

The Coming Vitality of Rural Places¹

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ABSTRACT

In many parts of the world, whether “developing” or “developed,” the concept of a rural sort of education is largely ignored by national ministries. The United States is just one notable example of silence at the bureaucratic center, despite scholarly interest in provincial universities. The future may change the “terms of engagement,” however, and this essay considers the leadership of rural schools and communities from the vantage of the daunting, but clearly visible, challenges of the future. The challenges described in the essay relate to a variety of visible, perhaps even familiar, economic, environmental, political, and cultural threats confronting life in the coming century. Though increasingly important and relevant to education, these threats are not a common part of discussions in education policy. The essay explains why, and why the threats are important to rural villages and districts. Discussion concludes with five rurally appropriate shifts of thinking that might help rural citizens and subjects around the world engage the challenges and counter the threats.

Key Words: Rural education, Rural communities, Urban to rural migration, Teacher leadership, Education policy, Transformational leadership

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THE COMING VITALITY OF RURAL PLACES

Observers with varied outlooks (e.g., Berry, 1977; Orr, 1995a; Bowers, 2004; Kunstler, 2005; Conklin, 2008; Mathez, 2009) argue that the human project is treading a path into the dangerous future that even those with overweening power and ambition cannot sustain, despite the fact that they have engineered such a future. Indeed, those whose thinking is enslaved to the idea of *unlimited economic growth* have become increasingly shrill about the sort of schooling their doomed vision requires, and they have squeezed public educators everywhere to bend their efforts to the vision.

In the vision of unlimited growth, rural places become cultural backwaters and zones for the exploitation of “natural resources” that belong mostly to the sovereign State and not to local people (Williams, 1989; Scott, 1999; Said, 2004). More than this, such metropolitan centers as New York, Istanbul, and Beijing, and Paris exercise cultural and political dominion internationally. They hold their respective nations together politically, linguistically and economically. The great critic and supporter of cities, Jane Jacobs believed national economies were fictions: cities did it all (Jacobs, 1961, 1986).

To question the necessity of unlimited economic growth³, however, is to question the assumption of inevitable rural decline and eventual disappearance (as a cultural, political, and economic reality). This essay *does* question the idea of unlimited growth and cosmopolitan hegemony as an undoubted character of the future world. Instead, it asks readers to consider emerging threats to the extant neo-liberal order under which rural ways of living and loving, knowing and being, are supposed to wither away.

I just turned 65 years of age, and I resent the inevitable. More than that, my most important education has been by rural villagers and neighbors. I think rural will persist even as the experience of rural, like all cultural forms, continues its evolution. Because all this comprises a cultural question, it is also the most important education of all—who are we and what shall we become? Rural ways of living provide longstanding and I think *durable* answers.

The Status Quo: Mission Impossible

Heraclitus (born near Selçuk, in fact, at Efes, about 535 BCE) famously noted that one cannot step twice into the same river. The river changes, but so do we; our cultural forms, moreover, are very much like rivers, and sometimes their changes of course are dramatic or catastrophic. When the changes are numerous and transpire at a planetary scale, the potential for difficulties expands dramatically, perhaps catastrophically.

Today portents of major changes in global cultural flow are easy to read (if harder to interpret for the future): (1) steady depletion of cheap energy reserves (Heinberg, 2005); (2) climate change forced by the incineration of the dwindling fossil reserves (Mathez, 2009); (3) other sorts of depletion, especially of water and the unreplenishable reserves known as “fossil water” (Solomon, 2010); (4) other sorts of pollution, especially by chemical inputs to farming—fertilizers made from cheap energy reserves like natural gas, and pesticides (Conklin, 2008); (5) wildly increasing demand on dwindling cheap energy reserves (and on much else; see Angus & Butler, 2011) in “developing” nations, particularly China (Jacques, 2009) and India, and (6) the

³ See Williams, 1989, for the related limitless growth of the *cultural and political* influence of the World-Class Cities across the previous century.

weakening sovereignty of the nation-state (“globalization”) under the press of global business concerns (Hobsbawm, 1992; Sassen, 1996; Barzun, 2000). Conklin (2007) is a conservative interpreter of these developments, but he believes that the threats confronting this century dwarf those that beset the 20th century (that century of terrible slaughter and dislocation—in case any reader needs reminding).

