Children of the Broken Heartlands:  
Rural Isolation and the Geography of Opportunity

Education is an indispensable pathway for children’s inclusion in the life of their societies, and the inclusiveness and adequacy of education for all children is foundational to their ability to function as free and equal citizens.¹ This is true with respect to their own acquired attributes – their capabilities, virtues, and understanding of the world – and it is true with respect to the ways others perceive and treat them.

Philosophical defenses of inclusive education have focused on these benefits for the individuals who are educated, and also its benefits for civic life and the relationships between individual benefits and collective benefits – in Rousseau’s terms, the harmonization of education for the child with education of the child for others.² These defenses have included Aristotle’s advocacy of common schools in which rich and poor male citizens would all be educated in the same curriculum, Mary Wollstonecraft’s case for common schools, curricula, and educational goals for boys and girls of all social classes, and John Dewey’s challenge to the exclusion of


working class children from the academic curriculum reserved for future leaders. Since the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, scholars and policymakers have addressed inclusion with respect to race, class, impairments, sex, and immigration status. Yet, rural isolation remains a matter rarely addressed in educational research, national policy, and philosophical inquiry. The central thesis of this paper is that rural isolation warrants attention in all of these spheres because it limits children’s access to positions of respect in the wider society. Rural isolation is a barrier that is growing in significance as global educational and technological revolutions conspire to create an immense chasm of opportunity and culture between rural and urban areas.

Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas wrote in their widely-cited 2009 ethnographic study of small town education in rural Iowa that, “what is happening in many small towns – the

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devastating loss of educated and talented young people, the aging of the population, and the erosion of the local economy – has repercussions far beyond their boundaries. . . . Without [these towns] the country couldn’t function.”

They wrote these prescient words in an era of “collapsing demand for labor” associated with mechanization, outsourcing, and a 30 percent decline in family farming in Iowa triggered by a farm credit crisis in the 1980s, but before the economic collapse of 2008 fueled the rise of radical right populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic. There is a deepening economic, educational, and cultural divide between the rural ‘Heartland’ interiors and large cities of the U.S. and Britain, and it has immense implications for the opportunity of children in rural towns to participate meaningfully in the civic life of the wider society. “Young people have always left small towns for big cities and brighter opportunities. But [a decade into the twenty-first century] . . . thousands of towns find themselves twenty, ten, or even five years away from extinction.” This is true not just in farming regions where demeaning and badly paid agribusiness labor is ascendant, but where jobs in logging have disappeared, fisheries have collapsed, rural manufacturing jobs have been lost to automation and globalization, and jobs in coal and oil have been eliminated by innovations in mining and

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6 Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, Hollowing out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and what it Means for America (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), pp. ix-x.


8 Carr and Keflas, Hollowing out the Middle, pp. 1-2.
automation in the petrochemical sector. The schools of the towns of these regions are centers of community life, and as the towns themselves struggle so too do their schools and children. It is in this context that the U.S. faces a problem of rural isolation.

About one-quarter of rural high school graduates go to a university, but in doing so they must leave their hometowns and adapt to a world that may “expect them to change too much of who and what they are.” Some find the cultural chasm insuperable and return, while others assimilate and must leave the comforting familiarity of their homes even farther behind when they graduate and migrate to the global cities where the payoffs for their investments in education are the greatest. In David Goodhart’s terms, they must make the cultural transition from being rooted ‘somewheres,’ whose identities are primarily defined by their position in local networks, to being cosmopolitan ‘anywheres,’ whose identities are much more defined by their

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11 I will use the word “rural” as shorthand for the rural interior or ‘Heartland’ regions of states such as Oregon, Iowa, North Dakota, Kansas, West Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana, with economies that are based predominantly on farming and extraction industries and benefit little if any from tourism or proximity to cities.


13 Ibid., p. 18, and ch. 1.
position in global networks. For another ten percent of rural youth, enlistment in the military serves as an “emergency exit” – a way “to get some education,” find “a halfway decent job,” and “see what else is out there.” Many who exit rural towns in this way eventually return, and some who do return join Patriot Movement groups, such as the Oath Keepers, that challenge the authority of the federal government and organize militias and voluntary community services that fill a void created by collapsing tax revenues and the disappearance of government services that depend on those revenues.

This paper will develop several aspects of the thesis that rural isolation limits children’s access to positions of respect in the wider society. After some preliminary remarks about inclusion, respect, and social equality, it will identify similarities between rural isolation and racial isolation, as it was discussed in the 1960s, and argue that both are failures of inclusion that present obstacles to free and equal citizenship. It will then address the evolving geography of opportunity and role of educational systems in shaping this geography. The farming regions of the American Midwest or ‘Heartland’ were among the first to expand the capacity of their public secondary schools to accommodate all children, in an era when high school diplomas were a valuable terminal degree. In the aftermath of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s,

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14 Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere*. Cf. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*, p. 217: “For at least some people, place matters . . . It is a part of at least some voters’ sense of self.” This is evident in the excerpts from her interview transcripts, in which her rural Wisconsin informants referred to themselves as ‘rural people,’ contrasting themselves with ‘city people.’

15 Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing out the Middle*, pp. 21-22, 89-90, and 95.


rural schools across the U.S. sponsored Future Farmers of America clubs that promoted the ecological and social sustainability of rural communities and a sense of meaningful participation in the progress of the country as a whole.\textsuperscript{18} Since then, the global expansion of educational systems and advance of technology have radically altered the value of a high school diploma and the geographic distribution of opportunity, even as rural schools perform well, in many respects.\textsuperscript{19} By 2010, a college diploma had become an essential prerequisite for middle class status in the U.S., and large cities of 150,000 or more residents accounted for 85 percent of the country’s GDP.\textsuperscript{20} Meanwhile, as rural towns shrink and can no longer retain doctors, dentists, and other professionals, the opportunities for more than local working-class respectability become geographically remote. In these towns, “the difference between $8 and $15 per hour means living in a house versus a trailer and being viewed as working-class instead of white trash,” but local working-class respectability does not seem to reliably confer respectability and


political voice within the larger society. For the residents of towns in the American Heartland, upward mobility is now barely distinguishable from geographic mobility.

