

KAREN FOSTER

## THE RIGHT TO BE RURAL

SEVERAL TIMES EACH SUMMER I drive through the smaller communities dotting Nova Scotia's South Shore—places like Petite Rivière, Cherry Hill, and Vogler's Cove. My partner and I peer at the houses, some of which are vinyl-clad and structurally sound and some of which are cloaked in weather-beaten shingles and leaning over like tired bodies. We wonder how long the inhabitants have lived there, whether they were born next door, what they did for a living, and how much it cost—in terms of money as well as foregone opportunities, luxuries, experiences, and relationships—to maintain a rural life. What remains implied but unstated in these discussions is the question of why people still live there, whether they should live there, and whether they have the right to live there.

These questions became the topic of heated debate in 2014 when the tiny island community of William's Harbour in Labrador voted unanimously to resettle *en masse* to the mainland community of Port Hope Simpson. For most of its history, William's Harbour had been used as a fishing spot in the summer and abandoned in the winter, but in the late 1970s a diesel plant was established to generate power year-round and families that had previously used the island as a seasonal fishing base moved in permanently. These families lived on modest fishing incomes and earned wages in the island's fish processing facility. They probably had to scrape by sometimes, doing work under the table and relying on employment insurance, as rural people often do, and women's work was probably invisible, mostly unpaid, and indispensable, as women's work often is. But they managed to get by for a while, and the world markets that like to eat North Atlantic seafood were sated with the fruits of their labour. Like many other coastal communities, however, the economy and population of William's Harbour began to shrink after the provincial government issued a moratorium on cod fishing in 1992. Children grew up to find that there wasn't enough work on the boats or in the processing facility, and most of them moved away to find dif-

ferent careers somewhere else. The fifteen remaining residents eventually voted unanimously to resettle, as their school had closed, they had an aging population with no access to medical services, the ferry to the mainland was under threat, and they could not see a sustainable future. Only one couple stayed on the island to live without electricity and “keep the name on the map.”

The William’s Harbour resettlement made national headlines around the same time that another little community in the province, St. Brendan’s, voted against resettlement. St. Brendan’s was also connected to the mainland by a ferry service, on which the provincial government spent six million dollars per year and which ran at 13% passenger and 20% vehicle capacity. Speaking to a CBC reporter, a man from St. Brendan’s explained that when you live in such a community the rest of the province and country “look at you like . . . an expense.” These few words, and the stories behind them, are windows to a larger problem that concerns what we think, say, and do about rural communities and their inhabitants—people we look at “like an expense”—all over the world.

I have been repeatedly confronted with this problem, as I currently hold a research chair in “Sustainable Rural Futures for Atlantic Canada.” My research is based on the premise that rural communities should be sustained, yet I often hear people say—in person, on the radio, in publications, and online—that the people living in hollowed-out rural areas with boarded-up main streets, shuttered factories, and depleted fisheries are being kept alive on life support, funded by the rest of us, and that they either need to move on before it’s too late or be taken off and left to die. This is the surprising problem that I keep bumping into—that is, the problem of having to justify the existence of rural communities—and the fact that their existence has to be justified at all—that sustaining these communities is not a self-evident goal—tells us something about the way we as a society think about rural life.

At the level of individual personal beliefs, experiences, and interactions, this view of rural life reveals the stirrings of an everyday sense of justice and fairness, and it matters because our ideas about justice and fairness structure what we do and what we feel that we owe to each other as inhabitants of different communities that are all part of the larger social and political project we call Canada. We tend to think of rural sustainability as a question of what we can and cannot afford, but if you peel back the layers of our fi-

nancial decisions in order to account for why money was spent or withheld, you can see that it isn't simply allocated where it makes the most sense or where it has the most impact. While some argue that money is allocated on the basis of political interests—that is, patronage—it's not always possible to identify political influence and interests down to a person. Sometimes these things operate at the more abstract level of feelings and ideas, such as our idea of what counts as fair, just, reasonable, and rational. Understanding those feelings and ideas, and bringing them out into the open, is essential if we want to comprehend where we are and sketch out where we might go next.