In short, the status quo is never supportable, but now it is likely not “sustainable” to use a popular term: it seems that a finite earth cannot support unlimited economic growth. It should not be the surprise it seemingly is to so many. The daunting threats just recited all proceed from devotion to a profound misconception of existential possibilities. The implication, for many activists and thinkers, is that if humans do not curb their profligacy, they (we) will so damage the planet that life will become quite miserable (for them...and for us). There are many evasions of such a realization: religious, political, economic, and certainly *educational*. This essay considers the educational evasions, and the implications for rural people and those teaching the rising generation of rural people.

Twenty-First-Century Skills

What the future holds is frightening, even if unclear, and even if national school leaders ignore the evident threats because of vested interest in the status quo. This vested interest and related incapacity are evident in the ubiquitous “twenty-first-century skills” pushed on educators as supposedly critical: computers, teamwork, and problem solving.

Competing definitions are very easy to find online, but whether identified by the offending phrase or not, many similar “skill sets” concern digital technology and its imagined role in national economic well-being (that is, the role of computers in producing endless growth, come what may). Students are said to require “media literacy,” but also to finally adopt and “master” such “skills” as *working in groups* and *problem solving*. The State and its business partners insist that such preparation will prepare students for anything, that these “skills” will prove fundamental across the century.

By contrast, if one took seriously the short list of six threats enumerated previously, one would not shout: *Computers! Teamwork! Problem-solving!* Of course such capacities would be helpful at any historical epoch (surely the Ottoman Empire would have appreciated the use of computers) and in any place, including rural villages and farms. Indeed, teamwork and problem solving have been hallmarks of farming life (Berry, 1977) since the beginning of agriculture (Anatolia was an “early adopter,” circa 6,000-8,000 years ago; see Diamond, 1999). Perhaps the business problem is simply that not every living human has a computer just yet, and that it might be good for every one of them to have two or three. But to pay computer manufacturers from public funds in order to put a computer into every child’s hands seems a notably bad rationale for schooling and a waste of educational resources.⁴

Such nonsense has much historical precedent of course. For just one example, in the mid-20th century US, an influential faction promoted *life adjustment skills*: “dating, marriage, mating, and the rearing of children” (Kliebard, 1986, 252). It was a postwar development, at the time when the State began to think everyone should complete high school. The old model of high school would not serve the purpose, however, because it was too academic, too intellectual:

⁴ In the US, some critics of public schools have seemed to think it good that computers might replace schools altogether.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the self-perception of school administrators had been evolving from that of educators to hard-headed business managers, and an education attuned to the real business of life, as opposed to the remote values of the academic curriculum, must have had an enormous appeal (Kliebard, 1986, 254).

As skills, today's new ones ("twenty-first century") are every bit as broad as the old ones ("life adjustment"), and they have the same source according to Kliebard: the faction that wants schools to help everyone embrace the idea of limitless economic growth, and to buy as much as possible—especially (at present) computers.

This purpose infects even rural education. In North America, for instance, a liberal wing of reformers has tended for several decades to advise rural "revitalization" under the banner of entrepreneurial development (e.g., Rosenfeld, 1984; Gatewood & DeLargy, 1985; Larson, 1999). That is, vital rural places are encouraged to act more like good cities (e.g., Florida, 2004; cf. Carr & Kefalas, 2009), just as improved rural schools (in the US) should be designed to look and function more like good schools for wealthy metropolitans and cosmopolitans. Some of these cited advisers, however, *do* understand the difference between a village trader and a genuine metropolitan "capitalist." Many who listened to them, however, did not.

In any case, with deep rural experience of (and respect and affection for) rural ways of doing things, knowing the world, and being in it, one can actually grasp the point of a *rural sort of education*. Rural is interesting, challenging, and in need of as much thoughtful care as cities. But a rural sort of education barely exists anywhere (especially in the US, I must add).

