

Farming Made Her Stupid

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I have a friend and colleague at my college, a hip, critically reflective young feminist theorist. Some time ago I had a conversation with her as she was preparing to take a group of students to a major U.S. city for a month-long service-learning course. While the course focused on students' work in various social change organizations in the city, Sue emphasized that she would also be sending them out to really “live” in the city. “They'll have to use the subway on the first day,” she reported, “and some of these students from small towns have no idea how to use a subway.” Sue described students' unfamiliarity with urban mass transit as if she were reporting on a deficiency in basic arithmetic skills. No, more fundamental than that, really; more like not knowing how to wash one's hands. Knowing how to navigate a metropolitan transit system is, to her, a fundamental life skill of the sort that every human being has—or had better have, before they consider themselves a college graduate. And she may well be right. In part.

But her rightness rests on a presupposition of massive proportions, a presupposition all but undetected in our metrocentric culture, and all the more insidious for its undetectability. It is this: these students who know nothing about where to insert the coin in a turnstile possess no compensatory knowledge rooted in their experience as rural and small-town denizens, *because there is no such knowledge*. Indeed, more than implying that these students were simply ignorant of some particular features of urban life, Sue's comments suggested that the things they *did* know counted as strikes against them—as if, perhaps, their knowing such things would make them *constitutionally incapable* of absorbing all-important features of city life.

This from a woman who knows relatively little about small towns—indeed, who refuses to live in the small town in which we teach. She'd say it's because she prefers big cities and doesn't mind commuting seventy miles *each way every day*. I say it's because she lacks the requisite

ways of knowing—knowing how to navigate the streets and the nights and the weekends of a town with only one real espresso machine.

My tongue is in my cheek as I make that claim, and yet at its core lies a sincere assertion; Sue embodies a metrocentric way of being in the world, a way of being in which she is validated and affirmed at every turn, even *in* this small town where residents ourselves complain that “there is nothing here.” One chief characteristic of that metrocentric perspective is its inability even to countenance the possibility that living in a small town or in the country requires any particular forms of knowledge. Let me sharpen that: its inability to countenance the possibility that living in a small town or in the country requires any *desirable* forms of knowledge. Sue would probably acknowledge the fact that her students from Hector and Kiester and Warroad Minnesota *know* some things that she doesn’t—but they aren’t the sorts of things anyone would really *want to know*, let alone anything anyone would *need* to know, or would be *enriched* by knowing. Knowing the county road system, for instance, or the way the townships are platted in one’s county surely is not inherently beneficial. Indeed, in an unguarded moment she’d probably confess that she thinks it’s better if students from places with names like Kiester just keep the matter to themselves until they acquire some “street cred” for sophistication and urbanity. Most certainly they should keep mum about the forms of knowing they possess because of their origins; these are not the sorts of things one should admit.

I, for instance, should just keep quiet about the fact that I can distinguish pig manure from cattle manure from chicken manure *on the basis of smell alone*, from a moving car travelling at highway speeds. Everyone in my family can—it’s just something we picked up, growing up in a farming-related business in a small farming community, where Sunday afternoons were spent driving in the country.

Feminists, of course, have no corner on the metrocentric market; indeed, as I shall suggest below, metrocentrism crosses the bounds of many usual allegiances and alliances, drawing together, in spirit, people who might otherwise have relatively little in common ideologically. Nevertheless, it is particularly notable and, perhaps also, particularly painful when feminists unthinkingly participate in the reproduction of ways of thinking that presume the primacy of urban-centered thinking. I count on feminist theory to be rigorously reflective of systems of marginalization, both when those systems harm groups of women, as well as when they privilege some women. To date, relatively little feminist theory has drawn our attention to issues specific to rural and small town women—and much feminist writing has rather unthinkingly participated in metrocentric stereotyping.¹

I have another professor friend—a smart, sophisticated, radical feminist—whose favorite insults—along with “idiot”—are “peasant” and “farmer.” For a time, her daughter was dating a farmer; she was devastated and terrified at the thought that her daughter might marry this man. Her story is a little less complicated to unravel than Sue’s; for her, quite straightforwardly, farmers are stupid, blockish, backward people. By definition.

Writing in the anthology *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, agricultural ethicist Paul Thompson notes “Antirural prejudice goes back a long way, but the twentieth century has seen an especially virulent version arise among American intellectuals, and especially among philosophers. Farming is like farting in most philosophical circles: one avoids mentioning it as assiduously as one avoids doing it.” Farmers, Thompson notes, are tacitly “understood” to be “rude, crude, and somewhat stupid” (Thompson 2000, 49).