Having addressed the dynamics of this geography of opportunity, the paper will then address the cultural aspects of rural isolation. Faced with a harsh structure of opportunity, rural identity and attachment to community engender high levels of anxiety and conflict in rural adolescents who must decide whether to stay or to go, cultural alienation in those who do leave to pursue a university education, and resentment, anger, and addiction in many who remain. For rural communities, sending their best out to succeed in the wider world and often not return is paradoxically a source of local pride and meaningful contribution to the ‘mainstream’ society to which they feel increasingly marginal.

A final section will identify some possible reforms that may be helpful in overcoming rural isolation. In doing this, it will consider how the rural-urban divide complicates the task of educating children both for their own benefit and for the benefit of society. The fundamental aim in educating children should be to enable every one of them to live well, and this suggests that, as far as possible, they should all be equipped by education with the developmental prerequisites of their own flourishing and also to cooperate in providing everyone else with opportunities to live well. This ideal is typically invoked without much specificity regarding the nested social

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21 Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing out the Middle*, p. 97. This wage range reported by Carr and Kefalas is consistent with a 40 percent decline in real wages earned by high school graduates in the U.S. since 1970 (Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land*, p. 125).


23 For developments of this conception of eudaimonic justice in education, see Curren, “A Neo-Aristotelian Account of Education, Justice, and the Human Good”; Randall Curren and Ellen Metzger, *Living Well Now and in the Future: Why Sustainability Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), chs. 3-4; Curren and Dorn, *Patriotic Education in a Global Age*, ch. 4. The conception of reciprocity this involves does not depend on a conception of
spheres in which it should apply, and its fulfillment is complicated by the unsustainability of rural towns and the role of geographic mobility in rural opportunity.

**Inclusion, respect, and social equality**

The chasm of opportunity and trust between those who have completed college and those who have not is a central aspect of the crisis that liberal democracies now face, and in the U.S. it is a chasm manifested in a geography of opportunity etched in an electoral map of red with a sprinkling of blue cities. Children of the rural Heartland and children of the urban poor both face the prospect of cultural dislocation in their quests for full inclusion in the life of the society, but the former face a prospect of geographic dislocation and separation from home that the latter often do not face. Some rural youth welcome this, but others discover it is a bridge too far. One of several questions at stake is whether there are prospects for advancing the opportunity and inclusion of rural children without forcing them to leave their communities of origin behind and adopt the cosmopolitanism of the ‘anywheres’ who pursue elite education and opportunity in global cities. National investment that provides upward mobility within rural towns may be as important to overcoming the problem of rural isolation as investment that facilitates inclusion through geographic mobility, especially if it is true that a country could not function without rural towns. Whatever mix of these forms of mobility may result from investing in rural children’s opportunities for inclusion, there is a case to be made for investments by higher levels of government.

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*justice as reciprocity* that would condition education for a child’s flourishing on her potential to engage in reciprocal social cooperation. For background, see Allen Buchanan, “Justice as Reciprocity versus Subject-Centered Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19(3) (1990): 227-252.
To further the inclusion of rural children, these investments should be made with a view to facilitating respected participation in the cultural, economic, and political life of the wider society. Sociological studies of the “new white minority” indicate a profound sense of cultural, economic, and political displacement from the center to the periphery of national life. This sense of displacement is not limited to rural areas, but the perception ‘rural people’ have that they are not respected by ‘city people’ may be its most politically toxic aspect. Katherine Cramer writes in her study of rural resentment in Wisconsin, that

Many of the people I listened to in rural areas identified strongly as rural people and took it as a given that rural areas do not get their fair share of political attention or decision-making power or public resources and have a fundamentally different set of values and lifestyles, which are neither understood nor respected by city dwellers.

Their resentment arises from these perceptions and related ones about “who is getting what and who deserves it,” but it is also shaped by political manipulation and the realities of globalization and a changing economic landscape.

No sector of a diverse population can justly claim the center of civic life for itself, but fair terms of cooperation in a constitutional system committed to free and equal citizenship would

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26 Ibid., p. 7. Arlie Hochschild writes similarly that her research subjects in rural Louisiana experience not only economic insecurity and demographic decline, but also – and perhaps most importantly – not being respected by outsiders (*Strangers in Their Own Land*, pp. 221-230). See also Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing out the Middle*, esp. ch. 1.
provide all children with opportunities for respected participation in the cultural, economic, and political life of the wider society. The isolation (de facto segregation) of an identity group that is perceived as inferior is an obstacle to such participation. For members of the group it is a psychologically taxing obstacle to achieving success beyond their communities of origin. For members of the world beyond those communities it is an obstacle to knowing and valuing members of their society whose merits and contributions they may underrate. For all concerned it is an obstacle to constructive civic engagement and cooperation in addressing urgent problems.

The kind of equality at stake in discussions of inclusion or opportunities for respected participation in a society is social or relational equality rather than distributive equality.\textsuperscript{27} Social or relational equality pertains to interpersonal relationships, and “it plays a central role in political philosophy because justice requires the establishment of a society of equals, a society whose members relate to one another on a footing of equality.”\textsuperscript{28} Equal moral consideration and equal civil rights and liberties are foundational to relational equality, but these foundational requirements are not always sufficient to prevent failures of relational justice manifested in hierarchies of esteem that undermine self-worth and civic friendship.\textsuperscript{29} Providing all children with opportunities for respected participation in the cultural, economic, and political life of the wider society is also essential.


