

Book Review

Albrecht, Don. E. *Rethinking Rural: Global Community and Economic Development in the Small Town West*. Washington State University Press, 2014.

When many of us think of the rural American West we conjure up images of vast open landscapes sparsely dotted with small, tightly-knit and isolated farming and ranching communities. In *Rethinking Rural: Global Community and Economic Development in the Small Town West*, Don Albrecht explores the historical and contemporary drivers of development and change in the rural West. He suggests that a new image of the rural West is emerging as the ecological, economic, and social impacts of globalization alter rural landscapes and communities. Albrecht's basic premise in this book is that new opportunities exist for rural West communities in today's modern world if they are willing to embrace change, be innovative, capitalize on their assets, and develop their human capacity.

Rethinking Rural is framed around three distinct sociological eras that occurred in the rural American West over the last century and a half: 1) Small Town in Isolation; 2) Small Town in Mass Society; and 3) Small Town in Global Society. As Albrecht illustrates, the impacts experienced by diverse rural West communities during and between these eras varied. Some rural communities near metropolitan areas and major transportation routes thrived when they were successful in attracting manufacturing companies. Whereas, others struggled to survive if they were unable to attract manufacturing during the 'Small Town in Mass Society' era and endured both demographic and economic decline. Today, in the 'Small Town in Global Society' era, many rural communities in the American West encounter both challenges and opportunities associated with globalization, rapidly changing technologies, and decreasing or increasing populations.

As a rural sociologist and Director of the Western Rural Development Center at Utah State University, Albrecht is well versed on the challenges and opportunities that have and will impact rural West communities. This book is based on his years of work in the rural West and on thirteen strategic roundtable planning sessions he conducted in 2009 with rural West communities. From these roundtable planning sessions, Albrecht identified three main concerns for rural West communities as they merge into a new global era: sustainable use of natural resources, the creation of vibrant economies, and enhancing educational, and livelihoods opportunities.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE RURAL AMERICAN WEST

Rethinking Rural is divided into two sections. The first section, comprising three short chapters, explores the two sociological eras historically associated with the settlement and development of the rural American West. The first era, 'Small Town in Isolation', spans a timeframe from the westward American expansion in the late 1800s to approximately 1950. During this era, early pioneering settlers in the American West struggled to adapt to limited access to resources such as water and make a viable living off the land. Many early settlers pooled their resources; they also worked collectively to build dams to store water and canals to transport water in arid and semi-arid locations. Gradually, communities began to emerge in the rural West in areas with dense concentrations of family-run farms, ranches, or natural resource industries. These communities were highly dependent on local agriculture and natural resources and were generally self-sufficient and isolated from the outside world.

Spanning from 1950 to 1980, the second historical era of the rural West is referred to as 'Small Town in Mass Society'. Characteristic of this era were advances in communications and transportation such as telephones, televisions, and highways. These advancements increased communications and connections to the outside world for many in the rural West. During this era growth in the manufacturing industry and new advances in agriculture also decreased dependence on agriculture and natural resources for many rural communities. Some of these advances, such as the use of pesticides, improved agricultural practices and products, but concerns emerged in the 1960s regarding the ecological and health impacts associated with pesticide use and natural resource development activities. Additionally, improved agricultural efficiencies and technologies led to a decrease in small family farms as larger commercial farms emerged. The increased migration of rural population to urban centers led to economic problems for many rural communities. Between 1940 and 1970, millions of rural Americans moved to urban areas, consequently decreasing tax bases and businesses in many rural communities.

THE NEW GLOBAL ERA OF THE RURAL AMERICAN WEST

Most of the space in *Rethinking Rural* is dedicated to the second section of the book and the current 'Small Town in Global Society' era. According to Albrecht, increased global competition and decreased relevance of location are what distinguish the current 'Small Town in Global Society' era from the preceding 'Small Town in Mass Society' era. What needs to change in the global society era are community approaches to development that vary from what was done in previous eras. Based on roundtable discussions with thirteen rural West communities in 2009, Albrecht summarizes three main concerns for the rural West as they enter the new global society era. The first is to determine the appropriate usage of natural resources now and in the future. The second is for communities to identify and develop innovative local economic

opportunities that adapt to new and ever changing technologies. Finally, enhancing human capacity in rural communities is necessary for increasing the skills of rural residents to adapt to new workforces. Developing human capacity is also necessary for rural community leaders to adequately address the current and upcoming opportunities and challenges of the global society era.