The reaction Thompson identifies is, I submit, far more a case of systematic marginalization than his word “prejudice” suggests. It is also, of course, not a reaction confined

to the groves of academe; this is not simply a case of the outcast brainiacs at the high school mocking the equally-outcast FFA (Future Farmers of America) members. For, in this case, the brainiacs know full well that their rejection of the aggies enjoys the full support of the cheerleaders, the sports team members, and the hip-cool kids. Translation: rural knowing is marginalized in mainstream, consumerist culture as a whole, not just by academics whose own attractiveness to that mainstream is itself tenuous at best.²

A recent *New York Times* story about Texas illustrates the ways in which nonacademic mainstream culture happily exploits academic tales of the stupid. A piece in the education section reported the story of Larry Sechrest, a professor of business administration at Sul Ross University, a small state institution in the small west Texas town of Alpine. Sechrest published an article in *Liberty*, a libertarian magazine, asserting that “the students at Sul Ross, and more generally, the long term residents of the entire area, are appallingly ignorant, irrational, anti-intellectual, and, well,... just plain stupid” (cited in Novovitch 2004). Furthermore, he is “prepared to defend to the death the proposition that...this area of Texas more generally, is the proud home of some of the dumbest clods on the planet” (Ibid). The *Times* writer went on to cite some of the other evidence Sechrest had amassed in support of his claim—spelling errors were high on the list. She also reported on some of the things that townspeople had done to Sechrest since news of his article leaked out: egging, obscene phone calls, death threats, and a “We Love Alpine” parade.

The story was picked up or reported on by scores of websites representing a surprisingly wide range of political perspectives. Most sites (including many Libertarian sites) simply reprinted the *Times* story. Headlines ranged from “Professor Threatened After Calling Alpine, TX the ‘Dumbest’ Town,” to “There’ll Always Be a Texas.” The consensus? Left, right and

center agree: those folks in West Texas *are* just plain stupid. The riff raff proved it when they threatened the guy's life, and the town fathers proved it when they held a parade instead of a spelling bee or a talent contest to try to refute this professor's obviously entirely justified assertions! (Yes, one internet post did actually argue that the town should have held some sort of smart-off, to disprove Sechrest's claims.)

I'll return to the West Texas story later; peeling back its layers can prove revealing about the way in which "stupid knowing" is mustered and deployed. But here, a word about stupidity.

Stupidity, as I use the term, means something more than a lack of knowledge, for which the term *ignorance* is more appropriate. Stupidity denotes actual *anti-knowledge*. If knowledge is a positive quantity on the spectrum and ignorance is a zero, stupidity must actually be a negative number. It's like those parking meters that go below zero minutes to tell the meter reader just exactly how long ago yours ran out. Stupidity is *worse* than knowing nothing. In fact, you can know something, and that knowing can itself make you stupid—which is where the parking meter analogy breaks down, unless you can imagine a parking meter that would register a negative number *after* you put certain kinds of money into it. Stupidity is also a moral category; people are understood to be morally culpable for being stupid.

This paper is an examination of stupid knowing—an attempt to catalogue this species of knowing, and to understand when, how and why the concept gets applied to marginalized groups of knowers. I see this project as prep chef work—work that supports and provides conceptual ingredients for others to use. In part, I intend my identification and categorization of stupid knowing to support the work of theorists of resistance who have identified ways that those marginalized as "stupid knowers" use the cloak of their purported stupidity in the aid of their resistance. (The slave who is able to sing the story of her escape even while she is being beaten

by her owner; the African-American maid whose purported cluelessness enables her to gather information that leads to the discovery that her white employer is a murderer.³) My question lies, as it were, *underneath* this analysis of resistance, examining the way the defining process works and the conditions that make it possible. I do so by considering one group of people who get defined as stupid—rural people.

I also see my work as resting *upon* an extensive body of philosophy that has critically examined traditional western conceptions of knowing, and critiqued the ways those conceptions support and are supported by systems of oppression. The features of that received view of knowing that are most salient to my project include: Knowing is theory making, hierarchically distinguished from practice or practical activity; it is most closely associated with “head work” and mentality, not “hand work” and the body. Knowing is general and abstract (and often atemporal), not particular and specific (and time-dependent).⁴ I hope to add to the already-robust critique of this hierarchy of knowing an understanding of one *particular* way that some knowledge is devalued—stupidification. Why are some forms of knowledge actually regarded as leaving you incapable of other forms of rational thought?

