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Teaching About the Environment in Cattle Country: A Reflection on Values and Conflict

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I teach anthropology at a rural university with a student body derived mostly from the surrounding areas. Sixty percent of the students at Eastern Oregon University are from that immediate region, and another 20 percent are from other rural areas. Many of our students come from families that have been ranching or farming or logging for generations, and many students expect to return to these occupations after college. This academic world, for many, is an alien world, filled with bizarre theories and upside-down values diametrically opposed to those learned at home or in the tiny and isolated public school systems in the small towns scattered throughout northeastern Oregon. Students must learn to cope with the disorientation and even shock resulting from exposure to "radical" ideas and "radical" professors, at the same time they learn to navigate the "urban" environs of the sprawling metropolis of La Grande.

Lest you think I am exaggerating the extent of such provincialism in our modern age of television, movie videos, and the Internet, let me offer just one illustrative example. I and other professors teach in disciplines that emphasize human biological evolution. The concept of human evolution is so upsetting to some students that they will not even come to class during that portion of the course, and choose to forfeit points on exams rather than hear about evolution. Perhaps the one topic that provokes even more outrage and resistance than evolution is environmentalism, or any environmentally based analysis of human society and behavior. Eastern Oregon is a region still greatly dependent on agricultural activities like farming and ranching, and on the timber industry in one form or another. I say still dependent because these industries are declining a little less rapidly than elsewhere, although declining they are. Declines in the cattle and timber industries, especially, are blamed on government regulations and environmentalists who, it is believed, are successful at limiting the number of trees cut or the areas where cattle may graze.

Every mainstream anthropology textbook examines humanity's development from small-scale foraging societies with minimal impacts on the environment, to one global system dominated by high-tech industrial and post-industrial societies based on intensive profit-oriented

agriculture, forestry, grazing, mining, and other extractive industries. But what seem like mainstream observations to anthropologists are perceived as radical assaults on traditional values and lifeways by students from a rural background where their families and almost everyone they know have struggled to make an increasingly precarious living in ranching, farming, or logging. Already feeling under siege by "environmentalists" and fearing each wave of environment-oriented ballot measures initiated by people in "the city," many of my students in northeastern Oregon find it almost unbearable to listen to anthropological perspectives on environmental degradation in the modern world, and on human profligacy in general.

Their pain is real. They have watched family and friends struggle mightily to, in essence, "save the family farm," and they have seen some of them fail. They have observed the shifts in regional, and certainly national, values away from the romanticized view of the pastoral life, to an increasingly skeptical view of farming that decries using pesticides and fertilizers to increase crops, and giving hormones to animals to promote faster growth or greater milk production. Vegetarianism and animal rights movements are seen as genuine threats by people who make their living raising animals for meat, hides, and by-products.

These values are not my values, and I have faced some of my biggest pedagogical challenges while teaching about the environment in cattle country. How do I even begin to bridge this gap in ways that maintain the integrity of my profession, and the environmental analyses offered by contemporary anthropology--with which I happen to agree--and still allow students to express their doubts, their frustrations, and their fears? How can environmental ideas be examined in such a way as to allow both parties, but especially the students, to walk away from the interaction with self-respect intact, and no sense of having "lost" an argument in a humiliating way? How do I, in other words, bring about that magical transformation whereby a student, through his or her own intellectual efforts, stops resisting threatening ideas just because they're threatening, and embraces new ones in the spirit of learning and thinking, of understanding? Or is any of this possible when professor and students come from such disparate worlds?

It is not often a question we ask about our roles as teachers and mentors, but, what do we symbolize to our students, their parents, and their rural communities? Are we the incarnation of others' attempts to uproot and destroy the rural family? Are we cynicism personified, equipped only to condemn and disparage, and never to help and

reassure? I know that many of my students are frightened and angered by the environmentalist messages that confront them in the classroom, my own and many others. The clash of values is deep and real, creating stressful situations in stressful, changing times.

Unfortunately, there are no magic formulas out there for achieving what may be irreconcilable objectives. Some students will refuse to participate in the whole enterprise, and that will always be the case. They will continue to dismiss analyses of modern agricultural and industrial society as "blaming the farmers." I doubt that we educators who interact with many students from rural settings will soon find that it is a breeze to teach about the environment in cattle country.

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