\textsuperscript{28} Scheffler, “What is Egalitarianism?”, p. 21.

This might involve both more and less than Rawlsian fair equality of opportunity (FEO). It would require institutions designed to ensure as far as possible that the available opportunities in the society are sufficiently numerous and not so stratified as to leave some members of the society without substantial freedom to play valued roles or achieve positions of respect. This might be approximated by satisfying a version of Rawls’s difference principle that focuses as much on the institutional bases of public respect as the institutional bases of self-respect (if they diverge).\(^\text{30}\) On the other hand, FEO as Rawls defines it is not obviously necessary to achieving justice with respect to inclusion. FEO requires that equally talented and motivated children of different social strata have equal prospects of acquiring the most coveted offices and positions. If there are non-invidious ways of falling short of this ideal while providing everyone access to a range of respected positions consistent with equal citizenship, it is not obviously essential to full inclusion. Prioritizing inclusion and contrasting it with FEO in this way is not grounds for dismissing FEO as an ideal, however. The focus of this inquiry is inclusion, but relational equality and distributive equality may nevertheless be considered complimentary ideals rather than mutually exclusive alternatives.\(^\text{31}\)

What can be safely assumed for the purposes of this paper is that inclusion should be understood to entail all forms of equality that are intrinsic to or developmentally and functionally foundational to equal citizenship or full participation in the social and civic life of a society. A form of equality is intrinsic to equal citizenship if its absence is invidious or inherently marks


members of a group as belonging to a lower caste or being less than full citizens or members of the society. The constitutional structure of a society should present no invidious barriers to universal full participation, nor should its institutions present practical barriers to universal full participation, either developmental or functional. Developmental barriers pertain to opportunities for personal development and functional barriers pertain more broadly to prerequisites for functioning and being perceived as a social and civic peer.

**Inclusive education and rural isolation**

I shall assume that all children have a right to education that is inclusive in two senses. First, all children should have schools in which they are accepted as equals for the duration of their education. I shall refer to schools that are inclusive in this way as *just school communities*. They accord all students basic moral respect, equal rights, and responsibilities, and they cultivate related virtues. Second, all children should have education that facilitates their inclusion as civic equals in the wider society, with respect to acquired attributes, relationships, and credentials required for higher education, employment, and positions of leadership. I shall refer to schools that are inclusive in this second sense as *civically adequate schools*. Put differently, schools should do their part to provide all students equal opportunity to secure and flourish in positions of respect in the society – in the role of citizen and in social roles and positions of employment consistent with functioning as free and equal citizens. A noteworthy aspect of these forms of inclusivity is that the former is local, while the latter is societal. As such, a school might be inclusive as a just community (unto itself) without providing a civically adequate education. On the other hand, *integrated* just school communities may be a developmental and functional necessity for civically adequate inclusivity with respect to education. Further, while civically
adequate education may itself be a developmental and functional necessity for respected participation in the cultural, economic, and political life of the wider society, it is clearly only one aspect of the inclusive social policies that are essential to providing all members of the society with opportunities for such participation.

Educational research on inclusion has been overwhelmingly focused on education that takes place in and around cities.\textsuperscript{32} The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights explained in the preface to its 1967 report, \textit{Racial Isolation in the Public Schools}, that its inquiry was “limited to school segregation resulting from circumstances other than legal compulsion” and gave priority to cities and metropolitan areas, because “two-thirds of the Nation’s school children are educated in urban schools.”\textsuperscript{33} There are more children in metropolitan areas than in rural areas, so interventions that can be effectively implemented in the former would likely benefit more children than interventions that can be implemented with similar effectiveness in the latter. Interventions that reduce racial isolation might also be more readily available in metropolitan areas, where children identified as belonging to different races live in greater proximity. These considerations would not justify continuing neglect of rural schooling, however, and the hollowing out of depopulated ‘Heartland’ regions makes the problem of rural isolation more

\textsuperscript{32} In the sphere of political and educational theory, the great exception to silence about the education and opportunities of rural children was a long-running debate over the U.S. Supreme Court decision in \textit{Wisconsin v. Yoder}, 406 U.S. 205 (1972), which exempted Amish farming communities from the legal requirement to keep their children in school until age 16 (allowing them to withdraw their children at 14). By contrast with the rural context that frames the present inquiry, a key premise of the decision and ensuing debate was that rural Amish communities were and would remain self-sufficient and removed from the affairs of the encompassing society. For a seminal philosophical examination of the issues raised by the \textit{Yoder} decision, see Joel Feinberg, “The Child’s Right to an Open Future,” in \textit{Freedom & Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 76-97.

acute, just as intensifying concentrations of poverty and racial isolation in cities makes racial isolation a more acute problem.

The Commission on Civil Rights report uses the terms “racial isolation,” “racial separation,” and (de facto) “racial segregation,” interchangeably. It identifies the fact of separation as significant in two ways in its opening lines:

Education long has been recognized as one of the important ways in which the promise of America – equality of opportunity – can be fulfilled. The public schools traditionally have provided a means by which those newly arrived in the cities – the immigrant, and the impoverished – have been able to join the American mainstream. The hope for public education always has been that it would be a means of assuring equal opportunity and of strengthening and unifying American society.34

Equal opportunity and the strengthening and unification of American society are identified as interrelated goals of public education in this passage, and in related passages equal opportunity is associated with development of talents and joining the mainstream of society. Although equal opportunity has often been seen as a functionally separable primary rationale for integrated schooling, opportunity and the civic dimensions of education are rightly regarded as interrelated. Failures of justice with respect to opportunity can weaken and divide a society not only by engendering resentment and conflict but by denying it the benefits of a wider flowering of talent. Schools that secure the moral, civic, and social goods of integrated just school communities advance equal opportunity by nurturing attributes and relationships favorable to securing and

34 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Racial Isolation in the Public Schools, p. 1.
flourishing in desirable positions in integrated workplaces.\textsuperscript{35} The report identifies racial isolation as an obstacle to education that furthers these related goals of equal opportunity and civic unity, and the remedies contemplated in the report revolve around integrating schools.