The best explanation I have for why a rural sort of schooling does not yet enjoy a substantial existence, however, is that most decision makers and most cosmopolitans believe strongly in the *deficiency of rural people* (Scott, 2012). With such a belief one can easily dismiss the theory of a *rural sort of education* as an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Why? As James Scott observes (2012), the nationally powerful believe themselves free to do whatever they like with deficient and ignorant people. Again and again, the world over, in Britain, France, the United States, Turkey, China, Vietnam, Tanzania, and Thailand the most ignorant and most abused have been rural people (Scott, 1998). Often they have exhibited skin color and spoken tongues that differ from those of the nation-making rulers at the center: these differences were evident even in the nation-building of the European heartland, as in the 19th century France described by Weber (1976). Making Frenchmen required stamping out competing languages and ways of being, especially rural ways of being. They became *illegal*. It's a very old story in history (Barzun, 2000).

More to the point, according to Scott, such suppositions of deficiency and ignorance have proven themselves unfounded across the experience of the 20th century. The national rulers (whether communist, capitalist, or nationalist) far from being expert and knowledgeable, proved themselves instead ignorant and dangerous for rural places and their cultural knowledge⁵—but also dangerous for cities⁶. It goes without saying that misguided planning of this sort, and as a

⁵ Scott refers to such local knowledge as *metis*—the intuitive cunning of Odysseus; a knowledge at once more local and more complete than that of formalized "science."

direct result of the related social engineering, are bad for systems of schooling and for the education that one might otherwise expect from schools (Scott, 2012, notes many educational parallels). Scott's analyses help explain why those leading the profession remain ignorant: Whether leading from the inside or the outside, they hear only one story. So far, their ignorance does not harm their interests. This situation seems about to change, if the scientists describing the coming challenges are even partly correct.

Twenty-first-century skills are going to be a poor preparation for the rural future. Indeed, the coming changes might render rural places across the globe more "vital" than they have seemed during the previous century.

World-Class Vitality

In her 1986 *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, Jane Jacobs claimed that cities, and not nation-states, were the engines of economic growth. Economically speaking, nation-states were a fiction in Jacobs' view. Worse, some nation-states, such as the US, seemed actively to be killing off their cities, sorting functions (residential, commercial, manufacturing, transportation) into separate geographic zones, rather than promoting a synthesis of all functions across the entire city—a synthesis, she wrote, that fostered community (Jacobs, 1961, 1986). Following her groundbreaking volume on the decline of the Great American city (Jacobs, 1961), she was looking for a counterexample. She found it in Italy.

Her exemplar there was Reggio-Emilia. According to Jacobs (1986), it succeeded precisely because it refused to follow the modernist path for city planning. The city sustained well recognizable *community* in its neighborhoods, and these communities fostered a wide range of interaction among residents, notably including economic interaction:

Vital cities have marvelous innate abilities for understanding, communicating, contriving, and inventing what is required to combat their difficulties. Lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves (Jacobs, 1961, 447).

Notably, Reggio is and was a *small* city by conventional "world-class" standards. It was not "world-class" in the way that Los Angeles and Shanghai are. It was more humanly scaled.

Vitality is not, however, a quality Jacobs would associate with the countryside. Her "vitality" differs from what one imagines as a vital village or farming district. But Jacobs (1980, 1986) did believe that vital cities, like Reggio, had to make use of their "hinterlands." In any case, a more localized rural connection of smaller cities and rural places might well become ever more important (for good and ill, let us remember) as the reign of cheap energy comes to a close. The relationship would likely remain a very much contested one because, on Jacobs's terms, rural will still probably be subsidiary (for related analyses see Williams, 1989; Soja, 2000; De Blij, 2009).

⁶ In some ways both Scott and Jacobs deplore the 20th century city as a social monstrosity. New York and Los Angeles are among Jacobs' examples, whereas Scott considers Brasilia and Le Corbusier's unrealized plans for Paris among his bad examples of urban "vision."

The nature of the relationship of small cities to “their” hinterlands may turn on the fate of the nation-state, that seemingly permanent political arrangement that began to emerge in Europe in the 17th century, in the quest for stability following the civil wars of the Christian sectarian struggle (“the Protestant Reformation”). In the centuries that followed, the theory and practice of the nation-state spread unevenly across the globe. Barzun (a sober and very conservative observer) wryly notes:

As for the idea of the nation-state, it is still in the future [i.e., as of 2000] for some peoples in various parts of the world. Their struggles are a remote consequence of the revolutionary monarch-and-nation idea [that emerged in 17th century Europe], as well as a paradox in our time, when kings are few and *the nation as a form is falling apart in the countries that first made it a reality* [emphasis added] (2000, 240).

