CHAPTER 19

Afterword: Violent Cartographies and the Ontology of the Rural

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Abstract

This afterword extends some themes developed in the book to present a new understanding of rurality and urbanity, not as things but as ontological processes. It highlights the ways that fixing the rural into an object is detrimental for political reasons. Thus, the chapter continues to make the rural explicit by articulating what we mean by the rural—how we understand the field from within or about which we write—while acknowledging that such an articulation necessarily intervenes in the construction of the rural. It does this by reading Don Mitchell's critique of culture and Barbara Applebaum's critique of white privilege pedagogy, showing the political stakes involved in the rural and redefining it as a process of production and reproduction.

Keywords

ontology – planetary urbanization – critical rural studies – race – art

One of the most important contributions this book makes is the rendering explicit of the rural. This is done, for example, by challenging its status as a negation of the urban (the rural as "not urban"), articulating the diverse demographics and people, institutions, and structures in the rural, and identifying the networks within which rural spaces congeal. The regions from which this book's research emerges—from Adam Jordan, Jacqueline Daniel, Sheri C. Hardee, Brianna Brown, and Rosann Kent's work on Appalachia and Greg Samuels' on the Black Belt, to Angela Redondo's work in New Mexico and Emma Redden's on Vermont—each help us untangle the complexity and richness that is the rural. Importantly, while doing so they refrain from *fixing* the rural into an unvarying and inert object. Doing so is detrimental for several political, epistemological, and ontological reasons. Rurality is both bounded and

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boundless; both active and receptive; both produced and productive. Making the rural explicit means instead articulating what we mean by the rural—how we understand the field from within or about which we write—while acknowledging that such an articulation necessarily intervenes in the construction of the rural. Space, after all, is historical, active, and dynamic, and in all these ways it's inherently educational (Ford, 2016, 2017). In this brief afterword, I want to extend this particular thread in the book just a bit further.

1 The Rural Age Thesis

The rural has always been a central concern of educational theory and policy in the U.S., which makes sense considering schooling in the U.S. started in what were considered rural areas. Up until the early-mid 20th century, most formal schooling occurred in one-room schoolhouses. Jonathan Zimmerman (2009) reports that as late as the beginning of the First World War "fully one-half of the nation's schoolchildren attended one of its 212,000 single-teacher schools" (p. 17). The consolidation of rural schools coincided with urbanization and was bolstered by The New Deal, especially the Public Works Project, which build over 3,000 schools between 1935–1938. In addition to consolidating existing schools and building new ones, the urbanization of education entailed and was facilitated by the building of broader infrastructure like roads and modes of transportation.

This, in turn, was tied up in changing spatial and class divisions, as "consolidation also reflected the widening wealth gap between rural and urban America" (p. 47). The struggle over the one-room schoolhouse was often framed as a struggle over urbanization, progress, and development. Some romanticized one-room schoolhouses as representative of an era of innocence, community, independence, and freedom. Others denounced them as backwards, inefficient, unequal, and no more than a relic of the past that should stay in the past. While Zimmerman rightly calls both caricatures that obfuscate the real history of the little red schoolhouse, both narratives also evidence that the rural comes into presence only in relation to urbanization.

Rural education scholarship likewise engages in its own caricatures and distortions. Michael Corbett (2014) shows this through the unproblematized conception of "community" at the heart of so much of the literature. Elwood Cubberly's classic *Rural Life and Education*, for example, advocated for the complete overhauling of rural schools and, at the same time, an expansion of community. "Cubberly," Corbett says, "saw rural schools and the communities that protected and preserved them as impediments to rural and national development" (p. 609). The rural community itself was just as much an impediment

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to progress and development as the rural school. Cubberly's analysis still informs rural education scholarship and policy today, and to show this Corbett turns to Paul Theobald's argument that "the persistent failure of educational reform in the United States can be traced back to the defensive form of liberal individualism that is uncritically and rather automatically promoted in and through the schools" (p. 610). Today, neoliberalism posits community (while plural and fragmented) as a replacement for the state and the embodiment of choice and liberty. Cubberly identifies the community as an obstacle to progress, Theobald argues that community both erodes and preserves individuality, and neoliberal thinkers contend that community is the place for choice. Using Raymond Williams' critique of community—which is never figured pejoratively (who argues *against* community?)—Corbett pushes us to examine the structural and spatial contexts of such appeals.

2 There's No Such Thing as the Rural

If there's one thing we're sure of, it seems, it's that the rural is not the urban. Thus, as Rebekah Cordova (2017) points out, "there is ample discussion of the rural, as in comparison to what is often described as 'urban,' but not necessarily as two-sides of the same coin, rather it is as if rural areas can better and more easily be characterized by the *absence* of urban characteristics" (p. 279). The rural *lacks* development and progress, population concentration and diversity, equality and efficiency, political consciousness and social movement. The primary lack defining the rural today is population. The reason we're living in a much-celebrated urban age is precisely because, beginning in 2006, the majority of the globe's people live in urban settings.

