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How to Make Rural Education Research *Rural*: An Essay at Practical Advice

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The sovereignty of the nation state, even in the developed world, is more problematic than at any time since 1945. In that light, this essay maintains that nation-building, partly through systems of schooling, has served rather more to debase than improve the rural circumstance. It suggests that a different logic of improvement is needed in rural education, but refrains from prescriptions. Instead, discussion focuses attention on the sort of questions that researchers (and school improvers) might ask either to discover or to invent varieties of that different logic. The essay distinguishes local from cosmopolitan interests and provides examples of issues that exhibit the distinction. I remind readers that the word "essay" indicates tentativeness.

Since the 1983 debut of *A Nation at Risk*, good critiques have unmasked the domestic implications of the idea that the nation can be preserved through educational reform. Until recently, however, fewer critics have doubted the sustainability of schooling as an institution for nation building, and fewer still have framed such doubts in light of the rural circumstance. This essay attempts to raise those doubts from the rural perspective.

Too often, researchers overlook what is most particularly rural as a fit object of inquiry in educational research. Instead, objects of national—or perhaps, cosmopolitan—practice absorb their attention and thereby obscure rural issues and dilemmas. Public school curricula and practices do look remarkably similar worldwide (e.g., Benavot, Cha, Kamens, Meyer, & Wong, 1991), and this fact ought to disturb educators more than it apparently does. Educators, after all, have a vested interest in the institutions of cultural transmission. When practices are so similar to one another worldwide, we might worry about the health of human cultures overall. This essay intends, in part, to pull back the veil of national, or cosmopolitan, concern in order to expose contemporary rural issues not only worthy of attention in their own right, but especially now, as markets for goods, labor, and communication services begin to "globalize" cultural practices.[1]

Improvement in rural education requires a logic quite different from the prevailing logic of school improvement. A changed perspective on the purposes of schooling is needed if educational researchers would help develop institutions that actually benefit rural communities. I argue that a worldwide decline in the importance of national sovereignty has made the historic mission of school improvement—conceived as nation-building—counterproductive in rural places. Although few educators have appreciated the relevance of this change to the system of American schooling, there are good reasons why the change is salient to rural communities—and to rural practitioners and researchers. This essay aims particularly to help educational researchers grasp the implications of this change so as to consider issues that are perhaps more germane to rural school improvement efforts.

Rural School Improvement is Nobody's Fault

In the best of all possible worlds, the interaction between disciplined inquiry and the arduous labor of keeping school would naturally, and easily, entail the improvement of schooling. But we no longer trust the naturalness or ease

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[1]Wendell Berry (1990) observes that people cannot think globally and simultaneously act locally; some writers go so far as to advocate re-ruralizing education altogether (e.g., Jackson & Vitek, 1995). Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash (1996) predict an era of "grassroots postmodernism."

of such an interaction; and we are less optimistic about the whole enterprise of schooling, including research about schooling, than formerly. From 1910 to 1965, education was part of the march of progress toward an inevitably better future—a progressive, postwar, and increasingly post-rural, future. Although many people behaved as if research had been a part of this improvement, it would probably be fairer to say that political economy, ideology, and technology were stronger influences. The Cold War, as obliquely joined by Harvard's James Conant, with long-term rural ill effects, was a context for many years; much was sacrificed in an ostensible defense of sovereign U.S. territory (cf. Jacobs, 1992).

Lately, however, we seem to have discovered that research occupies a seat less exalted than we previously thought. Instead of technology being the handmaiden of research (science), we are more and more frequently acknowledging that research is the handmaiden of technology.

