

Writing the New West: A Critical Review*

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ABSTRACT A vast and growing interdisciplinary research effort has focused on the rise of the so-called New West, purportedly the product of regional socioeconomic, political, and ecological upheavals in states like Montana and Colorado. Reviewing the growing research on this problem in sociology, economics, geography, and conservation science, this article identifies four central questions at the core of this diverse scholarship. Our review demonstrates that none of these central questions has generated consensus conclusions and that there is untapped potential for more structurally robust analyses of the drivers and outcomes of rapid change in the region. Indeed, supporting other analyses that have called the consistency of the region into question, our survey suggests the ways in which this region is not unique, but largely reflective of larger scale socioecological forces playing out in similar ways around the postindustrial world. We conclude, therefore, with a series of crucial questions, which may be unanswerable by assuming the “New West” as a coherent geography.

As cattle ranches give way to ranchettes across the western United States, socioeconomic and ecological transformations in states like Montana and Colorado have become central concerns for research in sociology, economics, geography, and conservation science. Over the past decade, scores of journal articles, books, and a widely popular atlas (Riebsame et al. 1997) have contributed to a loose confederacy of studies on the “New West.”

Visions of a changing West are further propelled by think tanks and research centers tracking social, institutional, and ecological change.

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The Sonoran Institute and Headwaters Economics, for example, engage in regional analyses of shifting trends in western demography and resource management, in some cases intervening to work with local communities and government agencies. Other organizations are more overtly normative in their intellectual pursuits, reflecting the variety of ways the central issues at play in the region are conceptualized. While the Center for the New West, for example, advocates libertarian and business-oriented thinking, stressing “balanced growth and economic development, personal freedom, limited government and free enterprise” (Center for the New West 2007), the University of Colorado’s Center of the American West focuses on conflict resolution, environmental justice, sustainable energy and collaboration through “forums for the respectful exchange of ideas and perspectives” (Center of the American West 2007). However divergent in mission and attitude, organizations commonly address the upheavals generated by growth and economic change in a region long-considered unique.

At the same time, many observers have challenged the existence of a coherent “New West,” the novelty of any of the processes at work, and the utility of a regional focus for explaining socioenvironmental change (Hyde 1998; Limerick 1987; Taylor 2004). “New Western” historians, beginning in the mid-1980s, have pointed to the overall continuities of boom and bust economies, the historic similarities between this region and others, the racial and ethnic imaginaries of a “white” West, and the urban character of the region. Their criticisms, along with recent work from other disciplines, raise the question of whether approaching the New West as a research object provides analytical or political utility.¹

In this article, we survey the diverse research trajectories of New West literature, drawing specifically on work from demography, sociology, geography, environmental management, planning, conservation, and anthropology. We admit that the precise boundaries of this geographical region remain elusive. Riebsame et al. wryly observe that “the ‘West’ keeps moving around in time and space. At moments in American history it was everything beyond the Alleghenies, then all lands west of the Mississippi, and, finally, a coastal West of dynamic Pacific cities” (1997:46). In this review we focus on literature that

¹ In the 1980s, a group of New Western historians rather successfully debunked distinctions of “old” and “new” in favor of a continuous understanding of western history (Lamar and Thompson 1981). The New Western perspective continues among historians (Tyrrell 1991; White 1993), yet it is largely overlooked in other disciplines. We focus here precisely on the extensive literature of the last decade that either explicitly or implicitly delineates the American West as a special region, rife with new and unique social, political, and economic processes.

tackles recent change in the 11 westernmost states of the continental United States, noting that much of it focuses more specifically on the “Mountain West,” “Interior West,” or “Intermountain West.” We begin by briefly introducing the issues that motivate this growing body of work, then review four predominant research problems addressed in the literature: economic transition, cultural conflict, ecological change, and scales of governance. Throughout, we draw attention to specific limitations that have formed in the rather pell-mell development of the field. We conclude with some promising areas of research, all of which involve less adherence to a strictly regional focus.