The urban age proclamation echoes throughout United Nations reports, political speeches, policy documents, and scholarship of traditional and critical bents. Nevertheless, Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014) argue that "the urban age thesis is a flawed basis on which to conceptualize contemporary world urbanization patterns: it is empirically untenable (a statistical artifact) and theoretically incoherent (a chaotic conception)" (p. 314). Movement happens fast and survey results age quickly, while the boundaries as to where the urban ends and the "other" begins shift endlessly. With such movement, what exactly should be measured, and how should it be measured? Who is it that draws these lines? What actually *is* urban, and what *is not* urban (Ford, 2017)? The urban age prophets, they say, combine unconnected and accidental attributes with no adequate "specification of what specific phenomena are meant to be contained within each term of the urban/rural dualism" (p. 329). The

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urban age thesis is, as such, also a rural age thesis. The rural thus dominantly denotes "residual zones of settlement that are purportedly 'not urban,' but this is done without specifying what features these spaces might share across contexts, whether in terms of population size, density or composition, land use, labor markets, or any other indicators" (p. 329). The rural isn't the urban, the urban isn't the rural, and it's as if that's all we're sure of.

In a searing polemic against new cultural geography, Don Mitchell (1995) argued "that there is no such (ontological) thing as culture. Rather, there is only a very powerful *idea* of culture, an idea that has developed under specific historical conditions and was later broadened as a means of explaining material differences, social order and relations of power" (p. 103). These processes, relations, and orders in need of explication are not *of* some thing (or level) termed culture, but are made sense of through the idea or concept of culture. "The idea of culture," he says, "is not what people are doing; rather, it is the way people make sense of what they have done" (p. 108). What is known as culture isn't something uniquely cultural, but part of the production and reproduction of life that's branded or commodified—and thus *naturalized* and *reified*—as some cultural realm.

Our world today isn't any more or less cultural than our world of yesterday, and culture doesn't play any more of a role in our lives than at any other point in history. The *idea* of culture, however, does play a more prominent role in our world and social relations. As an ideological abstraction, the idea of culture works to naturalize globalized capitalism:

> …what gets called 'culture' is part and parcel of systems of social reproduction, both at local and more global scales. 'Culture' is represented as part of, or as an archaic 'pristine' remainder in, a globally integrated system of social reproduction. 'Ways of life' are represented as part of this global system, yet their relative autonomy is always assumed. That is, the currency of 'culture' is precisely its ability to integrate by denying connections at some scales and by over-valorizing localism. (p. 111)

Marcel Duchamp's readymade art forcefully illustrates the foundation of Mitchell's thesis. Turning in his painter's brush, Duchamp took everyday objects, brought them into new contexts and presented them as art. He placed all manner of objects—from snow shovels and windows to urinals and coatracks—in art galleries, and through this alone transformed them into art. To use Mitchell's verbiage, Duchamp's great intervention was to reveal that there is no such (ontological) *thing* as art. Duchamp didn't transform the found objects in any way. But he did transform our *idea* of the objects and, thus, of

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art. He demystified the ideological abstraction of art as a distinct form, process, or product by revealing that art is a way that we make sense of, categorize, and approach forms, processes, and products.

3 Resisting Violent Cartographies

The urban-rural divide functions much like Mitchell says 'culture' does. It takes relations and processes of production and reproduction as they are spatialized and abstracts them into an undecipherable and undefinable thing. This, in turn, enables the urban and the rural to be deployed to advance and justify particular ideologies. Without a critical theoretical framing with which to approach the rural as a field in which one takes and reads notes about education and politics, prescribing solutions or denotating realities, we're left with dominant and reactionary understandings, what William Reynolds (2017) would label as the violent cartographic conceptualization of the rural. Cartography here isn't a passive or detached logic of mapping, but one that exerts real pressures and actively shapes experiences, relations, and understandings. Building on the work of Michael J. Shapiro, Reynolds defines violent cartographies as "diagrams [that] work to contain or destroy those free, creative resistant unbound points" (p. 33). Such a process is violent insofar as it takes processes and makes them into static entities. The rural becomes some *thing*, some solid and bounded space that contains and excludes. And if we approach the rural and urban as opposing entities, then the urban is locked in place too. The empirical and theoretical errors of the rural age thesis of our era are thus manifestations of a more general process of circumscription and repression.