Research cannot, in any case, reliably cause school improvement, because schools improve when those involved jointly will it, and this they may do entirely without the benefit of research. Properly speaking, research may *inspire* or *deflate* improvement efforts. That is, depending on its quality, research can either undermine or fortify the will to improve. Of course, research once promised that it would create a *reliable* path to improvement in all realms of life. But it has not been able to live up to this promise in education (nor, one might argue, in medicine, law, agriculture, industry, nor—Lord preserve us—in the operation of standing armies worldwide). As a result, a sort of hysteria for "more practical" educational research has grown up. We forget that the focus of the effort *always was* on creating reliable processes for improvement. The nature of education, I have argued elsewhere (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995), is such that the goal of fashioning widely applicable and reliable procedures for improvement is unreasonable. This is not the same as saying that improvement is impossible. Clearly, schools do improve and they do decline. What is needed is thoughtful research that attends to the particularities (and not the generalities) of the places of which schools are or ought to be part.

Rural places in the contemporary world may suffer more than other places from the lack of such research and from the misguided effort to build up widely applicable and reliable procedures for school improvement. Too many current research efforts, it seems, undermine improvement in rural education. Too few pay attention to rural circumstances, and too few offer anything to fortify the will of those who would see rural schools improve for the benefit of rural community.

In fact, during the past 150 years, improving rural schools also meant reshaping and redirecting them into a national system—a system of schooling, manufacture, trade, politics, and culture—that has insured, if not required, the depopulation of the countryside. This trend toward rural depopulation and unemployment continues, confounding and subverting rural families and rural communities. The increasing automation of agriculture, mining, and timbering has led to the widely repeated misrepresentation that "rural no longer means agriculture." What people mean by this phrase is that rural jobholding no longer means agriculture (or mining or timbering). Technology has effectively severed the natural connections—the economic connections—"the people" once maintained with the land. Fewer rural people are responsible for the land; and, in fact, those people who remain in rural places are less and less likely to own the rural lands that surround them, so concentrated has land ownership become in the U.S.[2] Rural people now are as "free" as the rest of the nation to wander wherever big capital requires them to go. Schooling is a handmaiden to the system that *is* responsible. And educational research is an (albeit subsidiary) handmaiden to the technologies that enable that national system. Rural school improvement of this sort is nobody's fault; it is endemic and longstanding.

"Today's Culture Sends Strong Messages"

Why has such a subversion of rural places, with its inevitable intrusions in educational practice and in research, continued for so long? The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) fingers a culprit sufficiently powerful to explain the problem: "Today's culture sends strong anti-intellectual messages" (CPRE, 1996, p. 7). This, by the way, is what I infer that Wendell Berry (1990) means when he claims that our society is "mind-dominated": We fail to attend to things that might otherwise be obvious to us. The mind turns against itself, and perhaps schooling is the instrument of such a turn of mind. The dilemma of rural education is constituted of this irony.

Not only is it true that anti-intellectual messages "are sent" to us, we are surrounded and relentlessly bombarded by them. Worse still, we repeat them, not only to others, but to ourselves. We live and breathe these messages; the very institutions of our society are anti-intellectual, and our universities are by no means exceptions to this rule (Howley et al., 1995).

Universities are knowledge factories given to making intellectual work as routine as manufacturing (Anderson, 1993); hence, they are not particularly well-equipped to consider improvements that require breaking rank with established relations of power. Beyond this general short-

[2]Agriculture, however, *must* still mean "rural," since large urban hydroponic wheat and corn farms to supply the global grain market have yet to emerge, though it would be an interesting conceit on which to base a science fiction novel.

coming, universities have generally implemented a cosmopolitan, modernizing mission; and this mission is perhaps pursued with the highest purpose the more the university's territory is understood to be a parochial backwater.

This observation may set some good people's teeth on edge, so let me add that I'm decidedly not suggesting that Harvard and Berkeley are the best resources for approaching matters differently in rural education. Their students and professors may empathize and exhibit wonderful insight, but *they are not usually here, or for very long.*

Once more: None of us is singly, or in groups, to blame, but it's as if we've been missing something. What's wrong?

The Default Position of Rural Educational Research

Most educational research, regardless of type of locale, is carried on today as if nation-building were still an operant principle in the world system. This is no wonder, since the most concerted and best funded effort (yielding the best research by technical standards) is sponsored nationally.