The “New West” as a Research Site and Problem

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a report on rural America challenging idealized visions of rural seclusion and pastoral productivity. The report noted:

Rural regions of the country survive economically on one or more of three basic assets: (1) natural amenities for tourism, second homes, and retirement; (2) low-cost, good quality labor and land for manufacturing, but also services such as prisons and extended care health facilities; and (3) natural resources for farming, forestry, and mining. Most rural jobs are not directly related to these assets, but instead are in consumer services—retail trade, education, health, and other consumer services primarily for local residents (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2003:41)

The U.S. West exemplifies these trends, with changes in the region fueled by dramatic shifts in economic, demographic, and land-use patterns (Booth 1999:399; Winkler et al. 2007).² The 2000 U.S. census showed that Colorado, Nevada, and Arizona were among the states with the highest in-migration rates (Suchan et al. 2007), and compared to a national rate of 13.2 percent, the 11 western states grew by 20 percent during the 1990s, adding 10.2 million people (Travis 2007). Recent projections estimate that Arizona and Nevada will more than double their populations by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b) and that the West will likely add 29 million more people by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a). Baby boomers make up a growing percentage of migrants to the West (Judson, Reynolds-Scanlon, and Popoff 1999;

² The Census Bureau defines the western United States to include 13 states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Travis 2007), and Nelson (2005) documents a consistent “Rustbelt-to-Sunbelt” shift related to retiree migration.

High rates of domestic in-migration as well as international immigration have transformed formerly remote outposts into new urban and “exurban” areas (Booth 1999; Cromartie and Browers 1999; Travis 2007). Historically, 70 percent of western residents lived in metropolitan areas, but recent growth has taken place largely in nonmetropolitan counties and “edge cities” (Cromartie and Wardwell 1999; Johnson and Beale 1994; Otterstrom and Shumway 2003; Shumway and Davis 1996). Rural western counties grew almost 9 percent on average between 1990 and 1998, more than twice the national rate of 4.1 percent, and 25 percent of those counties experienced net migration exceeding 16 percent (Nelson 2001). Drivers of this rural growth include economic restructuring, improvements in communication and transportation, and growing interest in the “quality of life” that many associate with living near mountains, canyons, rivers, lakes, or shorelines (Beale and Johnson 1998; Booth 1999; Fuguitt and Beale 1996; Jobs 2000; Johnson and Beale 1994; Johnson and Cromartie 2006; McGranahan 1999; Rasker, Waring, and Carter 2006; Rudzitis 1999; Shumway and Davis 1996).

Several studies have found linkages between emerging settlement patterns and proximity to public and wilderness lands (Duffy-Deno 1998; Frentz et al. 2004; Rasker 2005; Rudzitis and Johansen 1989). Lorah and Southwick (2003) find a correlation between protected lands and rapid growth in population, income, and employment. Growth is spatially dense near ski areas, national parks, and universities and colleges, suggesting “a desire to live apart from large metropolitan areas without completely severing ties to them” (Booth 1999:384; see also Beyers 1999). Recent migrants cite natural and cultural amenities more than employment opportunities as reasons for relocating (Beale and Fuguitt 1995; Cromartie and Wardwell 1999; Johnson and Rasker 1995; Nelson 1999; Rudzitis 1993, 1999; Shumway and Otterstrom 2001;Theobald, Gosnell, and Riebsame 1996).

As with demographic change, economic change in the region is rapid but uneven (Winkler et al. 2007). From 1985 to 1995, job growth in the rural West outpaced the nation by nearly 60 percent, especially in counties adjacent to metro areas (Beyers 1999). The 1990s saw more business starts, per capita job growth, and income gains in the West than in any other region in the United States (Travis 2007). Robust economic expansion has specifically occurred in the service sector, nonfarm self-employment, and niche manufacturing (Nelson 1997) rather than in agrarian sectors, and some researchers now link certain

aspects of the changing economy with new quality-of-life migrants, sometimes referred to as “lone eagles” (Beyers and Nelson 2000: 459) or “modern cowboys” (Riebsame et al. 1997: 13). Economist Thomas Power labels this new reality “post-cowboy economics” and regards the traditional core of activities in the region (mining, grazing, and timber) as essentially relics (Power 1996; Power and Barrett 2001). Analyses of income structures for nonmetropolitan counties in the West show areas with the most robust population and employment expansion have higher endowments of nonfarm proprietorships and investment income (Nelson and Beyers 1998).