The grand social construct, and political experiment, represented by the nation-state has actually been doubted for some time; in addition to Jacobs’s economic insight, and Barzun’s cultural insight, historian Eric Hobsbawm (1992) observed that the arrangement was *always* an incomplete historical process—and that it would have an historical end despite its incompleteness.

According to such political theorists as Saskia Sassen (1996), globalization is one important cause of the ongoing dissolution (and “unevenness”) of the nation state (and its incomplete realization). The actors in globalization are hardly the nation-states, much less the abstract citizen whose existence justifies nation-states in theory. The real contemporary political actors are trans-national corporations: only they can and do routinely take concerted global action. They are remaking the world every day, all day and all night. And, of course, their global actions have local consequences—among nation-states and in local (rural) places within them; Sassen calls them the new⁷ “citizens.” One need, in this light, to understand that globalization is as much a political as an economic phenomenon: because globalization takes place within nation-states, it erodes nation-states and the idea of the nation-state from within them, as a matter of everyday practice (Sassen, 2004).

To imagine the end of the nation-state or the threats of its demise or radical alternation are perhaps not unthinkable among contemporary leaders, but to expect discussion of such matters from them is unrealistic. The leaders, one might say, cannot lead. It’s easy to see why: the conditions of *extant* political, economic, and cultural power depend on the assumptions that brought them to power—unlimited growth, stable climate, and cheap energy. These assumptions represent the conditions of existence for billions of humans, ideologically and materially, and the silence is so widespread that any fear we might feel understanding such matters are fully justified (see, e.g., Conkin, 2007). With schooling, one should also remember that many national ministries of education deploy a neoliberal ideology that enforces the silence. Such silences—and such silencing—always point to the existence of a momentous issue and its many related questions.

⁷ Arguably, the old citizens—formerly the bedrock of legitimacy for the republican nation-state—now, once again, assume the status of *subject*. In this reincarnation, though, they are subjects of a corporate rather than an aristocratic ruler; they are not rooted serfs, either, but increasingly landless consumers.

Already, of course, economic growth elects national leaders and economic stagnation unseats them; but when rapid economic growth falters *for good*, what next? What becomes of “economics” itself? That modern discipline has itself known only a regime based on the assumption of endless growth. What becomes of politics (including nation states and not only governments within them), of energy supply (under conditions of climate change and very high cost), of culture (cheap energy fuels the rituals of everyday life, too)? Rural teachers and administrators and parents had better start asking such questions, and helping villagers and farmers and foresters and miners ask them too. The implications are massive.

Back to the Land: Alternative 21st Century Education

While we remain educators, then, we ought to be up to something very different from meeting current expectations, and this insight has implications that will be different for those of us who remain devoted to rural places, communities, families, and children in the coming decades and generations. After all, despite the ignorance of so many national “education leaders” and the imposition of so much bureaucratic and State baggage, *teachers keep teaching*. This simple fact means there is no way—not really—for the State to exercise effective dominion over all of us (see Scott’s 1998 *Seeing Like a State* for the reasons).

There is an institution of schooling, on the one hand, and an institution of teaching on the other; and good teaching is *always* in opposition to the goals of schooling (some readers may well find this a difficult proposition to accept). Barzun (2000)—a conservative, again—said of the institution of schooling that its nature was to *ossify*: “The school is a government on a small scale; it aims at forming a common mind as government aims at a common will. Both need periodic overhaul” (p. 180). That’s the institution of schooling. But there is also an institution of teaching, which, less subject to stringent control, bites back at the forces of ossification. Genuine educators has always had a good idea of what to do:

Change school from a prison to a *scholae ludus* (play site), where curiosity is aroused and satisfied. Stop beatings. Reduce rote learning and engage the child’s interest through music and games and through handling objects, through posing problems (the project method), stirring the imagination by dramatic accounts of the big world (2000, 181).

