



A Social History of the English Countryside. G. E. Mingay. New York: Routledge, 1990, 246 pp. ISBN: 0-415-03408-6 (hdbk.)

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I suppose the question is obvious: why review this book in a journal that focuses predominantly on rural education in the United States? The not-so-obvious answer is that it provides a "big picture" perspective regarding the health and well-being of rural communities and, by extension, rural schools. It also supplies intellectual leverage over a few lingering commonalities of small rural communities that have troubled education-minded rural reformers throughout this century. Last, and probably most significant, the book pushes the reader to the realization that the near-century long trend of rural decline in this country is not the inevitable result of some law of nature, but rather the predictable result of shifts related to the locus of political and economic power.

Can we say, for instance, that the children of a very small rural community *ought* to travel long distances to arrive at school because something called "progress" or, perhaps, some things called "market forces" suggest that a small rural town is destined for extinction? The cultural assumption behind such a view is that market forces or progress are somehow anonymous and, therefore, unrelated to the exercise of political power. Ostensibly existing in a political vacuum, such forces become the unerring determinants of the way things naturally or inevitably are. The socialization that embeds this cultural assumption into our view of how the world works is older than we are as a country. Its roots are in 16th and 17th century England. Mingay's work yields valuable leverage over our embrace of the idea that rural suffering must be chalked up as the price of progress.

Before moving on to some specifics, I want to share an anecdote that may illuminate the concept of "cultural assumption" and help the reader to see that much of our acquiescence related to America's treatment of the countryside can be attributed to a position that is intellectually shallow and virtually devoid of an evidential foundation.

A front-page article in a large midwestern newspaper told of a small rural school that had decided to create and maintain a convenience store sorely needed by its community. Very soon thereafter, I had the great misfortune of

hearing that in a nearby (though much larger) rural school, many of the teachers who were gathered in the teachers' lounge expressed the sentiment that all such small schools ought to be closed. The irony here is that these teachers worked in a middle school with 750 students crammed into an old building designed to serve far fewer than this. The same teachers who castigated the existence of small schools were busily involved trying to create teams, or schools within their school; in short, they were working hard to make themselves small. Because they lived in a bigger town and worked in a bigger school, they uncritically assumed that they were better. Indeed, the "bigger is better" cultural assumption is so powerful that these teachers could not see the contradictions staring them in the face.

And so it is with the idea that the price of progress must always be paid. Throughout nearly a century of rural decline, only a few voices have asked why the people of the countryside must pay more than their share, why the children of the countryside must spend eight or nine hours a day under school discipline while the children of suburban America spend only six, or why rural children should be content with classes taught by a representation of a teacher over a television screen rather than by a teacher. Indeed, asking such questions often constitutes a cultural embarrassment, for the idea that one must never obstruct progress is entrenched to this degree.

Though it was not his intent, Mingay's book permits the reader to piece together another interpretation regarding progress. He takes the reader back to the 14th century. In some ways this constitutes a significant shortcoming, for other historians of rural Europe have noted that the three centuries prior to the 14th were an unprecedented expanse of time marked by increased agricultural production *and* increased soil fertility (e.g., Blum, 1978, pp. 80-81; Merchant, 1980, pp. 47-48). But as is generally well known, the 14th century was catastrophic: the Black Death reduced the population of Europe by about one third. Something this tumultuous was bound to have an impact on human political economy, and this is where Mingay takes off with the story of the English countryside.

To be sure, the landed aristocracy maintained control of England, but with so much land and so many farms abandoned after the plague (indeed, much land simply reverted back to forest), the creation of a small freeholding "gentry" class was a predictable result. Later, during the 16th century, England's break with the Roman Catholic church brought about the dissolution of monastery lands, the dispersal of about a third of England's agricultural acreage.

In the wake of both the Plague and the Dissolution, inroads were made by former peasants, although it should be obvious that those most well-off were in the best position to take advantage of the new circumstances. One can see striking similarities by contrasting these English develop-

ments with the opening of the American frontier after the Louisiana Purchase. First, in-roads to land ownership were made by an aspiring yeomanry, although it was just as true in America that those who were most well-off were able to take greatest advantage of possibilities in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. Interestingly, however, the huge expanse of the American interior enabled some of the worst-off to become landowners, although this generally took place in the states of the trans-Mississippi west (e.g., Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas). It would be a mistake to overlook the connection between this settlement dynamic and the propensity of these states to be among the first to extend democracy through a political voice given to women, tenant farmers, and so forth. Also, these states have a history of resisting school consolidation with a fervor not matched in other parts of the country.

But the great benefit of Mingay's work lay in recognition of the fact that England's story preceded ours. England's rural communities began to decline during the 18th century, as witnessed by Oliver Goldsmith's classic poems, including "The Deserted Village." But the serious period of decline for the English countryside was the 19th century, 100 years ahead of similar circumstances in our own countryside.