In general, the shift from agrarian economies to postindustrial economies (those based on services, tourism, recreation, government, culture, education, and information technology) became most noticeable in the 1990s (Power 1996). Challenging the “base economic model,” in which people follow jobs, some scholars argue that economic shifts appear to follow demographic ones (Vias 1999), given that individuals with “footloose” incomes can rapidly affect local economies, catalyzing shifts in the types of services provided and in approaches to economic development (Power 1996). Many in-migrants are younger, earn less in wages and salary, receive more nonearnings income, and reside in more valuable housing than long-term residents (Power and Barrett 2001). These trends fuel popular assumptions that logging, mining, and ranching communities increasingly comprise Internet commuters and Californians on mountain bikes (e.g., Bonfante 1993; Brooke 1996; Johnson 2007; Leland 2007).

These demographic trends, however, are not unique to the West. The so-called “rural rebound” is taking place both in other parts of the United States and in other postindustrial countries, including Australia (Klepeis and Laris 2008) and the United Kingdom (Smith and Phillips 2001), for example. Similar trends are also noted in rural areas throughout Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and other parts of Australasia (Moss 2006). The rural-studies literature is rife with debates about how to characterize this trend, referring to it variously as a “post-productivist” or “multifunctional” rural transition, with a broadly generalizable set of social, ecological, and political implications (e.g., Holmes 2002, 2006; Mather, Hill, and Nijnik 2006; McCarthy 2005).

Thus, New West research is predicated on well-established demographic and economic trends, with much emphasis on socioeconomic differences (and conflicts) between amenity-based communities and long-standing productivity-based ones. Our review further reveals that the literature attends to these differences and conflicts in terms of four main questions: (1) Do the emerging economic priorities of the New

West hasten the demise of extractive industries? (2) Since migrants often bring new visions of the landscape to the region, are culture clashes over economic and environmental priorities inevitable? (3) Will newcomers' behaviors and preferences foster new environmental conditions? and (4) What forms of governance are emerging, and what capacity have they shown for reducing conflict while producing just and sustainable outcomes? In the next sections we review research that addresses each of these questions, assessing the degree of internal consistency in the literature and the degree to which important issues are adequately addressed.

Is the Old West Really Dead?

The U.S. West has relied on its natural resource base to drive economic growth for nearly 150 years (Bridge and Jonas 2002), a dependence that has led to periods of tremendous growth, punctuated by economic crises, downturns, and “busts” (Amundson 2002; Gulliford 2003; Limerick, Travis, and Scoggin 2002). Over the past few decades, however, primary commodity production—mining, timber, agriculture, and grazing—have experienced a combination of price collapses, overdepletion, changes in technology, and regulatory transition, leading to organizational and institutional changes that have transformed extractive practices and impinged on the profits of producers, traders, and investors (Power 1996). Globalization of agriculture, for example, has radically altered rural economies and facilitated the conversion of agricultural lands to rural residential landscapes (Jarosz and Qazi 2000). Simultaneously, technological innovations have decreased labor demands, thereby decoupling population from industry (Robbins 2005; Winkler et al. 2007).

As noted above, scholars in economics, geography, and regional development point to recent employment and revenue declines in extractive economies as concomitant with the ascendance of new economies, therefore, a result of an overall “rural restructuring” (Nelson 2001, 2002; Swanson 2004), entailing the “obsolescence of former modes of organizing and regulating economic activity” (Bridge 2000:253) and a decline of primary commodity production (Bridge and Jonas 2002). New institutional arrangements have decoupled forests from manufacturing and facilitated the subdivision of productive land for consumptive (higher and better use) development (Bliss 2003; Erickson and Rinehart 2005). The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is a paramount example of the transformation from extractive to service-based economy (Rasker and Hansen 2000). As Power notes, the natural

amenities of Greater Yellowstone, as passively consumed goods, are now “the region’s primary asset” (1996:403). Large ranches are being replaced by ranchettes throughout the region, and ranch ownership is increasingly absentee-based, where distant owners regard natural amenities as more important than production (Gosnell, Haggerty, and Travis 2006; Gosnell and Travis 2005; Swanson 2002).

New economic sectors, such as local services, constitute an expanding share of the economy (Beyers 1999). Between 1985 and 1995, 97 percent of the new nonagricultural jobs were in services such as retail, health, and education (Nelson and Beyers 1998). In recent years, self-employed, footloose, Internet-based entrepreneurs, as well as high-tech startups, have chosen to locate in the West for the region’s amenity characteristics, allowing small businesses to attract younger workers. Rasker (1995) uses a “quality-of-life” model to explain such continued growth in the case of the Columbia River Basin, arguing that new income streams come primarily from retirement, nonearnings income, small businesses, and the booming service sector.