In the end, I understand this paper as an attempt to show why and how defining entire classes of people—in this case rural people and farmers—as “stupid knowers” ensures their marginalization and subordination (clever resistance moves on their part notwithstanding).

A note on terminology: In this paper, the terms *center* and *margin* distinguish metrocentric perspectives from understandings of the world rooted in and consonant with, rural and small town experience. Such categories are of course gross oversimplifications. Nevertheless, we live in an urban-and-suburban-centered society, an orientation that is reinforced by everything from the entertainment industry (try to imagine a show called “Sex and the Country,” and think of

what it would be about and who would star in it),⁵ to “high” culture (think art museums and the symphony), to consumer culture. On the fringes of that culture, rural cultures and ways of life are regarded as at best quaint and historical, at worst unsophisticated, unworldly and, well, stupid.

Let me be explicit: I mean to bury the category of stupidity, not to praise it. While those understood as stupid knowers are sometimes able to use this assigned identity strategically, I do not think the world is a better place because some people are so defined. It is also not a tool I want to cleverly turn around and use to name those who lie at the privileged center.

I undertake my analysis by a sort of process of elimination, identifying the category of stupid knowing by distinguishing it from three near neighbors. I then consider some of the particular ways that marginalization-by-stupidification harms.

A. What Stupid Knowing Isn't

1. Stupid knowing is not just genuine or systematic error or wrongheadedness

Stupid knowing is not error or wrongheadedness, and in identifying the injustice of the former, I do not mean to deny the existence of the latter. There *are* bodies of purported knowledge so wrongheaded or misguided that believing them actually does leave one worse off than believing or knowing nothing. Into this category I throw entire categories of beliefs about gender and race and class that reinforce and perpetuate systems of oppression, for instance. It is possible that the power of the category of stupidity lies precisely in such legitimate ascriptions of error. But cases of systematic wrongheadedness are not my target.

I am interested in cases in which there is little to no dispute about whether a field of endeavor or inquiry counts as some kind of knowledge—as accurate, perhaps even as useful, knowledge.⁶ While people may agree that no systematic erroneous beliefs are promulgated with this form of knowing, nevertheless, it comes in for enormous abuse and scorn. It is knowing, yes,

but of a sort as to actually make you stupid. Why would anyone want to know that sort of thing, when its possession actually makes you intellectually inferior? *The stupidity I single out for challenge is understood to be a result of what one knows, not what one is mistaken about.*

2. Stupid knowing is not just devalued knowing

Second, I wish to distinguish stupid knowing from marginalized, not highly valued knowing. While these categories also certainly bleed into each other, nevertheless I want to allow for a difference in kind between forms of knowing that are regarded as lower on the ladder of worthwhile human inquiry activities, and forms of knowing that are seen as damaging one's ability to perform other inquiry activities. It is one thing to note that computers would be farther down Plato's divided line than pure mathematics; it is quite another to observe that a form of knowing like farming is actually regarded as having the capacity to render one unfit for the doing of philosophy—of stupidifying one. So, another feature of stupid knowing I identify is the fact that *it is believed to be unlike marginally valued forms of knowledge because it purportedly renders one incapable of other, more worthy, forms of thought.*

(Perhaps invoking Plato is more muddling than clarifying in this context, because Plato might have actually been the first to identify something like a category of stupid knowing. After all, he acknowledges that the appetitive class knows how to do some things, and admits that, lowly though those things be, they are nonetheless necessary. But he also insists that their appetitive natures render them incapable of any other, higher forms of understanding. In other words, precisely because of the kinds of knowers they are, they cannot *be* higher knowers.)

Recognizing this feature of stupid knowing has enabled me to make sense of the fact that every four years, when the presidential election rolls around and the candidates and television cameras land in Iowa, one has to endure a spate of stories in the national news sources, all of

which discuss the fact that—shut your mouth—those Iowa farmers are really pretty darn savvy! It's surprising (given those droll seed corn caps they insist on wearing, making it all but impossible to take them seriously) but many of these guys (okay, and gals and ladies too) seem to have a pretty good handle on this whole electoral process, and even on the issues! The surprise factor, I submit, comes because farmers are regarded by the metrocenter as dispositionally incapable of the kind of higher thought that politics represents. *Farming makes them stupid.*

3. Stupid knowing is stupid KNOWING, not stupid ignorance

This understanding leads nicely to a final distinction that will more sharply set off the category of stupid knowers from something like stupid ignorant people—though in the end the distinction may prove to be rather more spurious than it first appears.