The complexity of these feelings and ideas is often reflected in the ambivalence, or maybe even the hypocrisy, with which rural places are often discussed. While our society looks at rural communities as indispensable to our way of life, as they provide fish, lumber, produce, and tourist destinations, we don't always understand why or how they still exist beyond the narrow uses that we've delineated for them. We want lobster, and we're proud when other markets want it too, but we seem to begrudge the fishermen who draw employment insurance in the off-season. We also don't want conspicuous, dirty, or smelly industries in our urban backyards, so we move them outside of the city, but we have difficulty accepting that our taxes should pay for rural elderly people to age in place after their careers are over.

Of course these problems are not new. Over the course of our settler history we have enthusiastically established many communities around extractive industries, like mining, and when these industries collapse or the resources are gone we have looked at the people left behind and said, "What are you doing there with no jobs to sustain you?" And we haven't exactly learned from this history. Notwithstanding some shifts in rural development policy away from the "smokestack chasing" of the 1970s and before, we still rejoice when a major employer sets down in a declining rural community, promising to use up its underutilized labour force and maybe even draw new workers to town, but we rarely stop to ask what happens when the employer moves away in search of cheaper labour, as it almost always does. We assume that, after a short grace period of retraining and acceptable employment insurance usage, rebounding from such a shock is the responsibility of the people left behind. It is precisely this assumption that prompts a consideration of rural life in terms of rights and citizenship.

There's a healthy scholarly literature on rights and citizenship. Across disciplines and national boundaries, academics conduct research and develop theories of what it means to be a citizen, what it means to have rights, and how these things have changed over time. Their work is important because it shows us that citizenship is really just an idea whose meaning, practical application, and impact on our lives have varied over time and place, so what we say and think about citizenship not only reflects but can also change reality.

At the heart of most theories of citizenship is the notion of rights. British sociologist Thomas Humphrey Marshall wrote a tone-setting essay in 1950 called "Citizenship and the Social Class," which described citizenship as a status that accords rights as well as duties to the people who hold it. Marshall—and the hundreds of others who have analyzed citizenship in his wake—told us that although the meaning and significance of citizenship has and continues to evolve, it essentially refers to the relationship between people and the nation-state to which they belong, as expressed, if only partially, through the rights and duties each expects of the other. The citizens and the state also have other expectations that remain unwritten, unsaid, and mostly unexamined—that is, until they become controversial, as in the question of how to sustain rural communities.

When Marshall was writing in 1950s postwar Britain, state-funded social services were expanding rapidly, replacing a system that had previously been pieced together by churches, philanthropies, and other non-governmental sources. In other words, Marshall was living through the creation of the publicly-funded social safety net that we now call the "welfare state," and he argued that this emergent welfare state expanded citizenship beyond some bare civil and political rights to include social rights—that is, the right to a decent standard of living. For Marshall, the welfare state showed that citizens could expect a modicum of economic security from the state in addition to basic civil and political protections, like free speech and the right to own property.

Scholars who study citizenship in Western democracies today argue that the social citizenship that underpinned the postwar welfare state is no longer automatic, universal, and equalizing; instead, it has transformed into something more contingent and contractual, as belonging to a particular nation-state no longer entitles people to a decent standard of living. Citizenship has thus become a set of practises that determine who counts as a

member of a particular state and what kinds and amounts of resources they are owed on that basis. American sociologist Margaret Somers describes this as “contractualized citizenship”—a citizenship one earns through civic participation, with civic participation defined narrowly (and problematically) in terms of employment, such as the idea that people should be “productive members of society.” In other words, when people become unemployed or even just underemployed—that is, when their employment income doesn’t meet their basic needs and they turn to some other kind of help to cover expenses—they are judged to have let down their end of the citizenship contract and are deemed unworthy of the “earned privileges” that comprise citizenship itself.

Many other thinkers—in philosophy, social science, and geography—have advanced in different ways the idea that our liberal capitalist, late-modern political economy creates (and in some cases needs) superfluous populations. The people in these populations have been called “wasted lives,” “human waste,” or modernity’s “outcasts”—terms that all convey the idea that they are unnecessary for or possibly even a burden on the economy and society and that they are therefore denied, either through direct and horrifying neglect or through banal, slow-moving, bureaucratic indifference, some or all of the rights and protections associated with citizenship.

