the past, but we have not seriously considered how to use research to advocate for rural places, rural people, and rural women.

Keller and Bell overview the history of work on rural sexualities, and then introduce conceptual terms for future studies focused on sexuality in rural spaces. They introduce the idea of the sexual rural and the rural sexual, the former being the material and grounded understanding of sex and sexualities in rural places, and the latter being the imaginative construction of the rural in sex and sexualities. Ultimately, they argue that a plural rural sexual approach means seeing the significance of both of the concepts and initiating conversations and intersections between the two.

Jennifer Sherman concludes this section in chapter 27 by examining the causes of and contributors to rural poverty. She looks at the roles of rural labor markets and deindustrialization in perpetuating poverty, as well as the impacts of in- and out-migration on poor rural communities. Sherman observes that given the depth of the Great Recession and its exacerbation of ongoing deindustrialization and globalization trends, it is likely that many of the problems in rural communities will not be resolved quickly. She concludes with a discussion of the unique challenges and opportunities that rural American communities pose for surviving unemployment and poverty with dignity.

Rural Economies, Community, and Quality of Life

The concluding section examines rural economic strategies, the communities in which rural people live, and the quality of life in those communities. In her introductory essay, Linda Lobao draws attention to four structural domains shaping the fortunes of rural people and places. These include the shifting structure of

employment, the state at all levels, institutionalized relationships between actors vying for societal resources, and spatial processes that often disadvantage rural locales. Lobao calls upon scholars to examine such structural changes jointly, not independently, and proposes a political economy perspective as a unifying way to do just that. Drawing on this perspective, she sketches key realities of the early twenty-first century and their implications for rural social science generally, and the study of rural economies, community, and quality of life in particular.

Education is fundamental to individual and community economic well-being, but the challenges facing rural students, schools, and communities are always evolving. In chapter 28, Kai A. Schafft and Catharine Biddle examine the social, symbolic, and economic centrality of rural schools for the communities they serve. The key role of rural schools is challenged by rural out-migration, consolidation, poverty, and access to postsecondary schooling. They place these challenges in federal policy context, drawing out the implications of a neoliberal discourse that has come to dominate discussions and policy options today.

Ideally, education imparts human and cultural capital, and a reliable route to success in the labor market. In chapter 29, Tim Slack examines work in rural America. He traces changes in the national and rural labor markets in recent years and their implications for new challenges facing rural workers today. He then documents how these challenges are sharply manifest in recent patterns of underemployment, as global forces have conspired to render formal labor markets less able to provide ample work at a living wage. Slack concludes with a discussion of the informal economy and its role as an economic strategy among rural households.

Informal work often constitutes a self-help approach to economic survival and enhancement. Arguably, entrepreneurship is simply a more formalized, officially recognized, and advanced form of precisely the same strategy. In their chapter on rural entrepreneurship, Lori A. Dickes and Kenneth L. Robinson first explore why some rural localities are conducive to entrepreneurial development while others are not. They confront the tension between the traditional and get-rich-quick approach that emphasizes attracting outside businesses versus investments in local entrepreneurial infrastructures oriented toward longer-run benefits. They bring their arguments to life through both a case study and analysis of survey data from the rural South.

Creating a context that is conducive to entrepreneurship requires work within communities. In their chapter on community organization and mobilization, Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora highlight the vulnerability of rural communities facing structural changes over which they have little control. They promote the community capitals framework as a conceptual model for

enhancing local and community resiliency. The community capitals framework focuses attention on seven forms of capital (human, social, cultural, political, financial, natural, and built). They argue that intangible forms of community capital (human, cultural, social and political) are just as important as financial, built, and natural capital in community development. They present two case studies to illustrate this point. One case involves rapid population growth in a South Dakota community due to fracking. The second case involves an Iowa community dealing with the influx of migrant workers from Mexico and Central America. In both cases, small communities are forced to adapt to changes over which they have little control, but are shown to be resilient through effective use of social, cultural, and political capital.

In chapter 32, Todd L. Goodsell, Jeremy Flaherty, and Ralph B. Brown offer a conceptual discussion of the continued importance of community in light of processes of globalization that tend to erode the traditional underpinnings of this concept. They hold that processes of globalization are pervasive and, while not discounting communities as places where important functions and services are to be found, argue that place-based communities no longer play a central role in most people's lives. Community, to Goodsell and colleagues, may not be a place, much less a local place. For these authors, the key defining characteristic of community is moral proximity, which in the era of social media and global markets need no longer be restricted to a single physical space or even point in time. The increasing fluidity of human relationships and the increasing importance of the extra-local in our daily lives mean that moral proximity and the responsibility which we must accept for our actions is no longer determined primarily by place of residence. Goodsell, Flaherty, and Brown challenge us to rethink the concept of community in light of contemporary relationships and identities, and not simply accept that because a place exists it is the central social reality of those who live within it.