Rural isolation is arguably a parallel phenomenon that has grown in significance as an obstacle to equal opportunity and the strength and unity of the society. If the U.S. has a mainstream today, it is in cities large enough to be players in the global economy – the cities in which highly educated people can expect the greatest financial return on the education they have obtained. Rural schools cannot all provide their students a college preparatory curriculum comparable to what urban and suburban schools do, and they do not provide direct social connection to the mainstream.\textsuperscript{36} Their students are less likely to have college-educated parents than urban students are, and they are physically excluded from the networks of mainstream society as surely as African-American students have been excluded from those networks by not having access to racially integrated schools.\textsuperscript{37} In both cases, physical exclusion may preclude their schools from being civically adequate or providing a developmentally and functionally sufficient basis for opportunities to achieve positions of respect in the wider society.


\textsuperscript{36} Although rural schools perform well by some measures, they “are less likely to offer rigorous college-prep courses, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes, than city and suburban schools” (Tieken, “College Talk and the Rural Economy,” p. 204). Kai Schafft notes that “instructional positions in math, science, and special education” are “especially difficult to fill in rural areas” (Schafft, “Rural Education as Rural development,” p. 147, citing K. Dadisman, M. Gravelle, T. Farmer, and R. Petrin, Grow Your Own and Other Alternative Certification Programs in Rural School Districts (Issue Brief) (Chapel Hill, NC: National Research Center on Rural Education Support, 2010).

\textsuperscript{37} On the college attainment of rural parents and its significance for their children’s likelihood of attending college, see Provasnik, et al., Status of Education in Rural America.
cases, inclusion that promotes friendly acquaintance, communication, and common projects could overcome prejudice and promote mutual respect.

Rural isolation is not associated with invidious exclusion in the way that racial isolation has been. Nor has rural-urban integration been regarded as a necessary means to equalizing educational investment in rural children, in the way that racial integration was often regarded as a necessary means to equalizing educational investment in African-American children. In these respects, the problem of rural isolation is not like the problem of racial isolation that the Commission on Civil Rights sought to address. Nevertheless, these problems are comparable with respect to three factors: physical separation from the mainstream of society and its wealth of opportunities, cultural distance from the mainstream, and failures of respect and mutual understanding that might be remedied through structured integrative experiences, such as those provided by civically adequate schools. As noted previously, the hollowing out of dying rural towns has also created problems for rural children that are similar in some respects to those faced by racially isolated children in urban ghettos where poverty is concentrated by out-migration and the disappearance of work. Opioid addiction, declining life expectancy, and lack of in-town healthcare are now widely recognized as rural problems, but Carr and Kefalas noted years ago that, “Rural kids have distressingly high suicide rates, early childbearing, and alcohol abuse. . . . And school shootings occur more frequently in isolated rural places. . . . By 1999, there were three hundred times more meth-lab seizures in Iowa than in New York and New Jersey combined.”\(^{38}\) The struggles of rural communities undermine the performance of their schools and students as surely as the struggles of racially isolated urban communities undermine theirs.

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\(^{38}\) Carr and Kefalas, Hollowing out the Middle, pp. 76-77.
The geography of opportunity

One could imagine a world in which rural isolation is not a problem, a world in which rural children never ventured out into the world and were no more hindered in living well than had they been born in a thriving city with access to its more numerous opportunities. It would be a world in which rural communities are sustainably self-sufficient and experience no failures of relational equality that could be remedied by out-migration or a different relationship to the wider society. Everyone would have opportunities to play respected roles, and no one’s prospects of being a respected member of society would be improved by migrating out or by the town having a different relationship to the outside world. Being sustainably self-sufficient, these rural communities would either be in all respects self-contained or be assured of favorable terms of exchange in obtaining needed goods and services, including educational services, from the outside world. Yet, not even rural Amish communities using preindustrial modes of farming and transportation come close to being self-contained in this sense. Assurance of favorable terms of exchange is no less utopian – and all the more remote in the absence of external civic engagement. Seen in this light, education for inclusion in the wider society is both a right that is essential to the full value of free and equal citizenship and a form of insurance against geographic accidents of birth.

Self-sufficiency and vulnerability are matters of degree, of course, and today, more than ever, rural towns are endangered outposts on the peripheries of global economic empires. The

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39 This is based on personal observations of extensive commercial integration of Amish communities with the outside world in Holmes County, Ohio, in the 1990s. The marketing of this region to cultural and eco-tourists has (understandably) only intensified in the meantime. See https://amishcountryinsider.com/. The loveliness of Holmes County and its proximity to metropolitan areas are assets that many rural communities cannot rely on, unfortunately. See also, John Stoltzfus, “Ask an Amishman: How Self-sufficient are the Amish?” Amish America Feb. 4, 2013, http://amishamerica.com/how-self-sufficient-are-the-amish/.
evolution of the U.S. educational system and ensuing global educational revolution is an important aspect of how this has come about.