Several connections can be drawn to prevalent modes of operation under which research into rural education and rural schools is conducted.[3] We should all recall that superbly executed research that fails to ask the right questions will miss the point. C. Wright Mills (1959) took Talcott Parsons sternly to task for this failing ("power" was not a word in Parsons's lexicon).

First, skepticism prevails that rural schools are, or should be, very much different from urban or suburban schools. Underlying this belief, but seldom articulated, is the presumed Platonic ideal form-of-the-school, of which rural, urban, and suburban schools are all equally imperfect images. With us, the common school is not common simply because all neighboring children of whatever class or race have attended it, but it is understood as having the idealized form of the school in common with all other American schools. When Americanization was the essential educational project, such an ideal served a purpose; one could argue—though fewer do so today than formerly—that the ideal was emancipating for the European-Americans who invented it.

Second, beneath this skepticism about rural schools runs a deep disregard of actual rural places, diverse as they are. Disregard of these places entails the invisibility of the peculiarities of rural families, rural ways of living and working, and local rural meanings and knowledge. The anti-intellectual larger culture—which is as evident inside universities as outside them (Anderson, 1993; Barzun, 1959; Hofstadter, 1963; Howley et al., 1995)—makes it easy for scholars and ordinary citizens alike to avoid appreciating these peculiarities, except for fleeting sentimental purposes. In our disregard for manual labor, an enduring reality in rural America, we have as a people forgotten how much reflection and cleverness good handiwork requires. Relying on machines has helped make the culture stupid. Computers may be carrying this stupidity one step further.

Third, on the terms of nation-building, schools and districts are believed to constitute localities that frustrate reform efforts. CPRE (1996, p. 6), for instance, finds that "state and local agencies are slow to adapt to new policy goals." Presumably these new policy goals are those promulgated at the national level by learned societies and various combinations of national leadership. There is an historical shift of perspective inherent in this view: Where localities in the 19th century could be understood as units that contributed to nation-building, today they are widely understood as impediments to national vigor. In the 19th century, states *joined* the nation. In the 19th century, *Americans* shaped localities and *localities* shaped Americans. Today, local districts, schools, and teachers need to be fixed, systemically, and almost-all-at-once (cf. Sashkin & Egermeier, 1994). In the case of schools in rural places, the terms of systemic school reform tend to blame the victim while inflicting further punishment.

Fourth, the imperative that research now become exceptionally "useful"—that is, that it technologize the mission of truth-finding and truth telling—means that studies must be designed to ensure development of educational goods and services that can be marketed as universally effective, or nearly so. In practice, one might argue, this rumor of universal effectiveness promises that most such goods and services will be out of place in most locales. Few researchers believe in the old corporate model of development any longer, but many now hail Total Quality Management as the next wave of development; and "world-class-standards" are the watchword in this new scheme.

The Problem

There are other assumptions in American culture that might be listed as contributing to the difficulty of inquiring about rural schools and communities, their mutual educational dilemmas, and their mutual sustainability. And the conditions under which educational researchers, working in very instrumental ways, might also be mentioned (e.g., timing their labors to election cycles). But the four assumptions given above are enough to illustrate the problem.

If, for instance, the topic is statewide reform, again, the focus of effort is likely to be the special backwardness or challenges of rural places in acceding to the reforms, not the disjunction between local and state priorities. If the topic is student aspirations, the focus is likely to be how

[3]Recall that these points apply to a century-and-a-half of school improvement. There are plenty of recent exceptions, perhaps an increasing number, and the fact that it is possible even to frame the questions is perhaps evidence that things are changing.

rural schools can best "increase" the level of students' aspirations, not the relationship between student commitment to rural life ways and cosmopolitan ways.[4] If the topic is the dropout rate, the focus of effort is most likely to be strategies for retaining or retrieving students rather than the disjunction between rural schools' national purposes and the nature of local rural economies. These are all real examples, disguised to protect us all, for I too have conducted such studies. It is not *easy* to see rural issues, and, as Paul Theobald remarked recently in a private conversation, "The learning curve is very long." This article aims to help others shorten that curve. A shorter curve, however, may just be a steeper curve.

