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ABSTRACT

This essay critiques the way in which state accountability schemes reify aggregated achievement test scores and help undercut the meanings that inform properly rural sorts of education. The contemporary phenomenon of accountability is examined, along with its relation to the threatened meanings of rural life, the identity of the rural victims of accountability, and some rural-friendly alternatives. The critique links locally manifested subversions (the depredations of rural ways of being and knowing that lead to misuse of the land and rural communities) to cosmopolitan (macro-level) phenomena, including the structure of U.S. agriculture, the declining historical importance of the nation-state as a political entity, and the revised institution of citizenship under the regimen of globalization. The concluding discussion considers the requirements of accountability measures more appropriate to the rural circumstance. Elements of such measures include stewardship, the attitude of mutual care (possibly promoted by multiplying the number of public schools and decreasing their size), and critical accounts delivered to the public by internal and external forums. Four caveats point out a more stewardly use of tests. Contains 69 references. (Author/SV)

Distortions of Rural Student Achievement in the Era of Globalization

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> A society giving up on its ideals invites political duplicity. Accordingly, the erosion of family farming from within means that it is always best to speak well of the family farm, even while fostering industrial agribusiness. (Marty Strange, *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision*, 1988, p. 52)

This essay proposes a critique of the way in which state accountability schemes reify aggregated achievement test scores and help destroy the meanings that inform properly rural sorts of education. Hypothesized changes in the institution of citizenship have a connection to the purposes and effects of educational accountability in the countryside, and to the declining fortunes of the democratic project of education generally. The critique presented here links locally manifested subversions to cosmopolitan (macro-level) phenomena, including the structure of US agriculture, the declining historical importance of the nation-state as a political entity, and the revised institution of citizenship under the regimen of globalization. The concluding discussion considers the requirements of accountability measures prospectively more appropriate to the rural circumstance.

Twenty five years after first moving to a farm, we returned last September to a life in the country. In the years away from actual rural living, a complex remorse has fueled my writing and research about rural schools and communities. In a sense, the writing and research were imaginative efforts to treat a loss that remains painful. The generative tension is historical and political, however, as well as personal: distortions of achievement indeed.

Though life in the country has changed for the worse in many ways in 25 years, and in the 25 years prior to that (Gruchow, 1995), the needed rural devotions (to be explained subsequently) are prevalently but by no means entirely neglected. Prevalent neglect is, however, compounded by greed. Greed perhaps does the greatest mischief, because, whereas thoughtfulness may redeem neglect, greed inevitably subverts thoughtfulness. The result of this combination working in rural lives and communities is an injustice so ordinary it can barely be told in public (cf. Williams, 1989).

The place of schooling in undoing the work of neglect and greed in the countryside is the underlying subject of the following discussion, which shows these vices at work under the now popular rubric of accountability. Accountability is neither unremarkable nor inevitable, and we *can* talk about schooling in quite different ways, ways that are important to the capacity of rural communities to thrive. Before we are likely to move on to real achievements, however, we will need to clear up the distortions.

Achievement, Democracy, and Accountability

So far as *schooling* goes, concern for *academic* achievement had better be a central concern of teachers, students, administrators, and communities. Failing to honor plain-old academic learning, schools may as well close their doors. That perception, of course, is the entry point for many who believe that public schooling has run its course in the US, and that is one juncture at which I usually part company with my more conservative friends. Public schools do something else besides cultivate achievement; they constitute citizens *as* the public (Green, 1997; Hobsbawm, 1989). Without democratic purpose, even if funded by the State[1], we have de facto private schooling. The devolution to this end-game is well underway in the US, but still incomplete. That is cause for some hope, and to hope is our duty (Berry, 1996/1978), especially if we be educators.

Education and localism. Despite the critical need to learn academic lessons, academics are still the easy learning in life. Our schooling wastes years of long days in the attempt to teach

[1]Capital "S" for the abstract State, lower-case "s" for the various states.

a little reading, writing, and arithmetic. As a result, some observers demand longer days and years, and express consternation that US schools are not yet in session year round. But education, as contrasted to schooling, goes deeper and is simultaneously a more local, a more idiosyncratic, and (therefore) far more transcendent an experience, both the rarest and commonest. Humans learn *some*where, and best, from those that connect best to them. This best of all learning is mysterious and priceless, a gift that must also be actively taken, but which schooling as an enterprise cannot hope to purchase (see Bruner, 1996, for similar thoughts).

Good teachers know this well, or sense it, even though schooling itself is far too ordinary, unimaginative, and objective an institution to serve their purposes. True education is a bit miraculous wherever it transpires, but schooling cannot in any case achieve its best effects alone. Wrongly construed, schooling gets in the way of true education; and this it does increasingly more often than decency should permit. This needs to change and the change will be enormously difficult (Bruner, 1996). Rural schools, however, are good places to start (Rural Challenge, 1996; Webb, Shumway, & Shute, 1994)[2] for reasons given next.

The knowledge of most worth. Schools have enough trouble cultivating basic skills, and so we imagine that less obvious forms of learning, and also more practical ones, are largely irrelevant (e.g., Berry, 1970; Brown, 1991; Bruner, 1996). We leave them to churches, universities, or the school of hard knocks, which is not necessarily the school of last resort for many of us. I cannot say what I mean very well, but Wendell Berry has said it well repeatedly.

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[2]Good places to start because the rural embodies connections that are nearly impossible to see or make in the cosmopolitan world, as the novelist E. M. Forster knew so well, so long ago (Forster, 1910). The connections, as will be shown, are now under extreme threat, as Forster suspected they would be.