I am willing to imagine, at least in principle, that there are people marginalized as stupid because they know nothing (by which we have to understand “nothing relevant”). But I am interested in those groups of people who are understood—perhaps grudgingly and disparagingly—to have a kind of knowledge, and *because of it* to be identified as stupid.

In fact, I tend to believe that the first category—the category of persons defined as stupid because they know “nothing”—generally collapses into the category of stupid knowers. When pressed on the matter of whether a marginalized group of people *truly* knew nothing, a metrorepresentative would likely admit that, well, yes, they know something—but something so coarse and irrelevant that *it* actually was responsible for the person's stupidity.⁷ Thus, while I am willing to keep this category of stupid ignorance open, I think most ascriptions of stupidity will migrate out of it, and into the realm of stupid knowing. *This is because stupid knowing is often ascribed on the basis of both what someone does not know and what they unquestionably do know.*

My discussion of Sue illustrates this two-step; Sue identifies her students only in terms of what they do *not* know. Confronted with the suggestion that they know some things, she's likely to admit that rural life does require knowledge—but also to express the suspicion that their very knowledge *of* rural life renders them incompetent in the ways of the city.⁸

The case of Tom may also illustrate the way in which certain forms of knowing are rendered undetectable, thereby leaving their holders to be defined as ignorant-stupid. Tom is a friend from college who now farms near me on the eighty acres his family has owned for five generations. As Tom puts it, when he was in college, he didn't know he knew anything; in that context, all that was noticeable was his lack of the kind of knowledge he would have had he gone to a suburban high school with lots of enrichment programs. (And lest it seem that this is simply a result of his being at a liberal arts college, let it also be said that he wouldn't have gotten any other message if he'd been watching television or going to movies either; remember that metrocentricism is *not* simply an academic phenomenon.) It has only been since he decided to return to the farm (and, notably, to take up a form of farming that is both old fashioned and alternative) that Tom has come to recognize his considerable body of knowing. In the context of his college life, his farm experience and the knowledge that sprang from it were effectively damped down—they could not be detected. So little context existed for his knowledge (bizarrely enough, given the soybean and corn fields that surrounded our campus) that he wasn't even able to sniff it out himself, despite eighteen years on the farm. But *had* he been able to access that knowledge, in that context, I have no doubt that it would have been to his detriment.

B. How Marginalization by Stupidification Harms

What, if anything, is unique or uniquely powerful about the way stupid knowledge marginalizes? My tentative answer to the question is this: marginalization-by-stupidification of

rural people brings together people from diverse social locations with diverse interests and investments, all of whom can identify with the metrocenter. Metrocentrism can unite the spheres of academia, high culture and pop culture, and can do so across the political spectrum.

Attributing stupidity to rural people because of what we know is a widely-accepted form of marginalization, one in which surprisingly diverse people engage, frequently without any apparent discomfort. Here I catalogue three particular ways that such marginalization harms both insiders and margin dwellers.

1. Stupidification blames the victim

Farm knowledge, and other rural and small town knowledge, is so systematically devalued that the marginalization of people who possess it goes unmarked, uncommented-upon, even unbelievably. After all, if you're really stupid, well then, you're not oppressed—you deserve to be ignored! Furthermore, when stupidity is understood as a certain kind of knowing, it is not just accidental that you are stupid, not something out of your control. You have set out to learn things that render you stupid. Such behavior is perverse, and warrants punishment.⁹

2. The metrocentric presumption of stupidity renders the metrocentrist incapable of recognizing resistance when it happens

If you're stupid, you certainly can't respond meaningfully (read: resistantly, creatively) to others' attributions of stupidity *to* you. Public response to the Larry Sechrest story illustrates this presumption well. In reports of this story, I have seen no attempts to read the people of Alpine as marginalized, or to read their actions as resistant responses to their vilification.¹⁰ This, despite what are to me the striking parallels between their choices of actions and the actions of other marginalized people that are uncontroversially understood as resistant. Contrast the disgusted “West Texas—it figures” responses to the Alpiners' threats of violence (posted on various left-

leaning websites) with the complex and insightful readings of, e.g., urban violence that theorists of resistance have developed—readings that recognize, in the spirit of Paolo Freire, that violence can be a form of self love, an affirmation that one exists. Or contrast the withering responses to their parade (in which, for instance, people wore dunce caps and rode in pickup trucks) with the admiration heaped upon queer parodists who play with stereotypes about themselves, precisely in order to defuse their power. Surely the pickup-riding dunce-cap-wearers have delivered a clever sendup of the established hierarchy of knowledge!