The problem concerns motive, commitment, and attention. This essay has so far explained the motive for examining rural dilemmas more closely: the primary purpose of mass education in America is collapsing. The time has come for educational researchers to develop different commitments. This, of course, is already happening, as the pages of *Educational Researcher* attest with almost every issue. Among those different commitments, which really are familiar to many researchers, are *local purposes* for education—forms of education and their institutional expressions that sustain local communities, especially as thoughtful and active cultures.

Nation-Building

In the 19th century, nation building was the major educational project, and much of it took place in *rural schools*, because over half of all Americans lived in rural locales until 1917 or so. By Americanizing children, local rural schools not only converted immigrants into citizens, they ironically also converted themselves as a national system. The ideological roots of the national system are arguably rural (Meyer, Tyack, Nagel, & Gordon, 1979; Theobald, 1995).

Our historical motive for improvement seems to be that we wanted then—and still want—good Americans to issue forth from schools, but without histories or idiosyncrasies. The only adaptation we have made today is that we now want them perfectly prepared for, and accepting of, the emerging (global) postindustrial conditions of employment, which look less promising than the conditions of industrial employment at the height of modernist industrial power in post-war America. The grim outlook we hold on the future, of course, bodes ill for school improvement conducted in the name of building the nation.[5]

This point was recently brought home to me in a book to which I have been alluding (Anderson, 1993). The author, a scholar of political science at the University of Wisconsin, argued forcefully that *improvement* in thought and reality is an aim worth preserving for the university. It strikes me that this argument is needed because we no longer agree about our plans for an idea like "school improvement." Your improvements are my debasements, I might well claim.[6]

The very logic of improvement, it seems, has escaped us. At the end of the industrial age, we doubt the efficacy of reason itself because *technical rationality* has perhaps unwittingly, but none the less certainly and prominently, helped magnify the evident horrors of the 20th century. Anderson, however, wisely points out that—although progress is not inevitable, nor the workings of power necessarily just—we nonetheless need to believe we *can* make the world a better place and use the powers of the mind to facilitate that end (Anderson, 1993). So reason, it turns out, requires faith to support it.

It is faith we have lost, not reason, and not the need for decent research.

Although our lack of faith undermines the role of K-12 schools in producing good Americans, the purpose has already been rendered specious by the declining importance of nation-states. The educational problem of producing good Americans, aside from the perpetual danger that such a mission is xenophobic, is that *being American* no longer has much to do with shaping the American ethos. The American ethos, according to Christopher Lasch (1994), is being constructed by elites whose primary allegiance is not to American democracy but to their own self-interest in the global marketplace. They wave the flag to pacify, and not to rally, followers.

The work of nation-building, fueled by the 19th century rural experience, is virtually finished. This point requires some interpretation, because it must at first seem short-sighted and improbable, not to mention remote from issues of educational research and practice.

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[4]See, however, the Winter 1996 issue of *Journal of Research in Rural Education* (Vol. 12, No. 3) for a unique consideration of the aspirations of rural students.

[5]The grimness of outlook is not evident to everyone in education. But ample evidence suggests a declining standard of living, a shrinking middle class, and a proliferation of deskilled jobs in the U.S. The school establishment exhorts the populace to prepare for well-paid, high-tech jobs, but the supply of such jobs is likely to be inadequate to the demand education thus helps create for them.

[6]I am, of course, claiming that we need research about a different kind of improvement. There will be objections to this point. Many educators and professional improvers claim that we have done enough research and that extant research already tells us what we need, and it's not more research. We need, in this view, systemic improvement; authentic learning and assessment; we need to honor multiple intelligences and creativity; we should aim at cultivating lifelong learners (seemingly defined as those willing to undertake an interminable round of formal schooling). Nearly always, the context is presumed to be the emerging global economic battleground.