Here's a short version, from early in his recorded struggle[3]:

> The essential cultural discrimination is ... between the superfluous and the indispensable.... Granting the frailty, and no doubt the impermanence, of modern technology as a human contrivance, one who can keep a fire in a stove or on a hearth is not only more durable, but wiser, closer to the meaning of fire, than one who can only work a thermostat. (1970, p. 76)

Cultural practices that run (this) deep and wide are mostly beyond the grasp of any schooling, no matter how elite. Particular sites of schooling--call them "schools"--need varied communities and cultures if they are to undertake education, but some of us who study rural education have argued that the State conducts rural schooling on purpose to disabuse locals of their local ways of being and knowing (e.g., Berry, 1990; DeYoung, 1995; DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Howley, 1997b; Theobald, 1997). This is the necessary result of the prevailing deficiency model, which tries to grasp the structure of risk outside the suburbs (e.g., Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). Schooling, in short, can perfectly well subvert as enable the essential discriminations.

A rural critique of accountability will reveal something about how schooling, unwittingly from the perspective of local actors, undoes properly rural education. From a rural perspective, accountability turns out to be a peculiar (i.e., arguably enslaving) institution indeed. The discussion that follows considers the contemporary phenomenon of accountability, its relation to the threatened meanings of rural life, the identity of the rural victims of accountability, and some rural-friendly alternatives to the practice of phony accountability.

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[3]In a book, not at all incidentally, about the common losses that the great injustice of slave-holding brought, in its accomplishment and it aftermath, to US society. Slavery, we often forget, is a rural story, as is the genocide against Indians and the disposition of Mexican Americans.

What is Accountability?

Whatever else it may be, *accountability* is a word used frequently in these latter days by legislatures and State Education Agencies (SEAs). Representatives of SEAs speak about the *need* for accountability as if their speech and legislative acts automatically created a generalized and abstract public exactly and conveniently coincident with the state borders. The identity of this public is unclear and is never described; in some cases members of the public become anonymous customers (e.g., Voinovich, 1998, quoted subsequently). The only commonality of such a public would be economic. But, in fact, the State appeals to a vague construct of "the public" simply to warrant its impositions (Hobsbawm, 1989).

By implication, accountability renders an account to the public thus misconstrued. The implied account, though, is not at all the account being delivered. Rather, the accounting is a complicated vengeance being visited by SEAs at the behest of legislatures (those who actually mandate the account) on those bedeviling them: school districts. In state after state, rural superintendents--irked by the tangle of contradictory expectations that change the ink on their budgets from black to red, and which plague effective rural leadership with regulations intended for big-city districts--have sued the state for violating applicable language in state constitutions that seem to promise equitable and adequate funding on statewide bases. Often, after many years, after predictable reversals precipitating unexpected twists, the suits have been pressed successfully (see DeRolph v. Ohio, 78 Ohio 3d, 193, for the list of all such suits, most begun as rural actions).

Usually, legislators are commanded to devise more equitable and adequate ways to fund

schools. Rural and remote districts often receive special consideration (Verstegen, 1991). The additional tax burden created by related school finance measures often provokes business interests to insist that the legislature impose accountability measures (e.g., Ceperley, 1997) in the vain hope that the funds will be tied to an improved product--higher achievement test scores--in the statewide industry. The slips 'twixt lip and cup, however, are legion when the intention is that money leverage test scores (e.g., Hanushek, 1989). The sad fact is, however, that the schooling industry, as a public enterprise, will confound the most clever capitalist, because education properly concerns not private accumulation but cultural elaboration. *Whose* culture is being elaborated is always, and naturally, an issue in schooling (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Kliebard, 1986), and any schooling that values private accumulation over cultural elaboration will not long remain a public enterprise; the industry will inevitably have to abandon the losers in this game.[4]

Accountability is politically structured in this way at present, but 25 years ago, educators adopted the term in their attempt to establish effective, or "educationally accountable," programs (e.g., Browder, Atkins, & Kaya, 1973). Interestingly, the central role in accountability for Browder and colleagues is that of *steward*[5]. According to Browder and colleagues, "stewards"

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[4]This abandonment, a strategy to minimize responsibility for at-risk customers, is known as "creaming" in the insurance industry. In urban areas, the parents of at-risk students can be transformed into at-risk customers with a few vouchers. In rural areas, though, competition within most industries (e.g., telecommunications) is less likely, and the schooling industry will probably be stuck with the full gamut of customers it already has.

[5]This concept is beginning to make its way back into the professional discourses on rural schooling and school administration (e.g., Howley & Harmon, 1997, Sergiovanni, 1996; cf. Theobald, 1997, on "intradependence"). Stewardship has special salience for rural education; its applicability elsewhere is distinctly metaphorical (e.g., Sergiovanni, 1995; cf. Sergiovanni, 1993).

care for an enterprise on behalf of "reviewers," to whom they are accountable, and in which role they prepare and deliver an actual account (a substantiated story). The concluding chapter in their cited work describes the fashioning and delivery of the account to reviewers.

This version of accountability differs in interesting ways from the current one. In the contemporary accountancy, no account is composed and no review actually rendered (according to Dorn, 1998, the release of test data hardly constitutes an account). Indeed, the SEA confounds the roles of reviewer and steward. The constitutionally responsible steward of the state, the SEA, gathers the data, publishes, reviews it, and metes out the variety of rewards and punishments that inhere in the various states' systems of accountability. What's going on here?

First, today's accountability movement has got stewardship all wrong, quite possibly because any notion of the common good is being rather systematically overthrown in the US, as one might say, by neglect and greed (e.g., Bellah, 1992; Kemmis, 1991; Matthews, 1995). In fact, the public is *not* the ultimate audience for test scores aggregated to the school and district level, because, as Dorn (1998) insists, so little effort is made to prepare the public to interpret or act upon data so arcane that even practicing school administrators need inservice (e.g., Rudner, Conoley, & Plake, 1989) to interpret them validly and act responsibly under their influence. Any authentic public would require a far more elaborate preparation, a much richer account, and a review protocol more widely and openly engaged.

Second, the reason the public is cut out of the dialog is that the accountability being practiced is one tacitly negotiated between the ultimate constitutional authority (the legislature) and *its* steward, the SEA. *This* accounting, the operant accountability, is very evidently an

exercise in elite democracy (Lasch, 1995; cf. Snauwaert, 1995), a closed-door negotiation among ranking bureaucrats and politicians. It has little to do with the citizenry at large. The role of the citizenry is to give children over to schooling, traipse to the polls, and enjoy vigorous consumption (in the role of customer).