The risk is that we might erroneously see the transformation of citizenship as just recently triggered by the excesses of capitalism or a neoliberal perversion of an otherwise fair and just capitalism, but a careful genealogy reveals that the heyday of social citizenship rights, as embodied in the post-war welfare state, was in hindsight merely a blip in a much longer history, in which citizenship has consistently served capitalism, saving it from itself only in crises. Even in Marshall’s history, citizenship was largely allowed to grow in the first place because a capitalist market economy needed people to be free to own property and move for work. Capitalism thus created citizens with rights and mobility, while capitalism deposited and continues to deposit such citizens where and when they’re needed for production. It has also abandoned and continues to abandon them where and when they’re not needed.

Could this help to explain what is happening in rural communities? The story of William’s Harbour certainly tells us something about twentieth-century citizenship and rights. What do we owe the people left behind when the natural resource that they were put there to extract becomes extinct or

endangered? What do they owe the rest of society in return for basic services, such as the right to operate a school, employ a teacher, issue diplomas, and keep the lights on? What about expensive and complicated things, like funding and licencing for a ferry service linking them to the mainland? What earns them the right to remain in the absence of these things? What kind of status, practise, power, or relationships must we have in mind when we say that people in shrinking rural communities are citizens, as surely we do, but that “we” cannot afford the costs of health care, education, and transportation for them? Have these people let down their end of an unwritten contract, which means that their schools and hospitals should be de-funded?

To consider these questions, we must bear in mind that there is no perfect, direct relationship between the amount of money collected in taxes from one particular jurisdiction and the amount of money spent on local services there. For the most part, taxes are like insurance: there are some who will pay more and use less and some who will pay less and use more. The notion that expenditures on rural needs are a simple reflection of what those communities contribute to the collective pot is not true.

It is also important to bear in mind that not every discussion of personal or community responsibility is inherently neoliberal or market fundamentalist. Rural communities often want autonomy and self-determination; working together, they might be uniquely positioned to challenge the prevailing wisdom that “the market” is fair and efficient, insofar as they are nimble (and maybe desperate) enough to pursue some value other than private profit. Indeed, the problem in many rural communities is that they are not permitted to create and implement local solutions. The exceptions prove this point, such as the high-speed Internet co-ops emerging around Nova Scotia and the fishermen’s co-ops that have become, over the last twenty years, some of the longest continuously-running fish processing facilities in Newfoundland and Labrador. These initiatives are certainly reactions to the contractualization of citizenship, but they do not necessarily represent a fall into individualistic, market fundamentalist solutions to structural problems. Practically speaking, then, studying citizenship from a rural perspective might tell us how to preserve some self-determination on the part of rural places without making their plight entirely their own to deal with.

It is also important to recognize our quiet and continued dependence on the work of non-citizens to keep rural industries alive. Citizenship in

Canada—even if it is “contractualized” and only “fully bestowed” on those who work year-round for pay—still offers significant enough protections that a Canadian citizen could opt not to work a nearby job and remain in the country, accessing state-funded health care and education somewhere within our borders. But this is not true for temporary foreign workers, who perform work that nobody with a modicum of economic, political, and social security wants to do. The presence of foreign workers in rural communities thus expands the scope of those citizenship questions of who-owes-whom and who-owes-what and makes any resolution of contemporary citizenship’s contradictions even more complicated. We may rectify inequalities among our own citizens in order to make citizenship meaningful in rural and urban spaces alike, but what prevents us from doing that on the backs of people shut out from the citizenship contract? What are our obligations to these workers and their families, who are implicated in our economy and society but who cannot bring legal claims to bear on the state?

It is thus imperative that we confront and wrestle with the question of the rights and responsibilities of the state and its citizens, as theories of citizenship and rights can help to illuminate what is happening in shrinking rural communities and the perspectives of rural people can also help to nuance theories of citizenship and rights. At the very least, the study of rural communities might reveal the feelings and ideas that make the links between rights and citizenship so hard to put into words. Debates over rural infrastructure and investments—over responsibilities towards “dying” towns and villages—also address the intersection of the two processes that I have outlined in this essay: the creation of superfluous populations by capitalism, here and abroad, and the limitations placed on citizenship for people who are economically useful in a very narrowly-defined sense—and only some of those people at that. In studying these debates, we can see how intertwined citizenship and capitalism are and maybe always have been.