Through the early decades of the public school movement in the U.S., high schools competed directly with colleges, academies, and proprietary technical and professional schools. Sometimes referred to as “people’s colleges,” they were locally controlled and funded institutions that conferred terminal degrees. Farm states were early adopters, and the school year was defined to accommodate the seasonal rhythm of children’s work on family farms. Before the rest of the world caught up, rural towns of the American Heartland were remarkably self-sufficient and well-positioned with respect to education. The ascent of universities and the influence of their admissions policies on school curricula changed this, leading in time to the formation of the integrated sequential system of education that has been emulated all over the world. As public school systems scaled up, they created a growing pool of students qualified for university degrees and in time a growing demand for higher education. In 1950 only half of Americans had any formal education beyond elementary school and only 5 percent completed baccalaureate degrees, but in the 1960s high school completion rates reached about 70 percent and high school diplomas were no longer rare enough to provide much advantage in labor markets. Their exchange value was thus reduced to being little more than a requirement for admission to college. Things might have been different if high schools had differentiated curricula linked to the qualifications and certification for a wide array of occupations, as in the


German system.\textsuperscript{42} The reality for a system built on academic curricula is that rising rates of high school completion have stimulated higher rates of college attendance, and higher baccalaureate completion rates have stimulated wider pursuit of further graduate and professional degrees. A direct effect of this is that rural towns’ investment in their own schools does not make them as nearly educationally self-sufficient as it once did. A geographic gulf now stands between rural children and the higher education that is essential to middle-class status.

Overlaid on this geographic gulf of educational opportunity is a widening cultural gulf associated with the changing nature and distribution of work and associated patterns of migration and population density and diversity. Until recently, educational sociologists who accepted the evidence that pursuit of higher credentials is the driving force in the expansion of educational systems also assumed that explosive global growth in the availability of highly educated employees would not alter the nature of work.\textsuperscript{43} The assumption was that economic relations shape everything else, including education, and educational institutions have no shaping influence of their own. Yet the growth of education has facilitated the creation of new forms of work, the demise of many forms of less skilled work, and the alteration of much of the work that has survived from previous eras. It has done this both by facilitating the creation and widespread adoption of new technologies that have transformed workplaces, and by stimulating the creation and growth of new professional roles involving complex forms of analytical and creative thought. These lucrative professional roles are overwhelmingly in cities, “where the more extensive ‘market’ for professional services affords greater opportunity for division of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[43] Baker, The Schooled Society.
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function.”

This has yielded large income differentials between urban and rural areas, as well as within urban areas. Greater differentiation and complexity of roles is associated with greater social stratification, and one corollary of this pattern is a cultural divide between urban spheres of professional work involving applications of analytical prowess and rural spheres of food production, materials extraction and refining, and manufacturing.

A primary effect of expanding educational systems has thus been to facilitate the emergence of a structure and geography of opportunity that expands the chasm between those at the top and those at the bottom and concentrates higher-status positions in cities. The structure of opportunity, defined by the nature of work and terms of access to it, have been changing rapidly, to the detriment of smaller communities that have less access to higher education and are less likely to attract and retain college graduates. Meanwhile, as large cities have attracted diverse populations and nurtured comfort with diversity, opportunity has often been a one-way ticket out of rural towns that has left them more ethnically homogenous and isolated from the social worlds of middle-class opportunity and esteem.

All told, the global expansion of educational systems has made the difference between having and lacking a college degree economically and culturally fundamental to an extent it never was in the past. David Goodhart comes close to acknowledging this in his diagnosis of

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45 On the relationship between complexity and stratification, see Curren and Metzger, *Living Well Now and in the Future*, ch. 4: Complexity and the Structure of Opportunity.

46 See Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing out the Middle*; Hochschild, *Strangers in the Own Land*. It should be noted that there are small rural cities and towns in the U.S., such as Dodge City and Garden City, Kansas, that are being transformed by immigration and now have majority-minority, mostly Hispanic, populations. See James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018), pp. 351-375.

the Brexit vote in the U.K. as exposing a cleavage between the mobile ‘anywheres’ who begin or end up in global cities, which offer the best educational and employment opportunities, and the immobile ‘somewheres’ who begin and remain in rural towns and smaller cities that are in economic decline.\textsuperscript{48} The rural high achievers who migrate to global cities must leave behind the comfort of “being surrounded by people you know, people who share similar expectations about what constitutes a good life,” and they must acquire the cosmopolitan sensibilities and virtues that allow the multicultural social worlds of global cities to function well without common bonds of nationality or religion. Those who remain in rural towns may need to make a similar transition when immigrants arrive, but the virtues of tolerance, hospitality, and trust are more likely to flourish where the promise of opportunity is kept.\textsuperscript{49} It does not help that regional segregation of those with and without college education is a defining aspect of a collapse of equal opportunity so obvious that 50-65 percent of Americans now say that opportunity is hereditary.\textsuperscript{50} Research on rural adolescents suggests that “feelings of anxiety dominate [their] thoughts about the future. . . . Simultaneously feeling compelled to find a decent living and desiring to remain rural, males may feel angry that there are not more options available for them that would satisfy both of these goals.”\textsuperscript{51} This is not surprising, given how few of them are being prepared to succeed in the current economic landscape, either by leaving their hometowns or by staying in roles that could give them and their towns a future.


\textsuperscript{50} Luce, \textit{The Retreat of Western Liberalism}, p. 44.

Class and culture in the exclusion of rural children

Rural children are disadvantaged by a daunting geography of opportunity. Even those with college educated parents and teachers who invest heavily in their education face logistical and cultural barriers to success at universities that children in metropolitan areas do not face. Many rural children also face the double burden of being rural in an urban economy and being denied respect and equal opportunity within their rural communities and schools. Unfavorable moral judgments about their families shape how they are treated in their schools in ways that deny them the civically adequate education to which they are entitled – education that facilitates their inclusion as civic equals both in their local community and in the wider society.