Political hyperbole devises and shelters accountability from adequate scrutiny. In Ohio, the state most recently judged to have an unconstitutional funding scheme, the governor, in a 1998 address before the legislature *"guaranteed"* [emphasis in the live delivery] that the combination of new and inadequate funding with new accountability measures (school-by-school test-score report card) would induce the greatest school improvement "in history":

> I'd like to make a prediction. When we add this yardstick to the fiscal and academic accountability measures the General Assembly passed last year, I guarantee you that we will see the most significant improvement in classroom performance in Ohio history. That's because, at long last, our customers--the parents and taxpayers--will know what they're getting for their investment. (Voinovich, 1998, source document unpaginated)

When the stakes are this large, and when such highly placed people are induced to deliver such crafty nonsense[6], something terrible is surely afoot. Rural superintendents, by the way, organized this litigation. The Ohio executive and the legislature cannot be very pleased with them.

Accountability as practiced so widely today frustrates public engagement and mistakes the proper role of schooling in education (cf. Bruner, 1996). This critique next takes up the way in which this circumstance articulates with what I will call "the crisis of meaning in rural life."

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[6]Customers who received a prediction instead of a guarantee might well be induced to shop elsewhere than at the counter of public education. Perhaps this is the plan.

Stewardship and the Crisis of Meaning in Rural Life

From Thomas Jefferson through Theodore Roosevelt, influential Americans have struggled to ensure that the meanings of rural life would continue to motivate the nation (Theobald, 1991). In fact, the self-conscious reading world has generally celebrated rural life, and, to my mind, novelists have understood rural life best.[7] In considering the connections of rural peoples to wildness, to life on the land, and to community, they have grounded ethics and the nature of the good life in lived experience in ways that defy most other cultural workers (but see DeYoung, 1995, and Nachtigal & Haas, in press, for significant exceptions).

Stewardship of the land. What I am calling "rural meanings" are not simple, universally the same, or unquestionable; they comprehend anguish, tragedy, vanity, neglect, greed--all the enduring human troubles. Neither am I pointing to a rural romance, but to a complex and long-standing engagement with an ideal: stewardship *of* the land, *on* the land. *This* version of stewardship is simultaneously practical, ethical, and aesthetic; it is as unlike the version now practiced under the banner of educational accountability as two constructs bearing the same name could possibly be. One strives for wide social responsibility; the other seems, at least on the terms of this discussion, to evade even a narrow and specialized responsibility[8].

Since some readers may be baffled by the notion of "rural meanings," I will briefly sketch

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[7]In the 20th century, from Willa Cather (*O Pioneers!,* 1913), to Ken Kesey (*Sometimes a Great Notion,* 1964), to E. Annie Proulx (*Postcards*, 1994) US novelists have understood and shown the complexities of rural lives and rural cultures.

[8]The hypothetical existence of such evasion accounts for the shock value of the 1990 Kentucky court decision that declared the *entire state schooling apparatus* unconstitutional. The steward, in effect, was fired. The decision is a landmark in the history of US schooling.

the ideal. Stewardship of the land rests on attitudes and practices of care that maintain local holdings in excellent condition for the long term--and for the good of the community, a local public (Howley & Harmon, 1997; Orr, 1993; Strange, 1988; Theobald, 1997; Vitek & Jackson, 1996). The attitudes are wholistic, the practices labor intensive--they not only need people to implement them, these deeply educative practices *make* people of a certain stamp. In the ideal, seldom achieved, land and community are mutually honored as a legacy for coming generations. US individualism, as Theobald (1997) argues, systematically blocks a closer approximation of the ideal, and the crisis of rural meaning is acute.

This brief sketch must sound deceptively simple to anyone unfamiliar with the way land and rural community have been abused in North America. But the sources of the abuses will be familiar to many people: specialization, mechanization, and the focus on short-term profit. The legacy of ill-use extends well back into the 19th century (e.g., Strange, 1988; Theobald, 1995). Again, the ideal under consideration is *not* an idyllic past.[9] But the lack of care has become most painfully evident this century in the dramatic reduction of the numbers of people involved in farming (Castle, 1995, is a recent treatment). Just as neglect prevails in large schools, so it prevails on large farms. And farms continue to get larger, so large that they cannot be recognized as farms, but must be acknowledged for the factories they are: tens and even hundreds of

[9]The point is not to reconstruct a sanitized and sentimentalized model of the past, of the 18th or the 17th century, but to elaborate meanings now threatened--to reclaim a beleaguered sensibility that embodies a vision of the good life relevant to care of land, community, and of rising generations. The work is an essential educational improvement project: unlike postmodernism it is concerned with a form of progress. Such progress, though, is quite inconsistent with the terms of metropolitan (cosmopolitan) commitments, to be examined shortly.

thousands of hogs; millions and millions of chickens. Dairy farming, already an endangered family enterprise, will reportedly be the next victim of scale-up (Crowell, 1998b).

Metropolitan meanings. Rural meanings also differ radically from the meanings of the metropolitan experience, which is simultaneously urbane (refined) and cosmopolite (global). All great cities, on this view, are each imperfect reflections of the ideal world-city, and this is why world-class standards are so important to cities (and so inappropriate for rural schools and communities). Great cities, however, cannot rightfully claim their full status without achieving world-class standards. When the rich abandon a city to the poor, as has happened in some US cities, the cosmopolitan promise is broken and the city becomes a world-class outcast. But when the poor abandon the countryside to the ownership of the rich, the cosmopolitan promise is fulfilled.[10]

The ill-effects on rural communities of large-scale corporate agribusiness--in the roles of owners, researchers, sellers of technology, and policy makers--have been well known for at least 50 years (e.g., Strange, 1988; Vitek & Jackson, 1996); degradation of the land and the sacrifice of community has nonetheless been justified to the citizenry of the richest nation in the world as an acceptable sacrifice to secure the cheapest and most varied food supply in the world. The bargain cannot remain long in force; some predict that the land itself will be a conducting a tough renegotiation in the mid-term future (e.g., Orr, 1993).