This is a remarkable characterization of the aims of “the institution of teaching,” considering that Barzun uses it to characterize a line of school reformers (genuine ones) *from the 17th century forward*. One should notice that this durable description of reform has almost nothing in common with the aims of the managers, bureaucrats, legislators, and business leaders of neo-liberal “reform.” It aims at something very different: understanding, thinking, imagination.

For the sake of imagination, then, let us imagine the end of endless growth, of cheap energy, and the nation-state as we know it. This seems like a radical, perhaps a radically left-leaning, bit of imagination, but the conservative economist Michael Novak (1981) wrote about the significance of this sort of change, looking backward from the capitalist take-off toward the pre-industrial norm:

Indeed, in the 1780s four-fifths of all French families spent 90 percent of the income simply buying bread—only bread—to stay alive. In 1800 fewer than 1,000 people in the whole of Germany had incomes as high as \$1,000. Yet in Great Britain from 1800 to 1850, after the sudden capitalist take-off that had begun in 1780, real wages quadrupled, then quadrupled again between 1850 and 1900. The world had never seen anything like it (Novak, 1990, 30).

Kunstler (2005) believes that the world will never see anything like it *again*. We inhabit the pinnacle of the expansion according to some observers. It's a fabulous moment, they argue: enjoy it while it lasts. Only the exact timing of the onset of decline (has it started already?) is in doubt, in their view.

What's rural got to do with it all? Many of those devoted to and invested in the phenomenal accumulation enabled by cheap energy overlook *the relevant fact* of the durable rural world. Eric Hobsbawm began his epic history of the twin revolutions (English industrial and French political) that bracketed the onset of the "fabulous moment" with these words: "The world of 1789 was overwhelmingly rural, and nobody can understand it that has not absorbed this fundamental fact" (Hobsbawm, 1962, 1). That world looks more and more like a human baseline toward which we are moving again. It will not be—this should go without saying—the same rural world, but a very different post-expansion and post-industrial one. What will that world, and its revised rural portion, preserve of this one? What should it? Before turning to such questions, we need to consider the coming morbidity of urban zones.

The Coming Morbidity of Urban Zones

It's a disturbing thesis seldom encountered in academic writing about schooling: the global organizing machine (Jacobs, 1986, 2004) as we know it will break down. The reason for the avoidance is clear: apocalyptic visions are usually unfounded. But actual catastrophes—as compared to those based on prophesies informed by wishful thinking (as with many religious visions)—have overtaken humans in the past: the Black Deaths, the global wars of the previous century, and the great pandemic following the first of those wars...and many earlier ones. The present thesis has a base in evidence.

If the prospect of actual catastrophe seems unlikely, consider the implications: the end of cheap energy makes the vertical and horizontal movement of people and goods in and around huge cities, and their heating and cooling there, much more difficult (Heinberg, 2005; Kunstler, 2008). Rising seas would swamp many cities (Mathez, 2009). Of course, even without capitalist accumulation (endless economic growth), trade and manufacture would continue to exist; and rich and poor would continue their long struggle. But a similar catastrophe has *already* occurred in Cuba (Wright, 2009). When Soviet support disappeared, the State and the people improvised: food is now reportedly raised in thousands of urban gardens, more sustainably (i.e, with fewer cheap-energy inputs), and with various sorts of State encouragements and supports.

So life would likely continue in familiar ways, but on very different terms. One imagines that expensive energy would make many things more expensive and more rare (daily hot baths and air conditioning, for instance). Of course, such commonplaces of the World-Class nation-states in Europe and Asia and North America are still unknown in much of the world. The

shock for those places might be less; and this possibility applies to many, many rural villages and districts across the globe.

More ominously, nations themselves might fragment, of course—and such a development would predictably make cities more, not less, important. In this case, their “hinterlands”—the nearby rural places—would take on greater importance (cf. Jacobs, 1986). The local city and its rural zone would by necessity need to rely more on resources to be found nearby: timber, minerals (including fossil fuels), vegetables, livestock for power and food, fiber, watersheds, rural manufactures, and possibly room for wind or solar “farms.” Nearly all of these would originate in rural places. Such places would likely become more economically and culturally important—and therefore *educationally* more important than at present (in many parts of the world).