These three concerns are the focus of the second section starting in Chapter Four with a discussion on federal land ownership and the associated challenges and opportunities for communities. During the first two sociological eras in the rural West, much of the harsh terrain was deemed unsuitable for agriculture or development. Thus, today 55.4 percent of the West is federally owned and managed in comparison to less than five percent of land being federally owned and managed in the 37 nonwestern American states. In the current global era, decisions on how these lands and their resources are utilized—and who stands to benefit or lose from these decisions—will be controversial. Albrecht elaborates on this in chapters five through seven, with a discussion of the opportunities and challenges regarding land and natural resources in the rural West including water, energy, biodiversity, forests, mineral resources, and rangeland. As new technologies emerge, rural communities may have the potential to take advantage of unique opportunities such as generating renewable energy to accommodate the energy needs of their population. On the other hand, rural communities with growing populations will require increased access to natural resources such as water. As much of the West is arid or semi-arid, accessing water and regulating its supply and usage will present challenges for decision-makers. Likewise, additional decisions regarding natural resources and land usage will have to weigh conservation and environmental concerns against economic and development concerns.

Chapters eight and nine move on to discuss place-based economic development for rural West communities. The number and quality of employment opportunities has always been a challenge for rural communities. As we enter the global era, this challenge will be exacerbated by a decline in traditional sources of rural employment such as agriculture and natural resource industries. However, place is no longer as much of a deterrent to employment opportunities as it once was. Increased information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as personal computers and the internet, have opened up opportunities for flexible work locations. Chapters ten and eleven focus on the urgent need to increase human capacity and place-based economic development to mitigate the loss of traditional sources of employment and capitalize on new sources of employment in the global era. Albrecht stresses the benefits of addressing these issues locally or regionally will outweigh the costs and help rural West communities thrive. Finally, in chapter twelve Albrecht concludes with a summary of the three concerns for rural West communities and an assertion that there is no template for rural community

development. Rather, community development needs to be an individual process for each community that recognizes their unique locations, challenges, assets, and goals in the new 'Small Town in Global Society' era.

DISCUSSION

In *Rethinking Rural*, Albrecht presents a practical discussion regarding both the historical development and future trajectories of the rural West. Fueled mainly by globalization, the current 'Small Town in Global Society' era demands that rural West communities develop new strategies for taking advantage of opportunities and addressing challenges. In the 1990s, improved international transportation and the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up trade and interactions between nations, and created a need for large-scale agriculture. The 1990s also ushered in increased ICTs such as personal computers and the internet, which allowed for the development of a global society with the ability to rapidly share information and communicate. New ICTs also provided greater geographic flexibility for workers; with the introduction of computers and the internet, many skilled workers are now able to work from rural areas.

Yet, Albrecht stresses that the impacts of globalization for rural areas also comes with significant ecological and economic consequences. Though the need for traditional natural resources has declined for rural communities, the need for amenity resources has increased substantially. Amenity resources are the combination of factors that make environments aesthetically pleasing to people—lakes, mountains, or favourable climates. Beautiful mountain landscapes and low precipitation levels are not conducive to successful agricultural production, thus throughout most of the isolation and mass society eras the rural West struggled both economically and socially. People with flexible employment tend to favour rural areas with high quality amenity resources and they expect policies that cater to preserving these ecological resources over ones that may alter them in favour of the economic development that comes from natural resources or manufacturing.

Ecologically, the rural West varies from the rest of the United States with abundant undeveloped and federally owned land and amenity resources, and limited natural resources such as water. Because limited development occurred in much of the West during the isolation and mass society eras, the highly-valued, relatively undeveloped amenity resources of the rural West are now attractive. This new attraction may present a difficult adjustment period for communities with abundant amenity resources and that are now rapidly growing in the current globalization era. For some communities, this growth may alter landscapes and strain already limited resources such as access to water. Many of these communities will be forced to make difficult decisions that weigh development over short-and long-term ecological preservation.

Economically, new industries are replacing traditional agriculture, natural resource, and manufacturing industries throughout the rural West. Albrecht illustrates that different industries have different wage structures, varying levels of education and skills, and diverse proportions of gender and ages. Thus the transition from one industry based economy to another can often be economically and socially challenging for rural communities. Manufacturing and natural resource development jobs are often associated with middle-class wages, whereas service jobs, even in amenity-rich areas, are generally lower paying. Replacing middle-class incomes with lower paying jobs results in decreased tax revenues, higher levels of poverty, and greater inequality.

In conclusion, Albrecht succinctly summarizes the historical, current, and future challenges faced by many communities in the rural West. Beyond challenges, he also discusses ways for rural West communities and/or regions to capitalize on, plan for, and respond to the impacts of globalization. Though he focuses on the United States, much of what Albrecht discusses and suggests could also pertain to communities and regions in other countries with similar histories, resources, and geographies, such as Western Canada. The inclusion of many practical examples throughout the book is beneficial for the reader to understand the myriad issues that impact the rural West, and how this geographical area differs both ecologically and demographically from the rest of the United States. This book is easy to read and not overladen with academic jargon. In addition to a clear and engaging writing style, each chapter includes a conclusion that summarizes the main points presented. *Rethinking Rural* is an ideal read for diverse audiences—from academia to community leaders—who are looking to gain a better understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities facing rural communities and/or regions in the current 'Small Town in Global Society' era.

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