The absence of such responses suggests that, to at least some extent, we've all swallowed the metrocentric presumption that "these people," because of what they know, who they are, where they live, and what they do, cannot but be stupid.¹¹ Thus, whatever they are doing in response to Sechrest's attack cannot be intentional resistance. It's just cloddishness. We don't have to pay attention to, or think about why and how our *belief* in their unquestioned stupidity actually contributes to their marginalization and dehumanization. We also don't have to problematize, or attempt to see beyond, our fear and loathing of them, to try to think about what might lie behind it. These are just stupid people! Larry Sechrest said so. Sure, he's a libertarian—but he's right about this!

Elsewhere, I have described the dangerous way in which overprivilege and ignorance combine—and argue that, when we occupy such locations, we must work particularly hard to try to be traitorous to them.¹² I submit that this metrocentric dismissal of the "clods" is just such an instance of overprivilege and ignorance working together.

3. Stupidification dulls its believers' attentiveness to interconnected forms of oppression

Remember that the *Times* reported that Sechrest received death threats for calling townspeople “ignorant, irrational, anti-intellectual, . . . stupid?” The *Times* article pictured the professor as a kind of well-intentioned upholder of Basic Standards, struggling mightily against the legendary stupidity of Texas farmers and ranchers.

This telling of the story of Larry Sechrest stands for me as evidence of the willingness of those at the center to accept and promulgate the notion that those on the margins are stupid—that the things we know are stupid. It reinforces, rewards, valorizes metrocentrists’ *actual* ignorance and wrongheadedness, and thereby reifies the centrality of their position.

Consider: in telling the story, the *Times* reporter actively shores up Sechrest’s argument by choosing *not* to write about other parts of his article that would surely discredit him in the minds of many *Times* readers and might, in turn, even force them to question the legitimacy of his general assessment of the residents of Alpine. Here are some more memorable observations the *Times* reporter chose *not* to cite: “Here, to put it crudely but accurately, one has poor white trash and poor Mexican trash socializing with, even marrying, each other. Here the lowest common denominators get together to procreate.” And “Many of the kids in the Big Bend area are only a notch above retardation. Some are below that.” (Quoted on bertrandrussell.blogspot.com).

What does it mean that the *Times* reporter intentionally omits the explicit racism of this character? Was it too inconvenient? Would addressing the racism, and class bias and ablism of Sechrest’s article have forced her to problematize her portrait of a man purportedly defending knowledge in the desert of stupidity? If she’d acknowledged his racism, would she have had to go so far as to reexamine the standards by which he—and she—assign value to different forms of knowing? Perhaps so. (This is, after all, a woman who describes the location of a town in Texas

by noting that it is “three hours away from the nearest Barnes and Noble.” Translation: Stupidville.)

While the *Times* reporter may regard this “trash” talk as separate or separable from Sechrest’s main argument, for Sechrest it is nothing of the sort; according to him, poverty and intermarriage *make* clods. The *Times* writer apparently wants to *legitimize* Sechrest’s pronouncement of stupidity, which would be difficult for her to do in the face of such explicit racism. So, she simply elides its racist and classist elements, despite their obvious centrality to Sechrest’s argument.¹³

Such erasure of connections is not uncommon; the strength of the stupidity accusation is so strong that it often trumps all others. The metrocentrist who might, in another context, read racism, chooses in such a context to notice only stupidity.