And yet the disappearance of Old West economies appears to have been greatly overstated. For instance, historical research shows that many of the characteristics of the New West economy (fast growing, urban oriented, nonagricultural, wealth concentrated, and immigrant driven) are in fact associated with *all periods* of economic growth in the West while the region is simultaneously characterized by its ongoing reliance on extractive industries (Hyde 1998:398). Nonhistorians, too, have noted that these industries should not be dismissed as no longer important (Beyers and Nelson 2000). In 1997, Riebsame et al. analyzed and mapped large areas where the traditional economy continued to prevail—counties where logging, ranching, farming, and mining provided at least 35 percent of local jobs in 1994, including Idaho (with 7 counties), Oregon (6), Nevada (4), Colorado (2), Montana (1), and Utah (1).

There are several subregions in the West where resource-based economies remain important (Winkler et al. 2007). When energy and mineral prices rise, oil and natural gas activities generally revive, especially in the West (Kuuskraa, Godec, and Reeves 2007). In 2005, the number of active drilling rigs reached their highest point in 20 years, with increases in Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico leading the way (Petzet 2006). Analysts at Headwaters Economics showed that 27 of 414 western counties met their criteria for “energy-dependent” in 2005. Four of these counties (Campbell, WY; Emery, UT; Cheyenne, CO; and Rio Blanco, CO) had more than 20 percent of all employment in energy development, with Campbell County boasting fully a third of its

workforce employed directly in energy development (Headwaters Economics 2008).

Similarly, there are counties scattered across the West that still could be considered “forest-dependent.” Riebsame et al. (1997:109) report that in the small timber towns of Clearwater County, ID, a vast majority of jobs (up to 70 percent) remain in mills. That number is in decline due not only to the “spotted owl wars” of the 1990s (Proctor and Pincetl 1996) but also to the massive ownership shift currently under way as timber companies sell out to real-estate developers. Still, the degree to which newer economic sectors may penetrate these areas in the future remains in question (Crawford and Wilson 2005).

Technological and informational mechanisms within extractive industries have proven to be quite adaptable to the rise of amenity economies. For example, open-pit mining operations are now required by federal law to reclaim lands, and some industries, especially timber and mining, have gone so far as to harness discourses of “sustainable development” to overcome environmental troubles and maintain production (Bridge and McManus 2000). When required to mitigate environmental impacts, corporations advertise that they contribute to local economies by hiring restoration workers and by participating in the “ecosystem services” market, sometimes buying mitigation credits supplied by local landowners.³ The degree to which such production technologies are effective in sustaining or recovering preextraction conditions or bolstering rural economies in significant ways is both questionable and beyond the scope of this review. Nevertheless, major extractive firms (e.g., ASARCO) remain in the western landscape despite rising environmental concern and the antiproductivist backlash of recent decades. The presence of extractive economies has led to other complex interactions with the amenity boom. Nearly a third of those surveyed in Wyoming expressed concern about the environmental effects of oil and gas development (Boelter and Mays 2004; Hulme et al. 2008) and Loynes (2008) reveals that oil and gas (and associated growth and residential development) had contributed to greater local interest in conservation easements.

Assuming it is the case, therefore, that a consumption economy is accelerating in parts of the region, but a parallel expansion and restructuring of primary extractive industries is ongoing in some areas, a series of rather different questions becomes imperative. Where are specific industries becoming more prevalent and important, and over what time horizons? Following work in production/amenity compati-

³ See Montana’s 2007 “Restoration Initiative” (<http://www.restorationforum.mt.gov>).

bilities and conflicts in other countries (Robbins and Fraser 2003), we can ask, what is the relationship between extractive development and amenity economies and how smoothly can they be combined? We suggest that promising research would explore the ways in which these diverse economies and communities interact. One such study (Olstad 2007), illustrating growing academic and practitioner interest in “place-based conservation,” examines the implications for public-land management of different geographic meanings locals ascribed to the energy-rich Red Desert in Sweetwater County, WY.