Whereas in the nineteenth century, "we" all wanted to be Americans, we could not then have been so sure what it meant to be Americans. To be an American circa 1850, only somewhat less so than in 1750, entailed participation in the project of fashioning (perhaps equally by contribution and by negation) what it meant to be an American. It was difficult work, and we have not found the results very satisfactory; greed, venality, and injustice were as common then as now. As Daniel Kemmis (1990) and others have suggested, the frontier allowed us to hide from ourselves. Rural newcomers, up to and after the closing of the frontier, were acquisitors and not uncommonly thieves. When clever or lucky, they made sure that other newcomers, usually people with fewer initial advantages, kept moving (Theobald, 1995).

The point here is that there is no reason whatever to think that life in America and life in schools would improve if we just returned to the way things were 150 years ago. Nostalgia is an equally bad foundation for educational research and for educational practice.

Nation building, however, is over not merely because America has matured, but because the worldwide project of nation building is ending. The sovereignty of nations is in dispute and under assault, as it must be when national financial resources, which embody national sovereignty, circulate rapidly through international markets ("the global economy"). The political usefulness of the nation-state is perhaps being superseded by a new political-economic formation, though little is known about this emergent formation. Sovereignty based on territoriality, however, is less and less functional. It is difficult to determine if, when one "buys American," one really is buying American. Often one is buying "multinational firm," globalized but nonetheless private capital.

Globalized private capital, however, is an unsatisfactory replacement for sovereign territory. The idea of place itself is antithetical—and therefore essential—to the idea of globalization (McMichael, 1996). We need to realize that the emergence of localism in tandem with concern for globalization is not a conundrum or an accident. It represents a new circumstance in the evolution of the world; it also suggests that the focus on global competitiveness constitutes an insufficient preparation for the 21st century (cf. Esteva & Prakash, 1996).

In short, the way Americans understood ruralness in the 19th century is dramatically different from the way Americans now experience it, and from the way *they must increasingly begin to realize they experience it.* In the italicized phrase lies an educational purpose profoundly at odds with 19th and especially 20th century educational purpose. Back then, the rural need not have been conscious of itself. It was conscious, rather, of something else, an ideal Americanism in which the rural experience was a passing phase. Today, the rural experience will not continue to exist unless self-conscious and unless it develops its own purposes. But there are many reasons why the rural will persist, and more still why it should persist.

Again, I am not arguing that the rural past was an idyll, nor that rural places are necessary harbors of virtue. Slavery was a rural phenomenon; dispossession of Mexican American colonias was a rural phenomenon. The genocide against American Indians was carried out on the frontier. Although all these injustices contributed to nation building in North America, neither do I argue that nation building is a necessary harbor of evil, nor, further, that emergent political formations may implement justice more properly and more generally (they are more likely to magnify greed and injustice in my pessimistic view). I do claim, with many others, that care for particular places is more necessary to justice and decency than ever and that threats to the integrity of local places are multiplying.

Commitments Local and Cosmopolitan

"Local" is a crucial concept to keep in mind when dealing with rural places, as intimated previously. A recent conversation challenged me to say whether or not a useful definition of *rural* is possible.[7] For statistical purposes, it really is easy enough to define rural, but I choose to draw the distinction between *local* and *cosmopolitan. Local* can only be described as a set of commitments usefully distinguished from *cosmopolitan* commitments. And because rural places are composed of small communities, with a degree of separateness from one another, in sparsely populated places, they are exemplars of the idea of *local.* And in fact, rustic ways have generally served modernizing society as the perfect antithesis of cosmopolitanism.[8]

Can urban places share such commitments? They can, but, as Jane Jacobs (1984) has pointed out, our cities have been remade by what she calls "the sorters," social engineers and policymakers who have separated industrial zones, residential districts, low-income housing, and commercial districts from one another. The effect of the sorting has been to destroy city neighborhoods—urban localities with some commitments akin to those still prized in some rural places—and recreate cities as placeless enti-

[7]The setting was a university, and some of the participants to the conversation seemed prone to dismiss ruralness as a "demographic," and therefore superficial, feature of reality. In general, in both higher and lower education, *rural* connotes an equity issue of not quite pressing concern. The mental image of bucolic poverty, however, is mostly an oxymoron.