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[10]Among cosmopolites, episodes such as the farm crisis of the 1980s figure as economic and psychological, not cultural, stories. The US, so runs the cosmopolitan argument, needs world-class farms founded as industrial agriculture. In managing these operations, the world-class stewards' highest aspiration is to appease the EPA, no mean feat when you are raising 25,000 hogs simultaneously (e.g., Crowell, 1998a).

So what about the *metropolitan* meanings that have enabled these changes? Metropolitan meanings, according to Williams (1989), spring from the radical rootlessness (otherwise known as "anomie") of early 20th century modernism. In his account, the city constitutes an environment--bright but impenetrable, strange but crowded, anonymous but massed, and always restless and risky--that forms an historical process that continues to this day actively to overthrow the particularities of place. Williams counsels,

> If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again. (1989, p. 35)

In the metropolis, even those with shelter are homeless. One of the giant pioneering cosmopolites once quipped, "there's no there there." She might as easily have directed the remark to the placelessness of the modern world-city as to an acquaintance wanting presence or character. In any case, perhaps the association of homelessness and lack of character (in individuals) is inherent in the famous one-liner. My observation, fans of city life should note, is not intended to suggest that cities lack character or presence. The great world-cities do each have a renowned image, an image that the powerful in them are dedicated to maintain, often at the cost of authenticity and the common good (von Hoffman, 1994).[11]

The rural experience, including the variety of meanings centered on stewardship of land and community, is one of the neglected works that Williams had very much in view. But today the real stuff of which these alternatives might still be fashioned disappears year by year in the

[11]Similar pretenses are used to market country living, of course (e.g., Morris, 1995). The commodification of rural living is part of the attack on rural meanings.

actual experience of rural people. Working farms and, equally important, the economic infrastructure that served them have shrunk from those rural places where the land does not welcome behemoth tractors and fields the size of townships.

Along the road where I am now living, all the families kept dairy cows and chickens and all the neighbors sold milk and cream and eggs through the end of the 1950s. The little town of Albany reportedly hosted a dairy, and nearby Athens had three, the last of these apparently closing about 1980. And throughout the region old gambrel-roofed barns with crumbling milkhouses, or solitary concrete silos whose barns have vanished altogether, bear witness to the withdrawal of the local dairies. The final dairy farm nearby stopped milking in the early 90s, and neither milk cows nor chickens can any longer be seen along the ridge.

Such local collapses have educational as well as economic ill-effects. Care of a flock of hens was light-work for children on small farms throughout America (Strange, 1988). Farming taught (and still does for a small minority) young people the meaning of dedication and responsibility (Esterman & Hedlund, 1995), lessons that schooling is usually powerless to deliver today. The suggestion that contemporary schools need to assume responsibilities once believed to adhere to the family truly misses the point by failing to recognize the political-economic context that, as Jürgen Habermas has repeatedly noted, *has drained meaning from the life-world*[12] (cf. Young, 1990, p. 4).

Fewer rural people, fewer rural families, and fewer rural communities actually experience the land in which they live, much less have the opportunity to exercise the stewardship formerly

[12]Though widespread, the crisis is most notable in rural areas because of the clearance of rural people from the land during the 20th century.

incumbent on rural peoples. Instead, corporations increasingly govern the land, sometimes directly as owners, but more often *indirectly* as bankers, brokers, sellers, manufacturers, researchers, and policy makers. The net result is not only displacement of agrarian communities and people, but withdrawal of the attention people once paid to the land. Readers of this journal should hardly need to be reminded that the record of corporate stewardship is especially poor throughout rural America (e.g., Berry, 1978; Davidson, 1990; Gaventa, 1980; Gruchow, 1990; Strange, 1988; Whisnant, 1980).

The depredations of rural ways of being and knowing, which are inherent in the misuse of the land and of communities on the land, are party to a larger environmental disaster. The disaster can be traced in part to the triumph of industrial efficiency that has taken possession of the land and overthrown the force of the meanings that still adhere to the land in literate memory and in the threatened life practices of many millions of rural holdouts.

I turn the discussion next to the role of globalization as an influence on the rural circumstance. Globalization turns out to have a connection to the way in which the State implements accountability and legitimizes it among its (so-called) customers.

Citizens of the new world order. Eric Hobsbawm (1989) and Saskia Sassen (1996) are prominent among those arguing that globalization is a real phenomenon that is already remaking the role of the nation-state. The changes must have a profound effect on national systems of education that were created to serve the needs of the nation-state (Green, 1997). Hobsbawm (1989) goes further than Green: in his view, mass schooling actually created the nation-state. Surely, one might conclude, mass schooling will be retooled to serve the needs of the future. The

key question, seldom addressed, is *whose* are the "needs of the future"? (Note that this question is another version of "Whose culture does schooling elaborate?")

Sassen, however, makes a startling claim in this regard: globalization has constituted an entirely new and influential cadre of world-citizens. These new world-citizens are not individuals, but *firms*, especially transnational corporations and the supporting trade institutions and legal structures that help realize the firms' common worldwide interests (Sassen, 1996). These "citizens," she says, are quite capable of holding nation-states accountable to *their* interests; that is, their power is more efficient and effective than that of the old-style citizen-individual. When Archer-Daniels-Midlands, the huge agribusiness concern, tells the highly schooled PBS-watching populace that it is "supermarket to the world," it preaches to the choir, and the choir will not interrogate the dogma. As noted previously, the ill care that these corporate world-citizens, nearly everywhere in the world, exercise over rural regions is pretty much a matter of record--export agriculture is not an exercise in stewardship, but an exercise in dispossession (see Hammer, in press, for an educationally relevant discussion).

Unfortunately, the education profession in general is ill-equipped to grasp the implications. The SEA in particular is likely, via its location in the executive, to be held captive by the governor to the locally neglectful purposes of globalization. And, indeed, state-level rhetoric about international competitiveness in the 21st century is now just as shrill as it has been for a decade at the national level.