Scholars interested in the West have only begun to tap many other promising research questions. What explains uneven investment and development by sector within and between counties and states? Where and how do regional and subregional economies articulate with federal regulation and international terms of trade? To what degree do new economies depend upon those that preexist them? How do regulatory regimes, historically designed to accommodate commodity production, encourage or discourage amenity economy growth (e.g., Loynes 2008), and to what degree has reregulation of that growth influenced extractive economies? To really understand the dynamics of economic change in the American West, would it be more effective to perform sectoral, comparative, or international commodity-chain analysis, rather than regional economic-transition analysis?

Finally, given that transition at a regional level is not a *fait accompli*, it might be useful to analyze the spatial unevenness of multidirectional transition patterns, especially as they relate to normatively important outcomes, including social justice (see Lobao and Schulman 1991). Such examination of spatial heterogeneity, a key emerging theme and approach within rural sociology (Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2007), is nowhere better suited than in the case of the uneven transitions of New West economies.

Do New People Represent a New Culture?

Leaving complex economic patterns aside, the significant migration patterns that characterize the West also raise questions regarding the evolution of culture and knowledge in various geographic contexts. Socioeconomic differences between so-called amenity migrants and longer-term residents have in many cases led researchers to anticipate significant and corollary *cultural* differences, often related to conflicts regarding natural-resource management and the environment more generally. For example, Travis (2007) documents social conflict in the exurban West related to the differing attitudes of newcomers toward

wildlife and wildfire management. In the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, Gosnell, Haggerty, and Byorth (2007) demonstrate that amenity buyers are less likely to invest in increased irrigation efficiency on their property than longtime ranching residents, yet are more likely to reallocate water to in-stream uses, restore native ecosystems, and construct fish ponds. Haggerty and Travis (2006) document vastly different approaches to elk management of longtime owners and newcomers on private lands in the Upper Yellowstone Valley, with implications for elk migration patterns, state wildlife-management protocols, and social relations among landowners. In-migration can also tilt rural priorities towards “green” thinking (Jones et al. 2003). Smith and Phillips (2001) use the term “greentrification” to describe this phenomenon, which they link with rural gentrification in rural England, while Ghose (2004) documents its impact on the cultural landscape of Missoula, Montana. Together, the differences noted in the literature suggest changing systems of knowledge and cultural priorities.

Specific conflicts in the region bear out this trend, though we suggest that environmental priorities reflect economic interests as much as cultural differences, thereby troubling the distinction. Struggles over wolf reintroduction, for example, belie cultural views of wolves, but also very material implications for, and ideas about, private property (Wilson 1997). Walker and Fortmann (2003) demonstrate that such notions of property are tied to class-based differences rooted in divergent economic interests. Similarly, regional surveys have shown that where long-term residents hold differing values (Reading, Clark, and Kellert 1994), the distinctions are frequently tied to specifically economic preferences (e.g., utilitarian priorities or libertarian conceptions of property rights). Others demonstrate that wolf-recovery programs are generally supported across a range of demographic groups, with the notable exception of ranchers whose arguments lie most clearly in threats to livelihood (Meadow et al. 2005).

While some residents are stridently concerned about economic restructuring in the region, it would be difficult to correlate that concern with either “old” or “new” status. Nelson (2002) shows that low-income status, more than length of residence, explains anxiety about shifting economies. While there may be resentment among long-term residents toward newcomers, “on a deeper level of perception and attitude, there is more common ground between these two groups” than typically recognized (Nelson 2002:919). Cultural differences appear to reflect class differences, echoing research from other regions (Strahilevitz 2006). Whether in efforts to protect the Houston toad or

the Florida Key deer (Peterson et al. 2004), economic ideologies commonly subvert, or at least complicate, cultural environmental consensus.