National systems of schooling would predictably change with the changed power relationships. Maybe they would disappear in disintegrating nations. Thoughtful analysts are already worried that public schooling is disappearing in that heartland of globalization, the United States (Ravitch, 2011). What might replace nationalized education systems in such circumstances is certainly obscure. But the prospect is worth thinking about.

Dark Age Coming

I personally hope for the technical miracle that cheap-energy skeptics (e.g., Heinberg, 2005; Kunstler, 2005) regard as impossible. But it’s worth asking what the implications of urban-and-industrial retrenchment might be for rural places, including either schooling or education there—or at least what a no-growth economic reality might mean to rural education.

An exercise like this needs a few well-warranted axioms on which to base speculation. Here they are:

- Human population will rise to 8 billion in 2030 (e.g., United Nations, 2006).
- A technical solution to keep energy *cheap*⁸ is unlikely (e.g., Heinberg, 2005).
- China and India will continue their industrial florescence (e.g., Jacques, 2009).
- Climate forcing will continue to be inadequately unaddressed (e.g., Mathez, 2009)

These assumptions are tame enough; none is certain but each is likely, all else equal. They at least comprise a parsimonious list, and predicting sharp global dislocations under their operation is not so difficult. To predict what will happen *exactly*, though, is impossible. One prediction, though, seems reasonable: “Expensive” means that both goods and money itself are in short supply, and whenever such shortages become widely and durably manifest, people will turn to self-provisioning and barter if they can: as in contemporary Central Asia following the withdrawal of Soviet authority (DeYoung, Reeves & Valyayeva, 2006).

Now, observe that self-provisioning will be much, much more difficult in the world’s mega-cities, which are predicted to contain 60 percent of world population by 2030 (United Nations, 2006). Shortages would predictably be sharpest and most tragic, in the poorest regions,

⁸ “Cheap energy” needs a short explanation: the comparison is with the energy from draft animals (elephants, oxen, horses, mules, camels, llamas, and donkeys) and of course from human limbs. We cannot do by hand or with draft animals everything now done with fossil fuels. In the future, therefore, barring the technological miracle, humans will likely do less. One might say that what will be done will have to be done more wisely, as well.

but shortages will be general precisely because the most developed nations are those most historically dependent on cheap energy. If you've ever heated with wood during a viciously cold winter (as my family has), you know that freezing to death is not just a theoretical possibility.

Under conditions of shortage, it is perhaps prudent to entertain a fifth assumption about the human carrying capacity of the earth when energy is expensive:

- The human carrying capacity of the earth under changed conditions is 4 billion individuals (a generous guess, cf. Heinberg, 2005, 31, where it's 2 billion).

Angus & Butler (2011) caution against blaming the poor for global warming, energy depletion, and rampant pollution of water and air. They observe, and correctly I think, that a just global regime change *could* adequately support a large human population: if the rich regions relinquished their grip on global resources, if the regime of endless accumulation ended well and wisely, if food production were more careful and local, and if an effective global movement for social and ecological justice emerged. Well, such a fine regime change is appallingly unlikely worldwide (maybe anywhere) short of a dreadful collapse, and perhaps especially not even then: desperation does not encourage thoughtfulness and wisdom, as history demonstrates very well. I do hope for such a change, but I live in a land that already, and smugly, blames the poor for a great deal visited upon them by the rich (Gans, 1994). My hope in this regard has much in common with my hope for a continuing supply of cheap energy (see Cohen, 1995, for the complexities of assessing the earth's supposed carrying capacity). So: if 4 billion is correct and world population is currently over 6 billion, and heading for 8 billion, one can see the scope of disaster that worries sober, conservative observers like Conkin (2007). Conkin (2008, 112), writing about the great agricultural revolution of 1950-1970 observes mildly, "Synthetic fertilizers which are made from natural gas are essential for the level of production needed to feed the earth's presently inflated population." Perhaps some other arrangement will be found—but Conkin is not optimistic.

In short, all these assumptions together predict an urban-industrial *disaster*, about which, in fact, theorists (e.g., Jacobs, 1961; Berry, 1977; Orr, 1995a) have fretted now for a long time. If Jacobs (1986, 2004) is right, though, some cities will survive somehow, and their relationships to their rural hinterlands will have to be very strong to enable that survival.