The expansion of steam-driven industry in England facilitated advances in agricultural machinery. This machinery, in turn, displaced the poorest of rural dwellers. The response of England's 19th-century rural poor was very unlike the response of their counterparts in America. English rural dwellers attacked the technology that was leaving them without a means to survive in the place that was ancestrally theirs. They planted metal spikes in fields to damage rakes and tedders, they descended upon thrashing machines and smashed them to pieces, they created bonfires out of hayricks. The most extensive damage was done in what came to be known as the Swing Riots of 1830-31, but the mythical figure of Captain Swing was talked about, and figuratively heard from, for many decades thereafter. It became a very dangerous form of social protest, however. With the political power necessary to direct economic policy gradually shifting away from England's landed interests to the industrialists in the new urban centers, the fate of Swing rioters was destined to be severe. Many were jailed, some were hung, hundreds were "transported" to such places as New Zealand and Australia.

The rural tumult was used as a catalyst for calls to establish a system of public education. Indeed, across the Atlantic, Horace Mann wrote of England's example of "agrarianism gone mad" and warned his colleagues that the same could happen in Massachusetts if public schools were not supported (Cremin, 1957). On the spot where eight English protesters were killed after a law enforcement official had been murdered, local authorities ordered both a church and a school built, clearly symbolizing their belief

that more widely dispersed education and religion would put an end to what they saw as an irrational expression of rural fanaticism.

It is interesting to note that when 20th-century agricultural machinery began to displace rural Americans at a serious pace, a public education system was already entrenched. There were no Swing riots in the American 20th century. Why? Was it because the quality of the education provided in the small rural schools across the country created an informed citizenry, one smart enough to avoid a sort of useless fanaticism? Or did American public schools become engines of socialization passing on to youth a world view that in Darwinesque fashion castigated rural dwellers as "hicks" and "bumpkins," chastised small farmers as "inefficient operators," and began sending a powerful cultural message that said success means leaving the countryside?

Prior to the elections of 1994, I heard many references to the "podunk" farmers who through their vote were going to ensure the victory of tax reform measures clearly detrimental to the cause of public education. Such remarks reflect the pervasiveness of cultural assumptions regarding rural ignorance in this country. Just as with our assumption that "bigger is better," the idea that rural people are unintelligent runs far deeper than the shallow arguments that support it. Part of the reason for this is that rural culture, or rural history for that matter, is not deeply studied in this country (unlike in Europe). One hears a common complaint from suburban transplants to rural America (often teachers entering the workforce for the first time) that the community does not accept them, that they are constantly held at arm's length. There can be no mistaking the insinuation that this is evidence of a character flaw among rural dwellers. The complaint reflects our ahistorical bent in this country, our simplistic view that one becomes whatever one is during one's own lifetime, that history and cultural memory play no role in the development of who we are.

Mingay's book will help the reader understand this rural phenomenon at a more sophisticated level. Rural dwellers have historically been wary of strangers for a number of reasons. Tales of strangers who brought contagious diseases into rural communities abound. From our 20th-century vantage point, this may seem difficult to understand, but it was something for rural dwellers to be watchful of into the first decades of this century. Also, rural communities often worked out convoluted arrangements to deal with the passage of property that may have involved responsibilities and/or bargains made years before any transaction. Newcomers could throw a wrench into plans the residents of a community had come to take for granted decades earlier. In short, strangers were often competition for available resources and the genuinely courteous, though always cautious, treatment received by newcomers to rural

communities today should be seen as the manifestation of cultural force.

There are other issues illuminated by Mingay's comprehensive treatment of the English countryside. As the struggle to make a living from a small holding intensified in response to pressure for legislation to facilitate an industrially-oriented economy, rural women were frequently exploited in "cottage industries" that offered at least slim hope of continued existence on the land. Many early 19th-century farm women were busily engaged sewing gloves in an attempt to make ends meet. At mid-century, many rural women in New England were engaged in the production of palm-leaf hats to be sold to wealthy southerners for use by their slaves. Today, much the same dynamic is at work in the spread of low-capital, light-manufacturing plants that frequently move into rural communities and hire predominantly women. This is most clear in the telecommunications industry. These businesses generally move into a building donated by the local community development committee, plug in their equipment, hire local women, then unplug their equipment, lay off the local women, and move

out as soon as the community begins to express a desire for tax-paying responsibility on the part of the company.

The value of Mingay's book for those interested in the welfare of rural communities and schools, as I note at the outset, is that it offers a "big picture" perspective for anyone who will read it slowly and seriously. Such a reading yields recognition of the fact that there is no inevitability at work in the fate of rural America and that the story can unfold differently as sound argument begins to expose the unsound foundational assumptions that currently legitimate rural decline.

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