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Jennifer Sherman, Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America

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Jennifer Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009 (264 pp.), ISBN 978-0-8166-5905-0, US\$ 19.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Peter A. Kindle

Golden Valley, the pseudonym for an economically distressed and isolated timber community of approximately 2,000 people in northern California, is highlighted in this excellent ethnographic study. The author lived among the residents of this community for a year, actively participated in social and community events, volunteered in several local businesses and charitable organizations, and conducted 55 semi-structured interviews to supplement her ethnographic experiences. All names and details have been modified to insure confidentiality, yet this has not limited the depth of understanding Sherman shares with her readers.

Golden Valley, from the perspective of Sherman, represents many declining rural communities marked by economic hardship, isolation, low in-migration, and racial/cultural homogeneity. In this social context, the symbolic boundaries of social structure are marked primarily by moral norms because all other sources of social distinction have wasted away. Rather than dismissing these moral norms as a lack of rural sophistication, Sherman interprets them as an adaptation of the American Dream, the “value of hard work and the doctrine of individual achievement” (p. 6).

The implicit focus of this slim volume is to understand why anyone would choose to live in a poor rural community without job prospects or cultural amenities. Sherman finds that community coherence in Golden Valley is rooted in particular forms of American individualism and family life. The moral norms that sustain Golden Valley rely less on formal teachings of religion or ethics than it does on social relationships, a sense of place, and individual reputation. Compliance with moral norms, especially as regards work and family, leads to a form of *moral capital* used to organize the social life of the community.

The Introduction provides a justification of Sherman’s moral lens, how this is differentiated from a religious or ethical framework, and her research approach. I found that synthesizing most of the content in this section before reading the rest

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of the book was difficult because it builds upon conclusions reached in chapters one through four.

Chapter one explains how Sherman selected Golden Valley. She was looking for an exemplar of rural decline. Whether resulting from a loss of manufacturing jobs, declines in extractive industries, or loss of farm ownership, decline has been the shared fate of many rural communities. Golden Valley may be an extreme example, but Sherman provides a brief sketch of the community's history, demographic details on population and employment, and details of the spotted owl controversy that ended logging employment in Golden Valley. The bittersweet voices of the surviving residents fill the concluding pages of this chapter with their tales of hardship and devotion to their life in Golden Valley.

The second chapter focuses on the hegemonic embrace of a mainstream work ethic in Golden Valley. In contrast with an urban environment in which various subcultures provide a broader range of survival strategies, the small population, lack of anonymity, and cultural homogeneity in a community like Golden Valley creates substantial social pressure to conform. In decreasing measures of legitimacy, moral value in Golden Valley was associated with paid work, subsistence work (e.g., hunting or fishing), financial assistance from extended family members, cheap housing, receipt of unemployment benefits, and disability payments. Receipt of welfare payments (e.g., TANF or food stamps) and illegal activities actually resulted in a negative moral capital in the community. Three case studies are discussed in detail to illustrate commitment to the work ethic and the shame associated with welfare receipts.

Family life is highly prioritized in Golden Valley; however, the moral value associated with family life is not without its inconsistencies and ambiguities. As chapter three illustrates, stability of the nuclear family is paramount despite evidence to the effect that it has been relatively rare in Golden Valley's recent past. Extended family and nonfamily alternatives to the nuclear family are common and provide a degree of moral capital for those who care for children in this manner. In contrast to middle class families that strive to create opportunities and advantages for their children, Golden Valley parents focus on creating a safe environment for their children, meaning that the alcoholism and domestic violence that was common when most men worked as loggers is no longer tolerated now that most employment opportunities are provided to women. To the families of Golden Valley, *traditional* family values have been constructed in reaction against the competition, perception of racialized crime, and pace of change in urban America.

Maintenance of traditional family structures in a community without employment opportunities for most of the men has been a significant challenge to Golden Valley, and Sherman addresses this challenge in chapter four. While in many respects this chapter is repetitive of earlier discussions, the variety of adaptations to economic realities demonstrates the flexibility of rural cultures when faced with externalities that cannot be controlled.

In the extensive Conclusion, an unnumbered fifth chapter, Sherman suggests that the poverty of rural communities like Golden Valley cannot be effectively addressed without understanding the morality that undergirds community survival. “In the face of macroeconomic forces that individuals cannot imagine being able to influence or change, morality allows them to adapt and focus on the positive aspects of their lives” (p. 189). Politicians, policy analysts, and political parties need to take this implication of Sherman’s study to heart. Golden Valley residents considered themselves “wealthier with half the income” (p. 196). Policies that provide financial supports that bypass employment or that require relocation, both violations of the moral frame that shapes Golden Valley, are unlikely to affect rural poverty.

I found Sherman’s research to be insightful and stimulating. With 257 footnotes and a 15-page bibliography, this book is well-researched for the scholar, but easily accessible to the casual reader. It is highly recommended as a primary source for anyone desiring to understand life in rural America.

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