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Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

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Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009 (239 pp.), ISBN 978-0-8070-0614-6, US\$ 16.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Peter A. Kindle

Joined by academic discipline and marriage, the sociologists Patrick Carr (Rutgers University in New Brunswick) and Maria Kefalas (Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia) have collaborated on an ethnographic study of a small, rural community in northeastern Iowa. Initially conceived as a study of transitions to adulthood in nonmetropolitan America, Carr and Kefalas were quickly convinced that something larger was at stake – the survival of small town America. This volume contains their findings related to transitions to adulthood in rural communities, but it is clearly written to address the “rural crisis” by educating Americans about it and attempting to justify national policies to fix it. Simply defined, the rural crisis is the exodus of youth from small town America.

Carr and Kefalas relocated and joined the 2,014 residents of “Ellis” in 2002 with sponsorship from the MacArthur Foundation. Over the next 18 months, they surveyed 350 and interviewed 104 young adults who had enrolled at Ellis High School in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Written in an easily accessible style for the lay reader, this volume is filled with their observations of life in a rural community that is just “hanging on,” and stories from the young adults they met. Social scientists who read this book may be dissatisfied by a lack of attention to methodological niceties, but with more than 200 endnotes on 34 pages, no one can conclude that this research is meager.

The preface, introduction, and concluding chapter focus on the rural crisis and suggestions for how America should respond. Sandwiched between these pages are four chapters that address the four trajectories of rural youth transitions to adulthood. “. . . [T]he biggest question facing anyone who grows up in a small town is whether he or she should leave or stay” (p. xiii). How the youth of Ellis found personal answers to this question determined not only their trajectory into adulthood, but also, quite likely, the future destiny of their community.

Achievers are an elite few, about one in five youth that are carefully nurtured and prepared by the entire community to leave after high school graduation. This small “aristocracy” leaves because, frankly, the community expects them to do so. In contrast, about one in ten youth are *Seekers* who are self-motivated to escape, doing

so primarily through military service. Up to four in ten youth will never leave Ellis, choosing the path of early marriage, childbearing, and blue collar employment right after high school. Paradoxically, the *Stayers* have the lowest accumulation of human capital and offer the community the least upon which to build a future. The *Returners* are dominated by what Carr and Kefalas call *Boomerangs*, youth who leave temporarily for junior college or military service, but return to the comfortable surroundings of their hometown having concluded that the larger world was not to their liking. Much of the chapter on Returners discusses Iowa initiatives to recruit Achievers to return home, but the few *High Flyers* who do so appear to be an exception.

Because most Ellis resources are invested in Achievers, and because Achievers rarely permanently return to Ellis, the future of Ellis is imperiled by preparing its best young people to leave. This irony does not escape Carr and Kefalas' attention, and to some extent, this may be the primary thesis of the entire book. The future of Ellis, and by implication other rural communities, depends on Stayers and Boomerangs, but these segments of the young adult community are virtually neglected by rural leadership and priorities. When joined to the broader economic trends associated with globalization, the rise in agribusiness, and the decline in manufacturing employment, the future of rural America appears quite bleak.

What does the rural brain drain mean for America? Exactly what does America lose when a rural community ceases to be self-sustaining? Carr and Kefalas dutifully report the nostalgic response that pointed to the "historical centrality" of rurality. Others suggested, perhaps with hyperbole, that abandoning rural communities was comparable to the South seceding from the Union more than 150 years ago. Perhaps the most persuasive argument might be continued access to the natural resources, food production, and green potential of this region; however, it is difficult to imagine how a region touted as resource-rich can, in the next breath, lay claim to the redistribution of national resources proposed by Carr and Kefalas. "... [T]he best way to preserve the nation's small towns will be to create new sorts of conservation efforts to invest more efficiently in [Stayers and Boomerangs]..." (p. 9).

Carr and Kefalas may be correct in this conclusion; however, they did not answer the more important question of whether the nation's small towns should be preserved if they cannot sustain themselves. This reviewer suspects that many Americans might question federal investment in communities described as having "wariness about new people" (p. 13) and being "populated by insiders impatient with those who do not take the deepest sort of pleasure in knowing, with absolutely

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certainty, their place in the world and in abiding by the rules that govern it” (p. 109). There may be arguments for rurality that Carr and Kefalas do not address, but this reviewer fears that redistribution of national resources to sustain communities that cannot sustain themselves may simply convert rural America into an expensive museum of times past.

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