In their study in rural Iowa, Carr and Kefalas identified patterns of class-based intensive cultivation of students identified as high-achievers. This was manifested most conspicuously in stark differences in the amount of positive attention children received from their teachers and others. 52 “There is probably no other place in American society where the rules of class and status play out with a more brutal efficiency than in the world of a country high school,” they write. 53 Children of the local elite are “in a position of privilege from the start” in their schools, while some talented children of the “right kind” of underprivileged families are also cultivated as high-achievers:

A talented kid not from the best part of town could be groomed as an Achiever as long as neighbors assessed the young person’s circumstances to be a result of misfortune rather

52 Karr and Kefalas, Hollowing out the Middle, p. 31.

53 Ibid.
than moral failure or fecklessness, and as long as his or her family was not judged to be undeserving of local philanthropy. . . . Ideally, the student’s family was counted among the respectable, churchgoing sort . . . Respectability could be earned through any number of simple acts: not wasting food stamps or unemployment checks at the supermarket, or wearing clean and mended clothes, even if they were old and purchased at the discount store.\textsuperscript{54}

Children are not responsible for the family characteristics that play such an influential role in some being favored, so those who are less favored in this selection process are done an injustice. They have an equal fundamental right to education and do not need to “deserve” it. Yet a role for families’ deservingness of local philanthropy suggests that public education is perceived as philanthropic, when it comes to less fortunate families, and that deservingness is perceived incorrectly as both relevant and inherited.

In a related study conducted in rural northern California after the collapse of the region’s timber industry, Jennifer Sherman and Rayna Sage found that “marginalized residents often experienced the schools as reinforcers of social divisions that further excluded and disadvantaged those with fewer resources, poorer job prospects, extended histories of government assistance, or problems with drugs and alcohol.”\textsuperscript{55} They found, much as Carr and Kefalas did, that a family’s “perceived moral standing in the community” played a weighty role in “how a child comes to be recognized by teachers and the larger community as one who ‘deserves’ an education.”\textsuperscript{56} “The

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., pp. 32, 33-34.

\textsuperscript{55} Sherman and Sage, “Sending off all your Good Treasures,” p. 11.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 3.
category of “best and brightest’ tends to be constructed around moral and social schisms, which predestine many children for one trajectory or another before they even enroll in school.”\textsuperscript{57} Not surprisingly, Sherman and Sage found that parents at the bottom of the local hierarchy complained about teachers ignoring their children, not treating them fairly, and not “preparing them adequately for a future in the community.”\textsuperscript{58}

More generally, residents with less “social, human, economic, and moral capital” felt “isolated from the community’s mainstream and frustrated by the choices left available to them.”\textsuperscript{59} Summing up the struggle for respect in a town where a high school diploma was not a requirement for decent work before the 1990s but sending one’s children away to college was the new measure of respectability, a local business owner whose children did go to college remarked that:

You know, some people will look at a kid that graduated from Golden Valley High School, married his high school sweetheart, and worked – let’s say they worked in the mill or logged, and owned a small modest home and raised their family – and they think, wow, that guy is just a, you know, an unsophisticated bumpkin, uh, not real educated, not real intelligent, not really contributing anything to society. Well, I think to me that’s the most noble thing somebody can do. . . . And there’s a lot of people that aren’t college material, you know. There’s a lot of people that are never gonna be a rocket scientist.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 11.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 9.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 10, italics added for emphasis.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 10. “Golden Valley” is a pseudonym.
Those who begin life behind in rural towns have little prospect of making it to college and may have little prospect of achieving a position of respect in their local communities, let alone the wider society. Achieving a position of respect in the wider society may be a challenge even for their more fortunate peers.

When rural students are able to attend college they often incur notable social and psychic costs in striving to make a place for themselves in a world very different from the one they have known. They often experience conflict and regret in leaving their communities, as well as cultural alienation and social rejection in university settings. The strong, intergenerational networks of rural communities and encouragement of high-achieving students provide those students a comfortable familiarity and sense of valued belonging, while also limiting their familiarity with human diversity and ease of integration into the more cosmopolitan and anonymous world of a flagship state university or more remote institution.

“For small-town kids, particularly from the countryside, going off to college is a momentous, intense, and, for some, alienating experience,” write Carr and Kefalas. It is their “point of entry into a world controlled by the nation’s elite,” and “ignorance about the rules of college life transforms Ellis’s former popular students and teachers’ pets – overnight – into country bumpkins.” Angela, one of Carr and Kefalas’s interviewees, recounted that:

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62 Ibid., p. 4. See also Schafft, “Rural Education as Rural Development,” and Carr and Kefalas, Hollowing out the Middle, ch. 1.
63 Carr and Kefalas, Hollowing out the Middle, p. 43.
64 Ibid., pp. 44, 45. “Ellis” is a pseudonym.
Arriving on campus [at the University of Iowa] was a culture shock, not simply because of the apparent ubiquity of illicit drugs and Victoria’s Secret-themed parties where female guest wear lingerie, but because of how her peers treated her. . . . In the dorms, when Angela shared stories about going hunting with her father or listening to country music while doing her homework, the girls on her floor ‘would kind of look at you like, you know, it’s weird.’ In their eyes, Angela, the softball star and honor student from the town no one had heard of, was little more than a ‘hick’ and, confesses Angela in a hushed tone, ‘just a little white trash.’