Essential differences between and among in-migrants and long-term residents often violate assumptions. Based on surveys of three western communities with significant recent in-migration, Smith and Krannich (2000) find no significant attitudinal differences between newcomers and longer term residents, except that longtime residents are more likely to desire development controls (contrary to libertarian expectations). And contrary to common characterizations of longtime owners' pro-property-rights stance, Yung and Belsky (2007) find that compared to longtime ranchers, new landowners in Montana were less likely to maintain "permeable" property boundaries for locally valued activities such as hunting. Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Krannich (2004) demonstrate that length of residence in western communities is not significantly related to attachment to the natural environment. Newer residents may hold values supporting greater protection of bison and elk, reflecting key cultural priorities (Haggerty and Travis 2006), but they often turn to the ranching community for information, raising questions about any fundamental schisms between groups in terms of sources of knowledge of culture (Morris and McBeth 2003). Attitudes within older communities are also extremely heterogeneous. Rancher reactions to possible changes in public-land policies (e.g., changes in grazing season) differ significantly across subgroups depending on the degree to which respondents rely upon a ranching income (Genter and Tanaka 2002). Similarly, Walker, Marvin, and Fortmann (2003) conclude that attitudes in newcomer communities are quite diverse, and Rothman (2000) demonstrates that the long-term changes in New West economies produce waves of differing communities over longer time scales, especially in tourism-oriented areas.

Issues of cultural and economic difference also range far beyond "newcomers" and "old-timers" and embrace the complex multiethnic character of the region, which is commonly overlooked when the West is coded in nonracialized terms. Latino, African American, and Asian populations have not, historically, been fully acknowledged in the region (Limerick 2000). Moreover, as recent literature shows, any assumed homogeneity of either "old" or "new" populations (ethnic or otherwise) is problematic (Nelson and Hiemstra 2008). For example, Haverluk (1997) examines how long-standing Latino communities respond to the arrival of new generations of Mexican and Central American in-migrants. In Oregon, Nelson (2008:45) observes a number of "explicit and implicit spatial codings used to demarcate hegemonic

whiteness” of neighborhoods, towns, and counties. Understanding these racial codings, imaginaries, and conflicts as they unfold in practice reduces the tendency toward essentialism in questions about social and political change, undermining the racialized historical assumptions about the region (Moore and Taylor 2003; Taylor 1998). It also makes it possible to raise a range of important questions about social and political change. For instance, an examination of how successfully (or unsuccessfully) Native Americans inculcate traditional perspectives into land-use decisions of the Bureau of Land Management would provide important new insights into shifting use patterns of thousands of acres of public lands as a cultural-economic phenomenon.

Finally, while it is commonly assumed that group identities are formed through social interactions that lead to economic conflicts and outcomes, it is increasingly argued that conflicts and economics conversely invest people with culture (Mitchell 2000). As Jarosz and Lawson (2002) argue, the self-identification of “redneck” culture is not a timeless given categorical reality, but rather one that is commonly adopted in the encounter between long-standing populations and new classes. Similarly for McCarthy (1998; 2002), the apparently “conservative” property-rights positions of old-time residents are, at least in part, a product of interclass encounters and conflicts. Likewise, Robbins (2006) finds that traditional hunting communities in Greater Yellowstone share many values with environmentalist in-migrants, although mutual distrust disallows joint action. Research on groups (e.g., amenity seekers, traditional ranchers, new and old Hispanics) is thus complicated by interpretative and epistemological debates concerning the relationships between culture, economy, identity, and politics. In the context of the West, the empirical question may not be “do newcomers and old timers differ?” but instead “what cultural-economic differences exist among the residents of dynamic exurban spaces, and what processes produce, maintain, or erode those cultures and differences?”

Are Ranches More Sustainable than Ranchettes?

Unquestionably, the in-migration of people with new ideas for land use leads to material changes in New West communities. Large, open, productive ranchlands can give way to dense condominiums, to hobby ranches, and to easement tracts, each with very different implications for habitat fragmentation, water quality, soil conditions, flooding, and biodiversity. Thus, a third pillar of research has justifiably focused on the ecological implications of transition. Intriguingly, a priori assumptions about the direction of such change are difficult to discern. On the

one hand, new residents bring with them a greater likelihood of tending to in-stream flows, native ecosystem restoration, and other land-use practices and restrictions associated with environmental remediation (Gosnell et al. 2007; Inman, McLeod, and Menkhaus 2002). On the other hand, settlement densities and land covers associated with exurban growth can be ecologically disruptive (Gude, Hansen, and Jones 2007; Hansen et al. 2002; Hansen and Rotella 2002).