The Coming Vitality of Rural Places

An American journalist (Rosenthal, 2013), having recently learned that a Swedish city heated all its buildings (including homes) with gas from waste from farms, woods, and food processing, recommended it to her fellow American citizens. They couldn't imagine the possibility, but she observed: "I'd venture that a similar plan could work fine in Milwaukee [Wisconsin] or Burlington [Vermont], cities that also anchor rural areas" (15). Here's where Jacobs's city-centered views have relevance for the future (Jacobs, 1961, 1986, 2004). Under conditions of sharper and sharper energy shortfall, instead of a further clearing out of rural places (predicted by the cited UN report), rural places would be likely sites of organized *re-inhabitation* around such small cities.

Food production would rely necessarily less on large machines and employ more intensive and attentive methods of land care: in short, it would require *more farmers*: more people will need to participate in raising, processing, and transporting food. To eat well, and perhaps to survive, everyone who can farm or garden will do so (DeYoung et al., 2006; Wright, 2009). And those who cannot will need friends and relatives who do farm and garden. If 2 percent (US) to 5 percent (Ireland) of people in the developed world are now involved with “agriculture” in some way, perhaps five to ten times that proportion (10-50% is a pretty wide margin) will actually farm 100 years or more in the future. The proportion is quite debatable, of course, and local variation is appropriate⁹: but the need for a substantial increase in farmers is a simple corollary to the assumptions. Some readers will live to see where all this leads. We now turn to specific implications for rural education.

Education Then

Rural educators need to prepare for the future in very, very different ways from those being forced on them now. Fifteen years ago the environmental educator David Orr (1995b) counseled educators everywhere to “re-ruralize education.” He was predictably ignored, but such counsel is becoming increasingly relevant. This final section, then, is not a reactionary glance toward any golden age of pre-industrial agriculture (about 1880 in the US, perhaps right now in Turkey), but toward quite moderate suggestions for an alternative. In particular I want to recommend actions that *anyone* might take to get started on the advised “re-ruralization.”

These recommendations include the familiar and the unfamiliar, the uncontroversial and the dangerous. Each entails very difficult professional work over a very long trajectory, perhaps generations. I’m not advising *reform*. I’m not advising *revitalization*. I’m not advising *revolution*. I am advising hard thinking and hard work, and local collaboration with other local people. Obviously one hopes for improvement, but *engineering* improvement is proven hubris (Scott, 1998). It makes more sense to get busy locally. Here are the recommendations:

One. Turn off the sound. Abandon the national aims, the national discourse, and the national standards. The first two are irrelevant, but the last remains partially relevant: you will do better.

Two. Smell the roses (i.e., look for the good, the significant, the useful, the lovely; enjoy the looking). What’s useful in national standards can be retrieved, loosely, and better developed as a place-sustaining education, even a place-sustaining form of schooling and teaching.¹⁰ You will do better.

Three. Redefine “success” as the ability to live well locally. This redefinition will become easier as you lower the volume (see “One”). Embrace a measure of smart poverty. Do better: share.

Four. Find ways to work with rural communities to establish enterprises that will help transition the local place to an expensive-energy world. The number of possibilities is large, even daunting. Almost any of them, done well, is better than the alternative (see “One”). Try it.

⁹ Turkey currently employs 25% of its workforce in agriculture (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013).

¹⁰ This observation, by the way, applies *especially* to mathematics education (Howley, Showalter, Howley, Klein, & Johnson, 2011).

Five. Under conditions of hardship and stress, egalitarian communities seem better positioned to confront challenges. Work for social justice locally. This action will be very difficult in rural schools that are currently operated to reproduce whatever inequities prevail. Doing worse is not an option for genuine educators.

Actual twenty-first-century skills may be very different from what the current crop of globalization fanatics imagine. I myself find that the most useful “twenty-first-century skills” to be the ones that seem most durably and significantly human: the capacity to think, especially to think more freely and widely than the surrounding society. It always was an uphill struggle and remains so: perhaps that’s what makes it human. Such thinking was once the preserve of cities, but in the future rural villages and the countryside could prove themselves the more human place to live and work and think.

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