4. Stupidification erodes rural knowledge

Stupidification harms people who inhabit marginal places by eroding the forms of knowing that reside there. Stupidification makes marginalized forms of knowledge unattractive and unappealing *to those who inhabit the very spaces in which these forms are at home and are useful*. Knowledge of rural life has eroded considerably in the United States among rural people, and particularly among rural young people. While multiple reasons explain this, one contributing reason is that to possess such knowledge in our metrocentric society *makes* one a rube, a hick, a hayseed—in short, unsophisticated.¹⁴

A story will illustrate my point more clearly than will more taxonomy. This fall, I taught a course focused on a variety of food and agriculture issues and designed for first semester

students. As luck would have it, something like forty percent of the students in the class either lived on a family farm or had farming grandparents, aunts and uncles. (This, by the way, is some kind of miracle in twenty-first century United States.) Because the course addressed farming and farm-related work, being a farmer emerged as the “cool” thing to be in the context of the classroom; in that space, the suburban kids who made up the bulk of the class found themselves and their experiences to be on the fringes of things. But here’s the thing; neither the small town kids nor the farm kids knew much of anything about the activity of farming, despite its propinquity. The kids who lived on farms weren’t, for the most part, involved in the work of the farm in any way; indeed it seemed as if parents had intentionally shielded their children from this work. No doubt for farm families it was a mark of prosperity not to depend upon the labor of your kids on the farm, but to me it was also a mark of something much more depressing. The farm and small town students, for the most part, knew more about mall and movie culture than they knew about farm culture. And it was only in the context of a class in which I was clearly, obviously and intentionally privileging the knowledge that comes from living in the country, that rural students started seriously digging for what they *did* know, and started calling their parents (dads, mostly) and grandparents to ask them to explain things like why they used Roundup on their soybeans. I was proud to create a context in which their parents’ farm knowledge became a precious, desired resource (and tickled to imagine the conversations that went on around some dinner tables as a result of my class), but I was nonetheless depressed to realize the degree to which these rural students had imbibed the view that to own such knowledge would deal a severe blow to one’s social position. They knew the fact of the matter: that *sophisticated knowing protects you from stupid knowing, whereas stupid knowing prevents you from sophisticated knowing*. And they weren’t (in most contexts) going to run that risk.

I regard it as a tragedy that these students—as well as the kids growing up in and around the small rural town town in which they attend college—know practically nothing about farming, and probably very little about how to navigate the country roads around town. (Heck, for all I know, Sue might have been right to suggest that her students knew nothing; perhaps they didn't even have the compensatory knowing that I'm suggesting would "balance out" their lack of knowledge about turnstiles and subway tokens.) I regard it as a tragedy that most people in the U.S. know practically nothing about farming, and seem to think, at least, that there is no problem with their ignorance, and at most that such ignorance is actually an asset. I regard it as a tragedy that sophistication, intelligence, and savvy—all qualities unambiguously regarded as positive—are conceived as being in outright opposition to the ways of being most closely associated with farming, rural life, and small towns.

Such categorization harms not only rural people, but also knowledge itself. Elsewhere, I have argued that objectivity is best understood as responsibility—and that responsible inquiry requires "seeking the perspectives of those traditionally excluded from the [knowledge making] process..." (Heldke and Kellert 1995, 369). I am hardly alone in advocating such work; theorists of many stripes have called for revaluations of knowledge that recognize the importance of the bodily, the emotional, the particular, the quotidian and the temporal. I submit that, in the face of such reconstructive efforts, the persistent metrocentrist marginalization of farmers and rural people is an act of conceptual duplicity.

¹ Exercise: Type "rural feminist theory" in Google. Unless things have changed remarkably since the time I'm writing this (October 2004), you'll come up short. My search produced literally no results.

² In a piece called “The Prejudice Against Country People,” Wendell Berry notes that “Disparagements of farmers, of small towns, of anything identifiable as ‘provincial’ can be found everywhere: in comic strips, TV shows, newspaper editorials, literary magazines, and so on. A few years ago, *The New Republic* affirmed the necessity of the decline of family farms in a cover article entitled ‘The Idiocy of Rural Life...’” (Berry 2004). Berry, like Thompson, speaks of prejudice; I don’t believe that term adequately addresses the systematically marginalizing nature of this relationship.

³ The second example comes from *Blanche on the Lam*, a wonderful murder mystery by Barbara Neely.

