Book Review

Howley, C. B., Howley, A., & Johnson, J. D. (Eds.) (2014). Dynamics of social class, race, and place in rural education. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

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Dynamics is a book about social justice in a world where the traditional, modern, and global exist simultaneously and side by side by side. The authors represent that world from rural points of view in which the intersectionality of social class, race, and place is inescapable, active, and complex. The editors frame the arguments to identify institutional and cultural barriers that thwart rural citizens' possibilities "to organize their lives as they wish, to choose their own ends, and to realize them as they think best" (Mouffe, 1996, p. 20). At the center of that frame is schooling or "the State's schools," as the editors put it, in neoliberal times. From a variety of angles and with different levels of conviction, all contributors question the compatibility of neoliberal values and social justice in rural places.

In the preface, introduction, and closing chapter, the editors work as opticians to help readers use three lenses—class, race, and place—to focus sharply on the roles of schooling in rural life. Neoliberalism, they argue, positions rurality in marginal roles at best—a possible supply of cheap natural and, perhaps, human resources—and as wasted spaces and lives at worst. Neoliberal schooling mediates against rural traditions, inveigling rural students to adopt modern and global dispositions through "a global curriculum they will need if they are to take personal responsibility, if they are going to get out into the global workforce and succeed" (Barber, 2012). According to the editors, each lens adds to readers' overall acuity when considering economic, cultural, and political dimensions of the past, present, and future. Moreover, the combination of lenses is necessary when readers imagine how to "become able to break with what is fixed, finished, objectively and independently real" (Greene, 1995, p. 19).

To my reading, the authors tell four compelling stories: place confounds social class relationships; social forces direct public schools against rural place and class; direction is systemic and systematic; and therefore, most school outcomes are negative in terms of place sustainability. Using a metaphor from Marx's notion of commodification, Michael Corbett interrogates official efforts to reduce schools to a common denominator in order to compare them dispassionately. Visiting three schools in urban, suburban, and rural Canada, he demonstrates how social class works differently, rendering the comparisons questionable both in intent and consequence. Rakhat Zholdoshalieva, Alan DeYoung, and Umut Zholdoshalieva describe the invention of an indigent social class within the collision of the traditional, modern, and global in rural Kyrgyzstan. The Soviets built communities among nomad clans, used schooling to modernize and increase these populations, and then abandoned the region when their command economy disintegrated. "[N]ow formerly sophisticated villages like Ylay Talla are in serious decline, and the knowledge and values that used to be transmitted in their schools have very little instrumental utility or moral imperative" (p. 63). In the United States, Robert Pittman, Dixie McGinty, and Julie Johnson-Busbin offer empirical warrants for their counterintuitive conclusion that high school dropout rates are lower in more remote areas because local values of independence and self-reliance are expressed through family expectations.

Paul Theobald and Craig Campbell argue that rural communities (and therefore schools) have suffered continuously from America's initial rejection of old world feudalism to its current embrace of global capitalism. In search of profits, all things, experiences, and beings become monetized, leading to the disenchantment of rural places and people. Jerry Johnson demonstrates the continued legacy of American feudalism in a detailed study of class- and race-based school funding formulas and policies in Mississippi. "From Reconstruction on, schools for African Americans and poor Whites have been systematically under-resourced as a mechanism for providing inexpensive labor" (p.

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186). Examining the production and destruction of rural narratives surrounding the industrialization of agriculture in the American Midwest, Michael Volk interprets "native" and immigrant voices concerning the arrival of two global meatpacking giants, Tyson Foods and ConAgra. Natives rationalize "White flight" from the schools and community, and immigrants comment on the fracturing of their American dreams.

Craig Howley, Aimee Howley, Caitlin Howley, and Marged Howley take readers inside rural schools in order to examine how school personnel take up issues of class and race. Among six school districts, they identify four which took benign "save the poor" paternalistic stances, one which dwelled on the deficits of the poor, and one that acknowledged the poor as valued community members. In all but the last district, schooling was understood as a middle-class civilizing tool necessary for mobility among the poor. In the last district, they identified hope for rural futures. Megan Rhodes adds texture to the Howleys' and Volk's findings by interviewing high school teachers and administrators in a small Midwestern town which during the 1980s had replaced a closed military base with a meatpacking plant. Most participants articulated their versions of a new "culture of poverty," naming race, ethnicity, and class as the problems within their school and community. A few teachers resisted such stereotyping, but their colleagues often ignored their efforts to challenge the biased narratives. Edwina Pendarvis demonstrates how these biases are encoded within the official school textbooks used in Appalachian middle schools, positioning local dialect speakers as remedial, disparaging students' linguistic identities, and systematically limiting their academic prospects.

The outcomes of these three stories have varied consequences for rural adolescents. Caitlin Howley and Kimberly Hambrick find that high school students are aware of schools' differential treatment of social classes. Regardless of their own social class, students who observe class-based bias in classrooms would prefer to live elsewhere as adults. Those who believe their teachers to be fair are more likely to choose local residence. Rayna Sage and Jennifer Sherman explore differing influences of communities' work and educational opportunities on adolescents' decisions to leave. Areas with more opportunities also appear to be more tolerant of adolescents' choices, resisting the moral judgments that those who choose to stay lack ambition, or those who choose to leave are capable pragmatists. Returning the stories full circle, Hernan Cuervo ties adolescents' outmigration from Australian rural communities to an expected consequence of the neoliberalization of school curriculum that valorizes individual choice, mobility, and flexibility above other virtues. He fears for rural communities unless rural schools can "focus on teaching and learning in a specific place and time, and nurture the connection to students' own community and to the praxis of being rural humans" (p. 237).

Across the book's 14 chapters, the editors offer a tour of alternative meanings of the dynamics of class, race, and place in rural communities. Race and class are forces for movements within rural communities, and at times, in communities' work toward equilibrium or common good. They provide variation and contrasts in the rhythms of rural places. And they are shown to be processes of change with potential to release great energy within rural renewal and sustainability. Schools are implicated at every turn, and more often than not, cited for their negative dynamics. Yet in each chapter, the authors identify some signs of hope in place-based pedagogy and school personnel committed to social justice.

References

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