A few of Carr and Kefalas’s interviewees “simply were not willing to reinvent themselves or give up the comforts and familiarity of small-town life,” but others overcame experiences like Angela’s and found the opportunities afforded by college exhilarating. Even those who found the “exposure to different things, different types of people . . . racial and ethnic groups . . . a great education in and of itself,” recognized “the price that must be paid for big-city transformation.” Jack, a law student, acknowledged that when he returns home:

He needs time to acclimate to small-town life. He and his friends from Ellis who now attend universities have all noticed that they have a dual identity that manifests itself in their wardrobes. . . . As Jack explains, you can’t go home and hang out at a bar and play pool wearing the clothes you’d wear to a bar on the Gold Coast. Such displays make it

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65 Ibid., p. 45.
66 Ibid., p. 44 and 46-50.
67 Ibid., pp. 47, 48.
seem as if you’ve forgotten where you’ve come from and imply that you’re looking down on the people who have remained close to home. . . . The Achievers come to see leaving – and the metamorphosis that accompanies it – as disrespecting where you come from.68

Dual identities and code-switching between the values of one’s home culture and a mainstream culture are a price of opportunity for those who begin outside the mainstream.69 Those who succeed in integrating themselves into the mainstream typically recognize that “there is a level of ignorance among the people [back home] . . . because they haven’t been exposed to different situations in life that are presented to individuals in larger areas,” but it is a recognition fraught with conflict and ethical costs.70

Advancing the inclusion of rural youth
The foregoing analysis suggests that rural isolation is a barrier to the inclusion or relational equality of rural children. It arises from a geography of opportunity shaped by relationships between population density, social complexity, and stratification, and it is amplified by the global growth of educational systems and the concentration of college graduates and professional positions in metropolitan areas. It is a distinctly geographic form of isolation but it is similar to racial isolation to the extent that it involves physical distance, cultural distance, failures of respect, and – since the 1990s – the burdens of concentrated poverty associated with economic

68 Ibid., p. 48.
70 Ibid., p. 47.
collapse and the out-migration of those with the social, financial, human, and moral capital needed to leave. In these circumstances, children excluded from the mainstream of not just the society at large but their local communities face particularly bleak prospects. What is to be done?

One response to place-based disparities of opportunity is to pursue place-based development policies designed to reduce these disparities. The rooted residents of dying rural towns would clearly often prefer such policies, if the policies could bring back decent work that does not force their children to pursue higher education and find work wherever it may be. Strong attachment to place, collective ambivalence about education, and hope that children who go away to college will eventually return to jobs better than ones presently available are recurring themes in the research on rural education. Why must rural children pick up and move in order to have a place of respect in the society, they may ask. The political theorist Judith Shklar implied in *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* that they should not be forced to move. She argued that work is a functional requirement for equal citizenship, so societies should recognize a right to work “derived from the requirements of local [i.e., national] citizenship,” and “the minimal political obligation must be the creation of paying jobs geographically close to the unemployed.”

The place-based policies this may require have fallen out of favor, however. Many have failed or have been so expensive on a per capita basis that the entire approach has been written off by some observers as a misguided exercise in picking economic winners and losers. “Helping poor people is simple justice; helping poor places is far more difficult to justify,”

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argued Edward Glaeser in 2011.73 So invest in “the skills [people] need to compete, wherever they choose to live, rather than encouraging them to stay in one particular locale,” and do this at “higher levels of government . . . in a way that offsets the added costs of poverty.”74 Seven years later, in 2018, Glaeser is among those who argue that some place-based policies are effective and essential to “saving the heartland.”75 This is not the place to adjudicate this debate, so I will confine my remarks to two observations before focusing specifically on the provision of civically adequate education for rural children.

First, returning to Carr and Kefalas’s assessment that “the country couldn’t function” without the towns of the rural Heartland, it is not clear how many can survive. Would smart place-based policies and stronger retention of highly educated young people be enough to stabilize dying rural towns and expand the range of positions that confer working class respectability or better? It might in some cases, though surely not all. Even the most vigorous efforts to arrest climate change and other problems of sustainability will not halt the advance of severe drought, heat waves, desertification, fires, and the depletion of aquifers across vast swaths of the U.S. and much of the world beyond it by 2040.76 The 134,000 square mile Ogallala

73 Ibid., p. 256.
74 Ibid., pp. 257 and 259.
76 Coral Davenport, “Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040,” New York Times October 7, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-climate-report-2040.html. This new IPCC report, based on an analysis of 6,000 studies, is the first systematic effort to project the impact of 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit (1.5 ° C) of global surface mean warming. It pegs the costs of such warming at $54 trillion and predicts severe heat waves, drought, food shortages, fires, coastal inundation, and die-offs of coral reefs (and the aquatic ecosystems they support) by 2040. For details, see IPCC, Global Warming of 1.5 ° C (October 2018), http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/. For an overview of major causes and manifestations of unsustainability, see Curren and Metzger, Living Well Now and in the Future, pp. 16-24. For region by region overviews, see UNEP, Summary of the Sixth Global Environment Outlook, GEO-6, Regional Assessments: Key Findings and Policy Messages (Nairobi: United Nations Environmental Programme, 2016), http://www.unep.org/publications/.
Aquifer has sustained farming in the Great Plains of the U.S. since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and it will take a miracle for the region to survive the Ogalla’s projected collapse in the mid-2030s. Rural development policy should be a high priority, but it must be focused on what is sustainable and it should be pursued in the context of global climate stabilization through the Paris climate framework. This is essential to limiting the collapse of agrarian economies and mass migration of climate refugees that is already occurring, but it will not save every region.