Despite their problematic application in rural areas (and rural schools), world-class standards are particularly germane to national and state notions of accountability. They lend

rhetorical support to the agenda of globalization sponsored by the emerging international economic regime and disseminated to national populations by the various national governments separately and in concert.

Globalization and accountability. The globalization hypothesis also helps explain why, in recent decades, the previously important *democratic purposes of schooling* in the US have been under such continual assault and have garnered so very little official endorsement. Widespread doubt now exists about the sustainability of public schooling. Putting the situation most dramatically, if the historical role of the individual citizen is in decline, so is the role of mass education. Sassen suspects that globalization may not be the undoubted good that national political leaders (and educational leaders in the various states) believe it to be. She asks,

> Do we want the global capital market to exercise this discipline over our governments: and to do so at all costs--jobs, wages, safety, health--and without a public debate? While it is true that these markets are the result of multiple decisions by multiple investors and thus have a certain democratic aura, all the "voters" have to own capital, and small investors typically operate through institutional investors, such as pension funds, banks, and hedge funds. This leaves the vast majority of a country's citizens without any say. (1996, p. 51)

These observations do *not* mean that mass schooling is likely to disappear, only that elite democracy (cf. Lasch, 1995) will not see the need to waste resources on a messy sort of schooling for a messy sort of democracy.

The nature of the retooling needed for globalization is no mystery, either; it is already upon us, and has been for some time. With citizenship and ideals of local democracy now (at least hypothetically) obsolescent on the terms of national and international power, and with firms hypothetically assuming a clear role in world governance, the individual's *highest* official duty in

the future would, hypothetically, be to serve as a job-holder and consumer (customer). This is exactly how schooling is now promoted to the customers of government, its former citizens (Green, 1997; Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995; Marciano, 1997). School-to-Work programming is in step with this agenda in most places, though there are counter-examples to help rural educators incorporate distinctly local purposes (e.g., Hammer, in press; Miller & Hahn, in press; Howley, 1996). In any case, schooling for job-holding can be delivered much more cheaply and quickly than schooling that aims, on various and contradictory bases, to *educate*. Of course, an interesting residual question is the nature of the institution that will provide child care. When the universal patriotic duty is to get and hold a good job, job-holders, not their parents, oversee the children. Teachers do this now, already. The future may see a different arrangement.

Throughout this epoch, the State's most useful public motivator has been fear. The first fear is job loss in a more competitive world. The economy is booming only temporarily. The second fear is xenophobia, and increased patriotism is one of the awful ironies in the new global regimen. Ample scope exists for struggling global powers (firms, nation-states, and transnational alliances) to manipulate racism and xenophobia in the interest of competitive advantage since the dramatically increased ability of capital to cross national borders means that labor, too, must cross borders, and this form of border-crossing is more troubled. The individual's duty as job-holder helps defend the unequal global distribution of resources on which American comfortableness rests, and the two fears reinforce one another. US society, with so many immigrants part of its history, is especially conflicted about immigration.

Those who suffer under the new regime, however, do not all live in the developing

nations of the southern hemisphere. Many live in rural areas of the developed world, including the US. The citizens of the new world order are not likely to render an account of this phenomenon to the old-style US citizens. The outlines of such an account, however, appear next in this essay.

Accounting for the Rural Circumstance

Today, and without elaborate phoniness, the single word "accountability" sweeps up and obscures the identities of the beneficiaries and victims of its deployment in public policy. The beneficiaries have been considered; they include powerful institutions of the State (and of the various states); big business, in particular the complex of agribusiness enterprises; and, most theoretically interesting of all, the emerging regime of international competition (see Sassen, 1996, for the theory). The discussion that follows examines possible effects on rural work, popular self-rule in rural regions, and individual rural students.

Rural work. The change in rural work is profound since just 1960, when a substantial majority of US counties were still economically dependent on agriculture (Castle, 1995). *Most of the work that remains in rural America is no longer authentically rural work*, and the predicted new jobs in one very rural state are prison guards, home health aides, and fast food laborers (Howley, 1996). Home health aides and fast food laborers will likely not see fulltime assignments or benefits. No wonder so many rural educators, already convinced that schooling is about job-holding, cheerfully encourage promising rural students to move to the metropolis. Our

profession has for a long time tended to regard those who remain in rural areas as losers.[13]

The sweep of Americans off the land is nonetheless incomplete. Perhaps under the sway of globalization, rural schools would be better positioned than ever to facilitate a complete sweep. When observers, including some rural supporters, aver that "rural no longer *means* agriculture," they bungle the insight. Supporters of rural lifeways mean to say, or should be saying, that although rural meanings are now under extreme threat even in the countryside (cf. Young, 1990, on Habermas) they *continue* weakly to influence the rural experience. The bungled statement, in the way of ostensibly neutral science, conveniently avoids the necessary judgment that this essay, among other accounts, attempts. On the terms of such accounts, the State's conception of accountability compounds rather than mitigates the threat.

Why should rural educators and scholars be concerned about this prospective loss? (In my experience rural community members are already and often concerned about the loss.) Properly rural work was a feature of stewardship, and its performance as stewardship (the care of animals, crops, land, and communities) bound people together. And together they were accountable, as Christian stewards, to God and God's high purposes. Theoretically, Christians--and religious believers of all stripes--are still accountable to God; but they have been tempted to forsake their duty to serve as stewards of the world. Rural schooling that capitulates to this loss reconstitutes itself as deeply miseducative for the rural circumstance. The education it offers is

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[13]Proper evidence to this effect comes mostly from recent qualitative research (consult the reference list). My colleagues and I also encounter the attitude often (by no means always) in our conversations with rural teachers and administrators. The strength of the prejudice may vary substantially by region; Appalachia, the site of my personal experience on the land, exhibits the self-hatred common in colonial regions (cf. Gaventa, 1980) around the globe.

an education for an elsewhere.[14]

Popular self-rule in rural regions. Not all rural schools have capitulated in this way, by any means. In general, it seems that where stewardship of community and land remain at least as aspirations, resistance to the forces that threaten rural meanings is stronger and community engagement deeper than elsewhere (e.g., Howley & Harmon, 1997). However, where the SEA has established a tradition of micro-management in districts, or in states where there are just a few districts, the idea that rural commitments need to be honored is much less likely even to be understood. And in most states, even those with a stronger agrarian past, rural populations constitute a dwindling minority.