In the U.S., violent cartographies of the rural cast it out as an elsewhere "mostly forgotten or demeaned" (p. 33). This today does important ideological work in that it relegates retrograde elements of the U.S. like racism, misogyny, and homophobia to an "other" region, whitewashing systemic problems that run through—or, more accurately, that *constitute*—the fabric of the totality of the country, structuring our relations and consciousness. Barbara Applebaum (2010) writes about this ideological absolution in relation to racism and white supremacy. She critiques white privilege pedagogy and discourse for assuming the subject can stand outside of power relations and become a "good white" or engage in the development of a "positive whiteness." Rather than constantly and vigilantly investigating our own actions and consciousness, we white people critique others, displacing our racism or our participation in racist systems onto them. As she puts it, we protect our moral innocence in this way, which "is not so much a case of trying to persuade others, but rather about persuading

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ourselves of our own goodness" (p. 183). Because we are so fundamentally, thoroughly, and inescapably constituted through social norms, one can never extract oneself from them, or else one would be a "one," a recognizable subject at all. We are nothing but the social relations that render us intelligible, and we can only move from within these. When we map the rural-urban divide onto Applebaum's thesis, we see how dominant framings of the rural absolve the urban—and its inhabitants—of responsibility for racism and other forms of oppression.

The narrative around Donald Trump's election evidences this spatialization of discursive and political moves to exculpate oneself of wrongdoing or ways of being that reinforce oppression. Locking racism into another, non-relational place and group, we heard that poor whites or the "white working class" in rural areas voted Trump into power. Not people like me! The 2016 election somehow became a referendum on racism, with white Clinton voters as good, urban, smart whites, and Trump voters as bad, rural, stupid whites. Yet Trump's real base was and is the suburban middle class and wealthy elites. As Jesse Myerson (2017) observes, "fascisms real base: the petit bourgeoisie," a term used to designate "small-property owners, whose nearest equivalents these days may be the 'upper middle class' or 'small-business owners.'" Trump voters earned "roughly 130 percent of the national median" income, or $72,000 a year. For the urban to be an enlightened spatial arrangement, the rural needs to be stupid. And as Mary Gray (2009) remarks, "A politics of visibility needs the rural (or some *otherness*, some *place*) languishing in its shadow to sustain its status as an unquestionable achievement rather than a strategy that privileges the view of some by eliding the vantage points of others" (p. 9). Such a move thus not only fixes particular identities to space, but also ironically erases the history of the actual diverse peoples and struggles of the rural and homogenizes rural inhabitants into a uniform whiteness and reactionary political identity (which does a particularly egregious violence to the Indigenous and Black populations who live outside of cities).

Violent cartographies of the rural consequently naturalize a progressive urban way of being in the same way that Margret Grebowicz (2015) argues the national park naturalizes democracy, making democracy appear not as a particular set of political forms, but as "some original human state" (p. 25). The National Park appears as a natural and wild space devoid of politics; a sort of untarnished historical endurance. National parks work to depoliticize politics through a series of representations and experiences that link it to a supposedly natural state, a time and place uninterrupted by the human. Of course, when we enter the national park we "encounter spaces that are rigorously domesticated, landscaped, and tamed, not necessarily by design (although there is

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that too) but by deliberate discursive construction" (p. 6). The national park serves as the metropolis' other, an outside that makes democracy (civilization) possible. Fixing democracy as the beginning (national park) and end (civilization) of history prevents other forms of becoming as it abstracts and objectifies democracy and nature.

Rather than two sides of the same coin, the rural and urban constitute different parts of the same interconnected process of production. What is called the "rural" is, to put it differently, a categorization and delimiting of a certain field. This is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, names and delimitations are not only helpful but absolutely necessary for political thought and action. The problem is the *naturalization* and *locking* of the rural, or what we might call the fetishism of the rural. Andy Merrifield (2013) makes a similar argument when he proposes urban theory change its perspective, a transformation that he conceptualizes "as a move away from an *epistemology of cities* toward an *ontology of the urban*" (p. 6). Merrifield here builds on Henri Lefebvre's move from studying the city to studying the urban, a shift that took place with his 1970 book, *The Urban Revolution*. The city was once a discrete entity. Brenner and Schmid's problems haven't always held for the study of cities. There was once a time when the city was more or less bounded with relatively stable borders. In 1970 Lefebvre saw that was all changing. From this point on Lefebvre prefers to speak of the "urban" to get way from a reification of the city. To combat capital's assault on urban life we need to produce a new urbanity. We need to do the same to fight against capital's assault on the rural; resisting it not by clinging to it as an object but precisely by opening it up as an ontological movement (John & Ford, 2017). By resisting the violent cartographies that fix the rural in place, this book makes a key contribution to this struggle.

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