Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America, by Glen H. Elder Jr. and Rand D. Conger. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xx, 373 pp. Illustrations, graphs, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. $35.00 cloth, $24.50 paper.

Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America, by Cynthia M. Duncan. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. xvii, 235 pp. Maps, tables, graphs, notes, appendixes, index. $27.50 cloth.

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These books represent two very different approaches to the study of society, but provide insights into the state of rural America at the end of the twentieth century. While studying disparate locales and using divergent methods, the authors would agree that the glue that holds society together in rural areas is a dynamic civic culture in the community, allied with strong family ties. Elder and Conger focus on the farms and small towns of north central Iowa; Duncan on rural Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and northern New England. Appalachia and the Delta have traditionally been associated with poverty, while the Iowa Cornbelt, one of the most productive farm areas in the world, has recently suffered from a financial crisis and weather problems. Elder and Conger analyze how setbacks in family fortunes affect adolescent children; Duncan's more expansive study centers on why poverty persists in certain areas of rural America (she uses the northern New England locale as a contrast to her two main venues, where poverty has become a way of life).

Elder and Conger use rigorous social science methods to study the lives of Iowa schoolchildren in the early 1990s. This work is modeled on Elder's celebrated *Children of the Great Depression* (1974), in which he analyzed data collected in the 1930s to discover the effects of economic hard times on adolescents. The Iowa Project began in 1989 with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, other federal agencies, and the McArthur Foundation. It followed 451 two-parent households with seventh-grade children until the children graduated from high school in 1994. As is often the case with massively supported social science projects, the rigor demanded by the support agencies tends to squeeze out the human touch from the presentation of results. Halfway through the book the authors present a photo essay titled "the seasonal cycle in farm country," as if to remind readers that the subject matter is people and places. The old cliché that social science documents the obvious is demonstrated in work so dependent

on statistical manipulation and hypothesis testing. This is underlined when Elder and Conger's methodology is compared to Duncan's. Elder and Conger interviewed their subjects and translated the interviews into a statistical format, while Duncan's interviews often appear verbatim in the text, seamlessly integrated into her narrative.

Elder and Conger stress the uniqueness of the farm family in modern society, especially in north central Iowa, where rich soil attracted German families who have remained remarkably persistent on their farms for more than one hundred years. These families practiced intergenerational cooperation both in farming and in the inheritance of land. Given this family closeness, the authors are interested in gauging the impact of a financial downturn on adolescents who either still lived on farms, had left farms because of the farm crisis, or whose parents came from farm backgrounds.

The book bristles with results that attest to the positive legacy of a farm background on adolescent youth. Ironically, although only 20 percent of the farm boys wanted to farm, both boys and girls wanted to *live* on a farm—most said it was important to live in the country to raise a family. Farm chores provided children with significant work experience, which developed maturity and good work habits. Boys often worked closely with fathers: as a result, they attained many useful skills and close parental bonds. Many children felt that they were vital cogs in the success of the farm operation. Although chores declined after the eighth grade, paid work on and off the farm gave children a competence and confidence that marked them ahead of their years. Strong intergenerational family ties added strength to the lives of these children. In many families, grandparents came into daily contact with adolescents. In some cases they acted as a kind of safety net when parents, traumatized by their farm crisis losses, could no longer function. Farm children were often active in church, and religious involvement predicted good grades and peer success at school. Attendance at schools with small enrollments—typical of those found in rural and small-town Iowa—enabled children to take part in a large number of activities, enhancing these youths' socialization process.

In north central Iowa, active participation in school, church, and community organizations—indicators of a strong civic culture—were characteristic of students whose families were satisfied with their situation. Families with weak ties to the community, on the other hand, suffered alienation. Significantly, children with the best prospects came from families who ran the largest farms. Moreover, academic and social success had more to do with the socioeconomic resources of families than social relations.

Such findings would seem familiar to Duncan, whose analysis of Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta emphasizes the inequality in these locales. Historians may feel more comfortable with Duncan's oral interview formula, which tries to understand why poverty remains endemic in some rural areas and not in others. Her approach is to let the interviewees tell their stories—often in colorful language—and in a final summary chapter tries to make sense of her findings. In the conventional view, poverty is a legacy of structural problems in the economy, or cultural baggage perpetuated from generation to generation. More recent theory, however, suggests that the poverty cycle is maintained by what people know and what they experience in their daily lives. In Appalachia and the Delta, a two-class society—managers/coal miners and sharecroppers/planters—kept the have-nots isolated from the mainstream; in the Delta the situation was made even more extreme by racism. Even though millions of federal dollars were spent in both areas over the past 30 years and poverty has lessened to some degree, the social system is still characterized by a boss culture. Poor employment possibilities accentuate the importance of a patronage system provided by county government and the schools. The upper-class power structure that controls these institutions discourages participation in the political system. Not surprisingly, a lower class without access to institutions typical of middle-class civic culture remains isolated and demoralized.

As Duncan emphasizes, the American commitment to government decentralization and localism and ambivalence about racial integration have prevented change in many poverty-stricken communities. Good public schools—just the kind of schools that are typical of rural and small-town Iowa but so lacking in the Delta and Appalachia—remain the key institutions promoting change. As Elder and Conger amply demonstrate, the family and civic culture that flourishes in the Cornbelt allowed families to survive the farm crisis of the 1980s despite crippling losses. Most important, the impact was apparently minimal on children, who, although not interested in farm careers, demonstrated the utility of their rural roots by good records in school and enrollment in college. Elder and Conger's massive project shows what many others before them have asserted with less rigorous methods: that a farm upbringing provides good training for life. It is a pity for the state of Iowa, and the nation as a whole, that only a tiny proportion of the population is still needed on farms. On the other hand, the metropolitan areas of the country have benefited from this exodus. The suburbs of the Sunbelt have become home to many transplants who daily demonstrate their competence in the workplace.

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