In many rural states, particularly in the Northeast, the Midwest, and portions of the West, comparatively large numbers of school districts still exist. These include the states in which an agrarian tradition is either practiced or clearly remembered. In others, particularly in the Southeast, the state has successfully collapsed districts into large units, usually coincident with county lines. The process and power that underlie these consolidations establish the SEA as a force more powerful in these states than elsewhere, and in these states, rural commitments are probably least likely to exert influence within the SEA.

Nonetheless, the rural circumstance is still clearly inscribed in the national system of schooling. Not only the school year, but the organization of the national system, bear the stamp of agrarian origins: over half of all districts are located in rural areas or small towns. District

[14]My colleagues and I have argued that this education for an elsewhere, for patriotic job-holding and elite democracy, is equally miseducative (Howley et al., 1995). The lesson is that one may as well attempt good work in ones native place. Without a native place, Wendell Berry argues, good work comes to hand seldom and with much greater difficulty (e.g., Berry, 1984).

consolidation may become more of an issue as accountability systems increasingly formalize the international context--globalization--as the (world-class) standard for the design and conduct of schooling. Indeed, as the public purpose of cultivating old-style citizens erodes, and as new forms of privatization appear, a renewed logic of efficiency could hypothetically motivate district reorganizations and school closures in states where a measure of educational self-rule still, and for the time being, prevails.

Finally, the promulgation of test scores *under frameworks that continue to alienate local publics* tends both to narrow and to curtail public consideration of the sustainability of local schools (Dorn, 1998; Howley & Harmon, 1997; Strike, 1997). Some observers even believe that the imposition of standards will subvert the liberty of old-style citizens (e.g., Strike, 1997). Ultimately, and ironically, accountability schemes hold *rural students* accountable to the vision of a new world in which the significance of the rural world has all but disappeared (sentimentalized distortions of these meanings will persist as a *commodity*). This sort of accountability thus sponsors the continuing and further distortion of rural student achievement.

Rural students. The things that every child should know and be able to do under the new world order (the patriotic duty to hold a job and consume without restraint) have nothing at all to do with a land ethic; the tacit commitments of the two systems are logically incommensurate. So far as these statistical accountability systems are concerned, students are not actually people with significant lives outside classrooms. Their official worth rests on their functionality in role.[15]

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[15]And the official worth of teachers, schools, districts, and the whole national system of schooling ultimately rests in their functionality in "producing" student achievement as a national defense mission. This is thinking globally indeed. Student achievement *is* very important; but rural schools continue to be more than production sites for defense of the nation. Wendell Berry

Students are harshly sentimentalized as the nation's most precious resource, which, in the language of duplicity means that their principal duty is to serve as accumulators of private capital (with knowledge itself oddly refashioned as a kind of private accumulation).

Now, the measure of this worth, taken to reflect their potential value as producers and consumers in the globalized marketplace, is misrepresented as a test score (cf. Gould, 1981). Although the particular sort of testing that roused Gould's ire was intelligence testing, any standardized test (whether norm- or criterion-referenced) that is universally administered will be misunderstood to represent human worth, construed in accord with prevailing values. Most objectively, and most narrowly, all these tests gauge *adaptability to the prevailing regimen of schooling* (e.g., Pendarvis, Howley, & Howley, 1990), at different levels of aggregation--levels that vary by content (i.e., which subjects are aggregated together) and unit (i.e., individual student, reading group, classroom, grade cohort, school, district, state, region, nation). Technical and cultural issues relevant to the distortions of aggregation are widely ignored, and this ignorance is greater for achievement testing than for IQ testing.[16]

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argues (1990) that in so far as they are such sites, just so far do they also serve to undermine local lives, local economies, and local communities.

[16]The difficulty, seldom appreciated, concerns precisely the same issues of race and class differences in test scores that figure in the IQ debate (Pendarvis et al., 1990). Educational researchers, however, seldom seem to appreciate the fact that the questionable group differences that they so roundly condemn in IQ studies by Lewis Terman, Cyril Burt, Richard Hernstein, and Arthur Jensen are *also* at work in achievement test scores grouped by classroom, school, district, and state because schooling in the US is so thoroughly segregated by race and class. In fact, achievement test differences by ethnicity and class are as widespread and as durable as IQ differences. Educationists often (and understandably) seem to regard the mention of this fact as terribly bad manners. Nonetheless, the observed group differences are, it has been eloquently argued (e.g., Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984) logically attributable to history (e.g., slavery), political-economic structure (e.g., processes of accumulation), and cultural practices (e.g., what

Now, adaptableness to the regimen of schooling, given the forgoing discussion, is a virtue more inherently debatable than most of us any longer recognize. In previous generations, humans less adaptable to schooling apparently succeeded well enough in life. Today, educational credentials command a respect that, though obviously undeserved, nonetheless increases chances for success in life (e.g., Collins, 1979). Christopher Jencks and colleagues' research suggests that schooling has become a principal way in which the advantaged pass on their advantages to their children (Jencks et al., 1979).

The stranglehold that schooling thus puts on work is defended with the speculation that only mental workers will survive very far into the twenty-first century. However, if the twenty-first century builds on the catastrophic legacies of the twentieth, rural people should rather all be holding their breaths than breathing easily. Whatever history may hold in store for the US, rural students will surely need an education, in school and out, that prepares them and their communities to discriminate between the essential and the superfluous. Rural schools that heed the agenda that current state accountability systems impose (an imposition difficult but not impossible to evade) will help deny rural students the meanings that would otherwise enable them to make the essential cultural discriminations. There is every reason, of course, for the State to frustrate this work, and it is succeeding.

