

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ROGER EPP and DAVE WHITSON, eds., *Writing off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments, and the Transformation of the Rural West*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press. 2001, xxxv + 330 p., \$34.95 paper.

This edited volume by Roger Epp and Dave Whitson on the transformation of community in the rural west presents an interesting picture of the effects of globalization on rural places. While the editors are clearly concerned with the fate of rural Canada, they are not rural romantics. They dispel the myths that all rural communities were once "tight-knit;" that people succeeded almost solely due to their own stubborn determination to carve a life out of the land; and, that rural communities once enjoyed a high level of independence from the rest of society because people used to "do for themselves." Rather, the editors and most of the authors recognize that social change has been an integral part of western rural communities since their inception; that many places were and continue to be divided by class, race, ethnic or cohort (new-comers and old-timers); that massive government support spurred and maintained the development of Canadian rural communities for a century; and that the communities of the rural west were all created to produce commodities for export, not to be autonomous, self-sufficient units of social organization.

So, if major social change has been occurring in rural communities since the beginning, why this book? The answer lies in the political science background of the editors. Most of the contributors are sociologists and geographers, but the editors are concerned with globalization and the policy changes that have accompanied that phenomenon. Governments were once champions and promoters of rural settlement. Through infrastructure development, favorable policies such as the Crow Rate, and direct partnerships in resource development, governments actively shaped and supported the development of the rural west. The same governments are now finding the maintenance of the infrastructure too costly at the same time that the commodities produced by these places are falling out of fashion. Rural people, who despite their misgivings about elected officials, relied heavily on various forms of government subsidy, are now finding themselves cut loose with few resources and little capacity to shape positive futures on their own. While the editors clearly feel affinity for critical theorists such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, they are not overly ideological in their approach. They do take the themes of democracy, power, and privilege a bit further than their fellow contributors.

The book contains over a dozen interesting cases of change and conflict over such things as golf courses, hog barns, coal mines, and ski hills. There is a reasonable balance between the agricultural rural west and the other sector-dependent community types found in the region. The editors' own contributions are among the best. They achieve a deeper level of analysis than many of the other authors. Epp describes how political de-skilling in Alberta that has crippled rural communities' capacity to respond to government cut-backs. Whitson offers an insightful chapter on the transformation of rural communities from places that produce commodities, to places that serve those who consume amenities. It is not a diatribe against cappacino in Kamloops , but rather an articulate analysis of the benefits and costs that accompany increasingly urban lifestyles and expectation in formerly quite rural places.

As with most edited volumes, there is some unevenness in the contributions. A few chapters are real gems while others are less impressive. If there is any oversight, it is in the scant attention paid to Aboriginal communities in the west. One chapter explicitly treats race relations in a community in Saskatchewan and another has a short section on Aboriginal issues in northern British Columbia. Given the demographic shift currently underway in the rural west and political trends regarding treaty rights, Aboriginal issues are clearly going to loom large in the future of the rural west.

This book would be perfectly appropriate for an upper-level undergraduate class in geography, rural sociology, or a course on globalization. It is provocative without being dogmatic and it raises more questions than it answers, which is what a good book on emerging trends should do. The book resonated with me as I lived in Alberta and traveled extensively in the west for five years in the 1990s. As a current resident of the Maritimes, I found myself hungering for a similar analysis of how central and eastern Canadian communities are coping with the challenges brought about by globalization.

Tom Beckley *University of New Brunswick*

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