[8]Educators, especially educational administrators, are apt to associate the distinction between local and cosmopolitan with Alvin Gouldner (1957, 1958), who used the terms to describe organizational inhabitants—cosmopolitans were careerists not particularly committed to the organization, but to a larger professional purpose. My usage here sweeps up history, culture, and politics.

ties. Cities now seem a darker, dystopian, adaptation of the suburban nightmare. Whereas, in the country, people's character is evident in their homes and farms, in the city successful people try[9]—with some desperation it always seems to me—to symbolize their character in modes of self-presentation, particularly the way in which they dress. Changeable fashion substitutes for the enduring substance of place that characterizes rural places and people.

The issue of commitment lies in the realm of ideology: what we believe, why we believe it, whose interests our beliefs advance, and how we reflect those beliefs in thought and action (research and practice). Education for nation building is very different from education that would cultivate particular communities and the ideal of community, on that experiential basis. We are, it is fortunate, much less shy of commitments and values than used to be the case. After all, private businesses, universities, and nonprofit corporations are used to developing vision or mission statements founded on what we members assert as beliefs.

This is the place where I am going to get very specific in this essay, because I wish to indicate plainly some of the things that those researchers who might be interested in rural education, but have not yet interpreted its proper interests, could be looking at. These lists are hardly the result of research; they are the result of 10 years of observation of rural literature, however, by someone to whom people have the vexing habit of asking: "What should I study in rural education?" Observe that these are only topics, and that actual studies must consider locally relevant issues that emerge from local experiences or that embody local dilemmas. For the sake of contrast I begin with 'cosmopolitan' topics that can be related to rural settings, but which do not share rural *commitments*. (These topics are *not* commended to readers!)

Cosmopolitan commitments. These are cosmopolitan concerns as they apply to rural education: how to . . .

- increase the level of students' aspirations,
- overcome resistance to consolidation and school closure,
- overcome the disadvantages of students' backgrounds,
- implement state and national reforms,
- offer a broad and deep high school curriculum,
- insulate the school from local politics,
- implement "best practice" (i.e., nationally validated methods and programs), and
- change the local culture.

Rural (local) commitments. The following list is (merely) illustrative of rural concerns loosely related to the preceding cosmopolitan concerns, *as they must inevitably be in the era of waning influence among nation-states*, but better capturing issues of the local rural circumstance:

- senses of and attachment to rural places,
- the relationship between school and community sustainability,
- proper aims for an education committed to rural community,
- rural pathways to rural adulthoods,
- community engagement in rural schools,
- rural community and educational stewardship,
- curricula to sustain rural places,
- small-scale organization in rural schooling and community, and
- cultivation of appropriate local meanings, knowledge, and commitments.

Most of the usual suspects that researchers and doctoral students in education are advised to consider could be "ruralized" according to the commitments enumerated above. Many educational researchers will first need to separate themselves from their own cosmopolitan training. Several preparations can help.

Preparations

First, there is an excellent rural literature, but *one must read not only in education*, but in rural sociology, rural community development, history, and, especially, literature. Unlike these other disciplines, literature (literary fiction) has typically had a much better grasp of the nation-state *qua* fiction[10] (again, see the electronic version of this article for a list of books that have influenced me).

Second, and perhaps more critical to one's grounding, is *interest in matters and minds rural.* I mention this prepa-

[9] I am not speaking here so much of impoverished urban masses as of those affluent, mobile urbanites, young and old. At a recent AERA meeting, we stayed on New York's Upper East Side, 86th Street near 2nd Avenue. The people in our building, young and old alike, appeared not even to cook their own meals—a perception confirmed by the doorman. This struck us also as symptomatic. This observation is not intended to demonize either urban or rich people, but to suggest that the urban struggle for local purpose confronts cosmopolitanism at the seat of cosmopolitan interest (e.g., world cities).