Second, Glaser’s suggestion that justice requires national funding of education is well-taken. Securing the developmental and functional prerequisites of equal citizenship in the society is a matter of fundamental constitutional concern, and, to the extent that civically adequate education is one such prerequisite, there is a strong case to be made for national funding of such education to whatever extent may be necessary to ensure every child in the society receives it. Without this, states and localities may fail to deliver civically adequate education, especially in the face of economic decline. This argument is predicated on a right to education associated with equal citizenship. A second argument can be predicated on where the benefits of educating children flow. To the extent that deficits of local opportunity lead rural towns to focus their educational efforts on sending their high-achieving graduates out into the world, where those


graduates contribute not to their communities of origin but to the country at large, educating those children for their own benefit can only be reconciled with educating them for the benefit of society if the society in question is primarily the country at large. More generally, if the national sphere is a significant sphere of reciprocity with respect to educational benefit – whether or not out-migration is involved – there is a strong prima facie case for the costs of educational provision resting to that extent at the national level. This is a consideration secondary to the assertion of a fundamental right of inclusion, and it applies to only a portion of rural schools’ educational costs, but it is a matter of fairness, nonetheless.

In towns that are resilient enough to survive, national funding of rural education could aid local efforts to coordinate community development and educational practices in ways that might create better and more sustainable local opportunities. In the tradition of the Future Farmers of America club movement, “rural school engagement in community development . . . [could] strengthen and support local economies, while providing young people with new and perhaps unanticipated imaginations for adult life within their home rural communities (or one like it).” It may be only in the context of coordinated community development and educational reform that sufficient pathways into productive adult roles could be created by and for rural students who do not go on to four-year colleges. As a matter of justice, rural schools’ should balance their focus on outward mobility with stronger promotion of upward mobility for those who remain in and return to their home communities.

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79 On the importance of such coordination, see Schafft, “Rural Education as Rural Development”; Seelig, North of Highway 8.

80 Schafft, “Rural Education as Rural Development,” p. 147.
In the interest of providing a locally inclusive education, schools should be locally inclusive just communities in which all children are treated as equals, and they should provide civically adequate education that equips all students for positions of respect and inclusion as civic equals in the local community. There is little reason to think this could be accomplished by educating all children in a conventional pre-college academic curriculum, even if teachers and schools did not overinvest in children from the best parts of town and underinvest in those not identified as high-achievers. Such failures of equity are unjust from the standpoint of social or relational equality, which requires equity in providing all children with feasible pathways to positions of respect consistent with free and equal citizenship. Providing all children with such pathways is a daunting task, but it might be more nearly achieved by moving away from a uniform pre-collegiate curriculum and closer to the German apprenticeship model for a rural context. This might involve coordination of schools and community colleges with local and regional development, and the cooperation of labor, industry, and governments in establishing certification standards.\(^8\)

All of this might strengthen opportunity and inclusion within rural towns, but overcoming rural isolation would require more than this. How can the geographic and cultural distance between rural towns and global cities be overcome, in the interest of rural children’s inclusion in the wider society and in the interest of strengthening and unifying American society? Creating integrated rural-urban schools as such does not seem possible, but there may be ways to create integrated rural-urban just community experiences. It is also possible that, in doing so, local respectability can be made sufficient for a place of respect in the wider society.

How can rural youth be brought into friendly communication with urban peers, to cultivate wide civic friendship? Schools could take a page from traditional efforts to cultivate global citizenship, by updating pen pal programs and adapting them to bridge the rural-urban divide. They could update and adapt a Progressive Era community civics model, bringing rural-urban teams of students together through teleconferencing and other means to collaboratively research challenges in their respective communities and develop and promote proposals to address them. The U.S. could adopt a rural-urban partnership version of the U.K.’s National Citizen Service, which is a 2 to 4 week youth development and public service program involving team-building; leadership and communication training; connecting with organizations and community leaders; and completion of a social action project. It is designed to promote “capable, connected, and compassionate” citizenship and provide an institutional bridge from school to work. Such a program could be targeted specifically to bridging the rural and urban divide, by engaging joint rural-urban youth teams in projects, ideally in both a rural context and in an urban context. In the absence of a feasible model for integrated rural-urban schools, this could be a practical rural-urban youth leadership and public service bridge through which mutual understanding, respect, and civic friendship could be promoted. It could be one aspect of a more comprehensive, integrated approach through which rural-urban friendship and cooperation could develop through the school years. A related idea would be a version of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Global Futures proposal for collegiate education, focused not on global problems but on domestic problems. Like the Progressive Era community civics

84 See Kevin Hovland, Shared Futures: Global Learning and Liberal Education (Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2006); Curren and Dorn, Patriotic Education in a Global Age, ch. 6.
approach, it is problem-solving and team-building model of cooperative learning, and in the context rural-urban polarization it might involve rural community colleges partnering with urban colleges and universities.

**Conclusion**

In promoting fair access to positions of respect in a society, there must be acknowledgement of the functional realities of esteem but also ethical scrutiny of those realities. Withholding of esteem and respect may be unjustified, and the markers of success on which esteem and respect pivot are often questionable. From an ethical standpoint, the harmonization of education for a child with education of a child for others requires a social and economic system in which the respected roles individuals can occupy actually do promote the good of others in ways compatible with the individual’s own good. In eudaimonic terms, what is required is a system of roles in which individuals cooperate in enabling others to live well, as an aspect of living well themselves. This implies a set of contributing roles, all of which should be esteemed or compatible with fundamental social or relational equality. Such a system of roles might only exist through policies reaching far beyond education that we do not yet have, including policies that come to grips with the social impact of automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence.

In the meantime, we would do well to think more deeply and collectively about the nature and value of work. Rousseau wrote, as the French Revolution approached, that sons of privilege should learn a trade, not only because systems of entrenched privilege might soon be upended, but as part of a wider education in the value of labor and valuing of those who engage in it.\(^8\) As

the world hurtles toward ecological catastrophe in rural ‘heartlands’ across the world, such valuing is not irrelevant to overcoming rural isolation and establishing a more inclusive and constructive civic life and politics.

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