⁴ In *The Quest for Certainty*, John Dewey points out that this hierarchical distinction not coincidentally maps onto the distinction between classes of people; indeed, he argues that the relationship between the two distinctions is a causal one:

The social division into a laboring class and a leisure class,...became a metaphysical division into things which are mere means and things which are ends. Means are menial, subservient, slavish; and ends liberal and final.... The ingratitude displayed by thinkers to artists who...supplied idealistic philosophy with empirical models of their ultimately real objects, was shown in even greater measure to artisans. The accumulated results of the observations and procedures of farmers, navigators, builders furnished matter-of-fact information about natural events, and also supplied the pattern of logical and metaphysical subordination of change to directly possessed and enjoyed fulfillments. While thinkers condemned the industrial class and despised labor, they

borrowed from them the facts and the conceptions that gave form and substance to their own theories. (Dewey 1988b, 102-3)

⁵ Peg O'Connor reports that there actually is such a show, a reality television show called "Simple Life," starring Paris Hilton. The premise of the show is that two urban women find themselves in the country, and are forced to try to figure out things like how to milk a cow. In the course of showing their ineptitude at such tasks, they implicitly reveal the stupidity of people who are actually *skilled* at such work. This is a fairly common treatment of rural people; show them to be skilled, but at tasks so inane that being able to do them and, moreover, taking pride in them evidences one's inferiority.

Another common treatment is to show that rural people *seem* to possess only these undesirable forms of knowing, but on closer inspection turn out to be knowledgeable and savvy in ways that are *just like us*—just like urban people.

⁶ In picking out only cases in which there is general agreement that a practice constitutes actual knowing, I also obviously rule out another kind of case, the kind in which genuine dispute arises over whether or not a field of endeavor counts as a form of knowing at all. Such might be called the "astrology case" because of the frequency with which that practice has been invoked, particularly in the philosophy of science, to exemplify such genuine disputes.

⁷ Notice the difference between irrelevant and arcane. *Irrelevant*, from the metrocentric perspective, is what characterizes the particular kinds of obscure knowledge that people in rural regions collect up: knowing what a platbook is, where to buy one, and how to use it, for instance. *Arcane*, on the other hand, is the descriptor for obscure knowledge that lies in a

category that is regarded as important to the metrocenter. Baseball knowledge is arcane, as is knowledge about heraldry.

⁸ There's a way in which I am willing to agree that rural life, lived rural-centrally, renders one unfit for living in the city as well. Indeed, such intentional rural-centrism actually constitutes a form of resistance to metrocentrism, and as such, counts as the kind of strategic move I mentioned in the introduction. Rural-centric activists might include thinkers such as Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, Gretel Ehrlich and Linda Hasselstrom.

⁹ Of course if one agrees with Plato that people are born to certain forms of knowing, then presumably one cannot be seen as culpable for choosing to become a stupid knower. For the Platonist, such stupid knowers are essential parts of the system, and are rewarded for their efforts in a way that they can fully appreciate. So, you shouldn't penalize them, since it wasn't a choice. But you still wouldn't want to *be* them.

¹⁰ A significant number of the responses to the story posted on various left-leaning blogs tended toward assertions such as "The people of this town should just go about their business and ignore him" or "the people of this town and these students should just work to show why he is wrong." One said "I like to call this the 'indignation of the guilty.'" One poster actually wrote that the people of Alpine should "better themselves." Translation: when someone attacks you, turn the other cheek, or work harder to show why they're wrong. Such responses—from writers eager to flash their credentials as antiracist and antisexist—sound eerily familiar. Replace "farmers in Alpine" with "slaves," or "Japanese Americans" or "women."

¹¹Of course it is not immaterial that it is Texas where this story is set; the left is particularly eager to show *Texas* as stupid. But I don't want presidential politics to derail my point; this is NOT just about Texas.

¹² See Heldke and Kellert 1995.

¹³ I'd like to challenge the implicit assumptions of both Sechrest and the *Times* writer, with Wendell Berry's observation that, indeed, "the despised work of agriculture is done by the still-surviving and always struggling small farmers, and by many Mexican and Central American migrant laborers who live and work a half step, if that, above slavery. The work of the farmland, in other words, is now accomplished by two kinds of oppression and most people do not notice.... If they are invited to care, they are likely to excuse themselves by...[suggesting that f]armers are better off when they lose their farms. They are improved by being freed of the 'mind numbing work' of farming" (Berry 2004).

¹⁴ In *The Overspent American*, Juliet Schor notes that, whereas we used to compare ourselves to our neighbors, thanks to things like television, movies and magazines, we compare ourselves to the wealthiest people in the world—and find ourselves lacking. Similarly, in a metrocentric culture, we who live in the country compare our lives not to our neighbors', but to the people who live in shiny, fancy cities. Indeed, now that the metrocenter broadcasts itself everywhere, one can both participate in it from afar, and also regret that one is not in the thick of it. So rural kids, e.g., end up feeling even more acutely and clearly why and how they are marginal, because see virtually nothing admirable about their world represented on television, in movies, or in the printed word.

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