

Sustainability and the Civil Commons: Rural Communities in the Age of Globalization

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One anticipates great things from a book about the future of rural communities with the words 'sustainability' and 'globalization' in the title. If two buzzwords define the academic trends of the last two decades, these are the ones. Sumner seeks to engage these concepts, and couple them with McMurtry's ideas about 'life values,' Habermas's theory of communicative action, and Gramsci's thoughts on hegemony, to direct us to a new way of thinking about the future of rural communities. In particular, she suggests that we need to think in a new way about sustainability as building the civil commons, and therefore becoming the basis for a revival of rural life - and that this can happen within a new form of globalization. Unfortunately, despite some genuinely valuable ideas, the book's overall impact is lessened by some significant shortcomings. This review will address both.

First, the valuable: placing rural economic development within an innovative philosophical framework challenges current thought in an exciting way. John McMurtry's 'life values' approach, proposed as an alternative to the 'money values' (ie. neo-liberal) approach that currently guides economic action, is truly inspiring. Sumner uses this theoretical underpinning to guide her vision for a whole new way of thinking about the problems facing rural communities, and their potential solution. In essence, the idea is that decisions that sustain life (ie. the lives of people in rural communities) trump decisions that generate the accumulation of money. Therefore, public policy should be guided by 'life values' rather than 'money values.' This view seeks to present a serious alternative to current, neo-liberal views of sustainability based on 'money values.' In addition, the theory suggests that current economic problems, including the so-called crisis of rural economies, have been exacerbated by the pursuit of 'money values,' while 'life values' have been ignored. This, Sumner argues, is a consequence of 'corporate globalization' - the particular form that globalization has taken - which itself is driven by the 'money values' system. Sumner's book provides a nice overview of this theory, in the context of rural economy, and argues persuasively that sustainability needs to be based on the 'life value' system rather than the 'money value' system if the condition of rural communities is to improve. Connecting this theory to the challenges of rural communities is the main contribution of this book.

The second significant strength of this book lies in placing the problems of rural communities within the context of globalization. In particular, though not reflected in the title, this book focuses on rural Canada, and usefully employs the heartland-hinterland model as the framework within which to understand the

relation of rural Canada to the global economy, and the consequent influences this relationship has on the direction of rural economic and community development. Chapter two, a comprehensive overview of the condition of rural communities, develops these themes very nicely.

However, as noted, there are numerous shortcomings to this volume as well, some minor, some rather significant. First, the book is not based on any primary data. While this would not, in and of itself, necessarily be a bad thing, Sumner's reliance on secondary evidence is weak. For example, on several occasions she refers to reports, such as UN's Human Development Report, but gives reference to newspaper articles. Furthermore, the lack of primary data leaves an innovative theoretical approach essentially 'untested' with the exception of some 'suggestions' for its application (see below).

Second, there are several gaps in logic in the book, again some minor and some more significant. Of the former variety, for example, Sumner states that "money values ... tolerate no boundaries" (p.31) - clearly a critique of corporate globalization. However, she does not argue with any logic that 'life values' ought to tolerate boundaries. There is a deep need for some expansion of the role of geography in her thinking about (varieties of) globalization and value systems. More generally, the book, and indeed the theoretical underpinning of its arguments, are based on the assumption that 'money values' and 'life values' are contradictory. However, no logical argument is presented that suggests that they must be, that 'money values' cannot, under any circumstances, be mutually reinforcing of 'life values.'

Third, Sumner's thinking on globalization is rather thin. There is rich debate about this concept, and she essentially reduces it to 'corporate globalization' (bad) and 'globalization from below' (good). The former has dominated, so the book tends to fall prey to the 'blame globalization' syndrome, a few very good comments on the nature of the threat of corporate globalization notwithstanding. However, this is not the same as blaming global capital, but Sumner seems to miss this point.

Fourth, Sumner's exposition of the potential of the alternative view is not well developed. Chapter five, in which she lays out her new vision of sustainability as "involving a set of structures and processes that build the civil commons," is really the heart of the book. Unfortunately, the two examples she uses to demonstrate her 'vision' for a sustainable future for rural communities can be summarized as follows: Keep schools and hospitals in rural places open; keep them publicly funded. To really capitalize on her new approach, one would like to see Sumner propose some 'innovative' ideas which build on and are reinforced by the 'life values' approach, and demonstrate the capacity of the civil commons to generate a positive future for rural communities.

Fifth, after all the ideas developed in the book, it is not clear that this is really a book about rural communities. On the one hand, Sumner provides a comprehensive review of the 'state of rural communities' as the evidence that 'corporate globalization' needs to be challenged. However, the links between sustainability, the civil commons, the 'life values' system, etc., are not specific to rural communities; the latter are merely the example she uses. Since the example is not used to successfully demonstrate how the concept can be used to make a better future for rural communities, as suggested above, the importance of the new approach in the context of the 'rural' is diminished.

Sixth, the book is filled with 'pie in the sky' comments that add little to the argument. This is well illustrated by the last sentence in the book: "Sustainability ... open[s] the way for the realization of being more fully human," whatever that might mean.

Finally, and unfortunately, the book is plagued with errors in footnoting and referencing. In some cases, the errors are minor, while in others they can only generously be described as the result of sloppy editing. These errors become a real distraction from the argument, and in some cases leave the reader no direction for supporting materials or original sources. In the worst instance, a phrase is used in one place as a direct quote (properly footnoted), while in another the same phrase is used without attribution. Clearly, this book needed one more good, thorough edit before final production.

In sum, while this book came with tremendous potential to make a significant contribution to the literature on rural communities, its shortcomings may leave the reader disappointed. Nevertheless, the development of McMurtry's 'life value' system as an alternative framework through which to understand rural sustainability is innovative, and deserves to be considered. For this alone, parts of the book should be read.