[10] Jacobs (1984) is a refreshing exception among the social sciences. Her critique of macroeconomics is based on the thesis that cities, and not nations, are the engines of economic growth and health. Macroeconomics, in Jacobs's view, is a fiction based on the need to protect and reinforce national sovereignty. Macroeconomics is a poor tool of economic understanding and management because it substitutes national sovereignty from the local integrity that powers economic life.

ration second because it ought ideally to go without saying. One nonetheless suspects that some of those who attempt rural studies are more interested in other things (e.g., tenure, the rural venue seeming perhaps less stressful than the national venue). Interest means some combination of experience and understanding that puts one in the middle of the salient real issues. The best experience on which to ground interest (this is a third preparation) may be *living or working in a rural community.* This experience is nonetheless insufficient in itself.

The fourth and perhaps most essential admonition is that those interested in rural educational research should bring some sort of critical framework to the experience. Rural educators who would conduct rural educational research are at risk in this regard, precisely on account of their training, both as educationists and as researchers. The reasons should be clear from the main discussion: Educationists and researchers are cultivated as cosmopolitan nationalists. What am I talking about?

Amitai Etzioni once asserted that the instrumentalism of schooling increases with each higher level, on which basis doctoral programs could be said to be the most instrumental schooling of all. Although this is a strange turn of events for those who are called "doctors of philosophy," very little research is ever guided by philosophy, and the theorizing that does guide it is usually very narrow. This is merely how 'positivism' works. Concerned with, and usually trained to do the thing right, most of us lack not only the personal capacity, but, more importantly, the *institutional* capacity to do the right thing (to borrow a useful phrase from the leadership literature). Our 'training' not only prepares us to ignore local issues, but predisposes us to ignorance.[11]

The Importance of Critique

"Critique" is almost a dangerous word these days; it conjures images of dejected Marxists, undisciplined postpositivists, ethereal post-structuralists, Nietzschean postmodern flakes of varied crunchiness, deluded romantic communitarians, and wild-eyed paradigm shifters—many of whom are not only incomprehensible, but who are actually trying to dismiss reality altogether. Academics are held up for special ridicule by those few practitioners and numerous policy makers who know a little of the arcane struggles that beset academe.

The dismissal of critique on this view (i.e., the view that madness lies in the direction of critique) is all rubbish from the perspective of this essay, and it is neither bold nor modern. In fact, responsible and very practical Marxist, postpositivist, postmodern, and communitarian critiques are, each of them, very much needed in rural educational research.

Anderson (1993), rather conservative in his outlook, has the role of critique about right: its highest purpose *probably is* in service of action to make the world a better place. This sort of practicality, however, is very different from the national instrumentalism that determines the best-funded research agendas, because it allows for realities outside the accepted canon of national security issues. Rural education lies in the shadow of this canon. Critique that aims to make the world a better place might cultivate a supportive, but not directive or determining, expectation for research. Practical critique is needed at present in the construction of properly rural education. Such critique, in fact, has long been needed. Right now, however, the opportunity for it is perhaps more auspicious, since the motive of school improvement is becoming less and less salient to real conditions in the world.

Let me add that I am no paradigm-shifter. All the paradigm-shifters of my experience seem to be selling snake oil, and that is a very old trade. So far as I can make out, the world is going on as it always has: birth, life, death, diversity, and unity (*e pluribus unum*, indeed!).

There are momentous changes afoot in the world, to be sure, but such changes are always just being born, or in full bloom, or they are dying. Other technological revolutions, other conceptions of knowledge, and other bases of political organization than those we now appear to be giving up simply constitute the flux of history. Though Heraclitus's river flows on, rural places are major tributaries to the flow, and at this bend of the river they have a lot to tell each other—and much with which to inform all the global flows. Right now, rural North America is a very interesting place for researchers *to be.*

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[11] Though this is a sharp charge, this sort of "ignorance" (really a form of knowledge) is the basis of the widespread longing for so-called interdisciplinary studies, and the longing for wholism more generally, a longing that actually is not new, but which coincides with modernism. You need to turn to good fiction, however, to follow these longings through the course of the 20th century. This reading is never part of a researcher's training.

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