The fate of the beneficiaries. The identity of the beneficiaries--State institutions, big business, and the regime of globalization--is clear on the terms of this analysis. Far less clear is their longer term fate. A global regime operating transnationally to expand production,

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the de facto national curriculum espouses).

consumption, and inequitable private accumulation without limit under neo-liberal economic theory poses severe threats to social justice, to the environment, and, always, to its own stability. Geopolitics is a dangerous international game, and the declining historical importance of the contemporary nation-state probably compounds the danger (Hobsbawm, 1989).

One implication of Sassen's work is that the processes of globalization may strengthen human rights but sever them from political rights. Human rights would secure peoples' prerogatives of production and consumption, in line with expectations for the customers of government, and with the operant ideal of student and adult. The change in the structure of rights would be consistent with Sassen's hypothesis about the new world citizens (cf. Sassen, 1996, on the elaboration of human rights as a global issue). But as disasters engineered by an elite world order descend upon the globe in the coming decades, national populations may not so contentedly accept the passing of their civil rights (i.e., their rights as citizens in the world).

Pro-Rural Alternatives to Phony Accountability

Accountability measures are not simply anti-rural, they embody the duplicity of the epigraph: "the erosion of local schooling from within means that it is best to speak well of local control even while fostering globalization." But we should remember also that the political duplicity of accountability schemes is not sustainable in the long run. The lack of public engagement will persist, and perhaps intensify, even under privatization schemes.

Pro-rural accountability schemes would need be both pro-local and more democratic than they now are. The difference between rural and other localities, however, is related to scale.

Many rural schools actually continue to serve localities, some with in-tact communities still, while many suburban and urban manifestations of schooling serve a generalized clientele under a generic ideal of professionalism[17].

DeYoung (1990, 1995) has argued that in rural places schools retain features of their pre-modern origins. Both rural lifeways and rural schools remain different, perhaps, because they have, so far, been insufficiently disciplined by the profession or colonized by the cosmopolitan culture. Time is running out, but for now, the terms of a pro-local accountability scheme consistent with rural commitments can still be imagined.

Stewardship. Stewardship, as implied previously, constitutes a devotion relevant to both accountability and the rural circumstance (which entails the need for a land ethic). I would argue, however, that this stewardship includes the entire community's care of its children and youth, so that the covenant at issue is the one that binds generations together. It bears little resemblance to the one under which authority is delegated from an ultimate (i.e., governmental) to a proximate (i.e., professional) power. Everyone *in the community*[18] has a part in this stewardship, whether or not they have children in school, whether or not they know anything

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[17]Too many schools in rural locales also intend to serve a generic population or generic professional ideal (e.g., world-class standards, that which all students should know, the desiderata of learned societies, and so forth). When this happens the siting of a school in rural place appears as something of an accident. It may as well have been sited elsewhere, and, in a sense it *is* sited elsewhere.

[18]Of course teachers need to live near, if not actually *in,* the community that the school serves. Rural schools generally meet this condition, whereas metropolitan schools commonly do not. This means, of course, that not all individuals who prepare to teach can be expected to teach in any school anywhere. And this proviso creates a predisposition toward locals that may offend urban educators; however, this predisposition is already in place in most rural schools.

about test scores, and whether or not they will. Such stewardship, like residence on earth, is part of the human condition, inherent in living and breathing as a human being, whether one owns the role or not. US society disowns this form of stewardship, perhaps more famously, than it disowns stewardship of the earth (e.g., Kozol, 1991).

The reason that stewardship of this sort founders, however, gives clues about how it might actually be institutionalized more widely. Schooling has been vigorously pried from communities during the 20th century, just as, throughout US society, individuals have been pried from communities. Worse, professional school administration, and professionalism in general, has contributed to the decay of small towns and, to the related demise of stewardship of the land. But, happily, stewardship is also the means to end the cycle of collapse, and it comprises an attitude of mutual care more than anything.

The attitude of care. Care could enable us to see several things. First, we might see that there are too few schools, not only in rural locales, but nearly everywhere. I have elsewhere made some practical suggestions about maximum school sizes relative to community affluence (Howley, 1997a), and the logical extension of the rules of thumb might be to triple or quadruple the number of public schools (and districts) in the nation. This is an important, a key, long term project for American education (Meier, 1998; Sarason, 1998).

Second, propagating small schools will not be enough, because the point of stewardship is community; that is, real, organic communities and not primarily the analogical "learning communities" for which thoughtful educators understandably strive. It is important to remember that the idea of those analogical communities has force and meaning only because we imagine we

still understand what organic communities are like. We educators want our learning communities to be somehow authentic, though tend to forget that organic communities enact tragedy as well as comedy. In fact, I believe that the difficult tensions of real communities are the guarantors of authenticity in "learning communities." Whether one is even possible without the other is an interesting question.

Though smaller schools are believed to give better scope for educators to establish "learning communities" (cf. Meier, 1995, 1998), creating more schools is unlikely in its own right to bring into being a larger number of organic communities in the real world, those described as people necessarily struggling together in a beloved place (Berry, 1990; cf. Kemmis, 1991). Schools can, however, begin to contribute to this project instead of withdrawing from it. Schooling in general, and rural schools in particular, can start to approach community as the center of schooling (Howley & Eckman, 1997; Theobald & Howley, in press).

This notion of the stewardship of a real-world rural community, centered on care of rising generations and for the land and its proper culture, encompasses both sorts of action: (1) creating smaller schools in which functional learning "communities" become more likely and (2) placing community (rather than merely the individual) at the center of the process of education. Some, perhaps a sizable minority are attempting this redefinition. This undertaking cannot, however, figure as just another improvement strategy. Rural educators should be advised to chose some other improvement project if they lack the long-term commitments of real-world (not just educational) stewardship.

Meier (1998), writing of her experience with small urban schools, describes a couple of

practical approaches to "accountability" somewhat along the lines of stewardship as suggested here. Notably her discussion of community hardly extends beyond learning communities; Meier promotes public school choice as an essential feature of small schools--a commitment that means communities must be construed analogically. This is one important distinction to be made between urban and rural small schools; choice is often far less feasible in the countryside.