The final three chapters in this section concern issues related to quality of life among rural people. The most basic thing people need for a fulfilling life is food. But, as Keiko Tanaka, Patrick H. Mooney, and Brett Wolff point out in chapter 33, the historical connection of poverty and hunger has in many places been broken. Indeed, they are motivated by the fact that too often just the opposite is true—that poverty and obesity go hand in hand. Tanaka and colleagues are captivated by the contradictions of rising obesity and food insecurity coinciding in “places that make the United States the breadbasket of the world.” After providing contemporary data on food insecurity and obesity, they situate both in a common framework that rests squarely on the four interrelated processes (economic structure, the state, institutionalized relationships, and spatial processes)

Lobao lays out in her framing essay. As such, they reconcile prevailing contradictions by showing how food insecurity and obesity are two manifestations of global forces shaping life in rural and urban America in the twenty-first century.

In her chapter about rural health, E. Helen Berry points out that standardized mortality rates are lower among rural than urban residents, but that such averages mask considerable diversity among rural populations. Some places defined as rural are in close proximity to urban areas where health services are readily available. Elsewhere, however, low population densities often constrain physical access to both physical and mental health care. Rural populations are also less likely to have health insurance. Chronic disease problems in rural areas, including obesity, are exacerbated by the lack of preventative care and the phenomenon of food deserts as rural populations decline and local grocery stores close.

In the concluding chapter, Katherine A. MacTavish, Ann Ziebarth, and Lance George describe the status and context of housing in rural America focusing on ownership, quality, and affordability—aspects of housing closely tied to quality of life. They examine the outcomes of market-driven approaches to housing development, and highlight the unequal housing opportunities that leave some people and places increasingly vulnerable while others are advantaged. Harkening back to the political economy perspective Lobao suggests, they conclude that the rural housing dilemma reflects socioeconomic and political processes that foster place-based persistent poverty and segregation of populations of color.

Concluding Remarks

Secretary of Agriculture Thomas Vilsak (2012) recently observed that rural America and its concerns are becoming less relevant in national political discourse because, with declining rural populations, few political leaders have an understanding of rural America. Vilsak pointed out, however, that rural America is a vital part of the United States, a statement that would hold true for Canada and almost any other nation. Rural areas are storehouses of energy and sources of food and fiber. Ecosystem services such as clean air and water depend on rural landscapes and the people who live there. Yet, because human populations in North America and most other parts of the world increasingly live in large urban settings, rural issues and concerns are marginalized in social and political discussions. As the chapters in this volume make clear, however, rural North America is not at all marginal in economic terms and is tied intimately to and shares a common fate with the larger society.

The trend toward urbanization in North America and elsewhere in the world has been in place since the days of the industrial revolution. Mechanization in agriculture has been one among a number of forces that have contributed to the decline in farm labor and out-migration to urban areas. Technological as well as policy changes over the past several decades have contributed to the increasingly global nature of our food supply. As documented in several chapters of this volume, these changes have been the driving force behind recent restructuring of agricultural production and the food system more generally. Globalization of food and agriculture has been made possible in part due to the development of new production and transportation technologies, but it has been the political ideology of neoliberalism and the emphasis of free trade unencumbered by tariffs and other regulatory restraints on trade that have allowed the penetration of industrial capital into the production, processing, distribution, and marketing of food on a global scale.

The anti-regulatory ideology of neoliberalism favors free market rationality which in an era of corporate consolidation has the effect of squeezing out family farms (the “disappearing middle” Guptill and Welsh describe) and either bankrupting smaller businesses or placing them into a status of dependence on more powerful economic actors. As Worosz and Stuart describe, even the operation of regulatory structures tend to serve the interests of corporate capital and not small businesses and family farms. The ideology of neoliberalism also impedes our abilities to address problems of climate change, create a rational energy policy, or effectively manage water resources.

There is no question that Secretary Vilsak on one level was correct in describing rural America as increasingly irrelevant in national affairs—an observation not limited to the United States or even to North America. The increasing concentration of people, wealth, and power in urban spaces is fact. What is less well understood is that urban populations and their wealth and power depend on rural people and communities. In some cases, as Jackson-Smith and Petrzelka as well as Tallichet note, rural resources are owned and controlled by urban interests, which directly draw wealth from rural to urban areas. In the case of agriculture and natural resources, the processing, distribution, and marketing of food, energy, and other resources are controlled by corporations based in urban areas.

Rural sociologists are well placed to help document these relationships, to help understand the importance of the rural part to the whole, and to tell the stories of rural people in an increasingly interconnected world. We have a long tradition of tracing demographic changes and how these affect access to health, education, and other vital social services. Rural sociologists also have long experience examining the impact of globalization on such fundamental

societal building blocks as community, and more recently on how changes in the social and economic landscape are changing our understanding of gender roles and relationships. We recognize that we as rural sociologists are not alone in this quest for understanding, and that we have colleagues in related disciplines of geography, anthropology, and agricultural economics, among others, who have made important contributions to our understanding and who often take an active part in our annual meetings and intellectual life more generally. That said, members of the RSS consistently have sought to bring and maintain a focus on rural people and communities in North America and around the world, in order to understand the forces that bear on their lives and to ensure our research informs policies. The authors in this volume have been faithful to this disciplinary tradition.

Notes

1 The names of the editors are listed alphabetically. Each shared equally in editing this volume, working with chapter authors, and writing this introduction.

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