Meier, in any case, suggests two sorts of forum--internal and external. The *internal forums* are decidedly local--community members, students, and educators that organize to examine the work of the school *critically*[19]. The *external forums* would consist of networks--"communities" if you will--of like minded schools reviewing each others' efforts for the purpose of mutual improvement. While Meier (1998) reports that such external networks are encouraged by the Annenberg (Urban) Challenge project, the idea appears to have been imported from rural to urban; the Rural Challenge was founded upon the practice of link-minded school networks (Nachtigal, cluster piece; cf. Rural Challenge, 1993).

Now, the accounts given by internal and external forums stand a much better chance of reaching the public--ideally, the *communities*--served by small rural schools. In a school with 300 students, the public consists of perhaps 1200 other individuals of all ages (school aged youngsters comprising perhaps 20 percent of total population). A public on this scale can be deeply engaged with its school, and vice versa. If the school construes the community of its

[19]The habit of criticism will not be easily cultivated in some rural schools, or in US schools generally. My colleagues and I have recently argued that anti-intellectualism permeates schooling (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995). The imagined internal and external forums must be charged to provide helpful critique and vigorously supported in that effort. Resources for this project could logically be provided by the state as its contribution to an utterly revamped accountability system.

public as its center, then public engagement becomes hypothetically more likely. And, were all else equal, the school might foster, among its public, community in the world.

Accountability and the common good. Phony accountability is easy and, practically speaking, worthless. Attempts to involve a fictive statewide public (e.g., via town meetings) to define "what every student should know and be able to do" sponsor serious misrepresentations. They certainly take no account of rural meanings to inform properly rural education. Genuine public involvement is far more costly and, because protracted, eventually more painful.

The importance of local action to negotiate the common good is not a fine point of philosophy; it is the very means by which the common good, anywhere, is constructed. Education, in contrast to the prevalent form of schooling, requires the inevitably difficult and conflicted participation of families and communities as central actors, not as temporary, pro forma joiners. This participation cannot be mandated, defined in advance, or even fixedly determined. Neither its excellence nor its ethics can be ensured. Belief to the contrary is magical thinking, even when disguised as a technical measure (e.g., the reporting of aggregate test scores).

Four Caveats

This essay has critiqued the failures of accountability systems, but has exercise some restraint with respect to testing programs per se, in contrast to Sherman Dorn's recent critique (Dorn, 1998). The inequity observable in test results is *not,* I firmly believe, the inheritable result of skin color, poverty, or terminally deficient culture, but of legacies of *massive* injustice (e.g.,

slavery, genocide, exploitation). Although we educators ignore these legacies, they are with us and are actively at work in school practice. The tests remind us of this, and they would do so even without the subsidized dissemination of *The Bell Curve*'s distortions. Banishing the tests does predictably little good. And the evil will remain even without them.

Tests are valuable if they benefit learning, but this they seldom do. We overuse all sorts tests, and we teach too little (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Meier, 1995). Four caveats apply to a more stewardly use of tests--and these caveats do imply that test scores are relatively unimportant pieces of information compared to the scope of public engagement needed by rural schools.

Test scores are not the problem. Access to test scores from universally administered testing is vital to research efforts, and this is where they have their best effect, even if it is an undervalued effect. Other uses are actually more problematic (Pendarvis et al., 1990). Most education professionals of my acquaintance--almost all of them, actually--are very poor interpreters of test scores. The press is a big problem (Dorn, 1998) as well.

There is nothing--at all--that all children "need to know and be able to do." This is part of the reason for caveat one. The State (and the various states) especially needs to stay out of the business of making such determinations. *Big* business should be formally excluded from the discussion since it has already done great damage (Howley et al., 1995); Sassen's interesting scholarship notwithstanding, no firm of my acquaintance has yet been granted citizenship in the US. Small business owners, by contrast, are very much part of thriving local communities and must take part in local determinations of educational purpose.

An average test score can be a miracle; a high score can be a disaster. This caveat

makes a widely unappreciated point. In a very impoverished community, a median ranking of aggregate student performance (test scores) is an accomplishment of high order, attesting perhaps to a strong community of learning, caring relationships among generations, and the capacity to imagine and implement the good life (cf. Meier, 1995). In a very wealthy community, a ranking in the highest decile (90th percentile and above) may well be symptomatic of failure, a lazy teaching staff, and an anti-intellectual culture based on greed and neglect. Educational miracles exist, but we do not celebrate them because we cannot see them. And too often we celebrate our educational disasters.

The corollary to this observation concerns negligible increases or declines in state rankings. Usually, such negligible changes cause for celebration or chagrin, depending on the sign (negative or positive) of the change. But the negligible differences can almost always be attributed to chance, and sometimes they bolster moves to close rural schools (e.g., DeYoung, 1995).

We need test scores. In teaching and administration, test scores are most useful, ironically in the context of the contemporary accountability movement, to help inform educational plans for exceptional students (cf. Dorn, 1998). Such tests are best administered individually (a costly proposition).

And, again: the study of schooling requires widespread testing. Much of the energy and resources spent on testing for accountability would be more profitably directed to the construction of richer state-level databases to investigate research questions about students, classrooms, schools, communities, and districts. This testing could be more restricted in scale

and less intrusive than the accountability tests now administered.

What Are These People Doing?

Three-quarters of all US farms are classified as "noncommercial," meaning they produce gross sales under $50,000; average income for these farm families is $35,000, *virtually all of it from off-farm income*[20] (United States Department of Agriculture, 1993). These people farm for the rare and difficult pleasures related to a land ethic. Evidently, despite the loss of economic function, rural meanings persist to be reclaimed, much as Raymond Williams recommends. In the future rural educators *might well* help cultivate such meanings again.

[20]In fact, of the one-quarter of all other farms, fully *half* the income of those who operate them (which includes large non-family corporations) comes from off-farm income. Only 8 percent of farm operators achieve an income equal to the national median family income through farming (USDA, 1993).

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