Thus, while environmental opposition to working ranches can be persuasive (Wuerthner and Matteson 2002), some argue in favor of ranching ecologies (Knight, Gilgert, and Marston 2002). The historically productive agropastoral land covers in the region are unquestionably anthropogenic, yet these regimes now facilitate important ecological flows and functions. As Knight, Wallace, and Riebsame (1995:460) explain, "ranches and farms, which represent large, contiguous blocks of relatively undisturbed land, create shallower gradients, more compatible ecotones, and more stable local communities, than, for example, do subdivisions and golf courses." Debates center on the degree of negative ecological impact caused by historical land uses (e.g., ranching, timber production, mining) and the as-yet anticipated long-term effects of amenity residential land-cover configurations.

Uncertainty prevails. Brown and McDonald (1995, 1997) question the degree to which pregrazing landscapes were anthropogenically unaltered, the wisdom of removing cattle from significantly altered ecosystems, and the role and importance of fire in maintaining "desirable" ecologies. Sayre (2002:xv) cautions against simplistic assumptions regarding the utility of removing cattle for the purpose of ecological restoration. For exurban development, on the other hand, questions center on the degree of fragmentation resulting from subdivision, and the impacts of lot sizes and infrastructure density on ecosystem structure and function (Theobald et al. 1996; Vias and Carruthers 2005). These debates, which came to a head in the mid-1990s, especially within the conservation-biology community, have led to a call for abandonment of polarizing caricatures and an "end to the range wars" (Riebsame 1996; White 2008;). Contributing to this cease-fire is the assertion by Siegel (1996), among others, that debates regarding subdivision versus agriculture are rooted not only in false assumptions regarding the ecological impacts of both productive and consumptive landscapes but also in misguided characterizations of an "either-or" choice between large subsidized ranches and unfettered residential development.

A growing body of evidence underlines the ambiguous and heterogeneous nature of "old" versus "new" land cover (Sayre

2002). In one study, grazed exurban areas perform similarly to ungrazed, totally developed ones in terms of the richness of key insect species and forbs, but lightly grazed areas perform better than either (Bock, Jones, and Bock 2006). Removal of grazing from observed areas in the Southwest results in increases in avian diversity, though this effect is significant predominantly in riparian areas, rather than open scrub (Krueper, Bart, and Rich 2003). Where grazing impacts have been significant, removal of grazing may not, without significant restoration and intentional management and ongoing inputs, by itself achieve a restored state (Curtin 2002). While fully protected areas unsurprisingly maintain native plant and faunal biodiversity most effectively, ranches, too can be effective in this regard when compared to exurban residential development (Maestas, Knight, and Gilgert 2001). Suburban development fosters the presence of many human commensal tree-nesting bird species but retards the presence of other species, including shrub-nesting birds, coyotes, and other native fauna (Maestas, Knight, and Gilgert 2003). While urbanization involving habitat fragmentation clearly negatively impacts ecological structure and function, tremendous variability between developments is possible, depending on the degree to which they maintain native vegetation and features, mimic the surrounding matrix, and have buffers and other management features, such as cluster development, to mitigate impacts (Marzluff and Ewing 2001).

As this brief review shows, there is a lack of consensus regarding the pros and cons of working landscapes like cattle ranches versus low- and mid-density housing developments. Within each category there is tremendous diversity, and clearly each represents a trade-off. The limited number of controlled analyses between residential land uses and other land uses (e.g., mining and timber extraction) also makes meaningful comparison difficult. Given this increasingly apparent fact, the urge to frame comparisons between old (cattle) and new (condos) seems increasingly irrelevant. As Sheridan (2001) demonstrates, moreover, the imagined “choice” of one land use over the other is typically arbitrated by land prices, falling commodity prices, speculative real-estate investors, local land-use policy, and political uncertainty, not by ecological science (see also Sheridan 2007).

Torell et al. (2005) analyze the role of income-earning potential versus consumptive values in setting ranchland prices in New Mexico, for example, and find that ranch location, scenic view, and the desirability of the lifestyle influence ranch value more than ranch income. As a result, while the receipts from productive ranching fall and the consumptive values of the landscape rise, a “rent gap” opens,

inviting aggressive speculation (Smith 1996; see especially 67–70). This parallels precisely the dynamics of inner-city neighborhoods where, whatever “preferences” might exist for specific social or environmental conditions, the engine of change is a cycle of devalorization and reinvestment, fed and followed by mobile capital from distant locales (Anella and Wright 2004; see also Darling 2005 for application of Smith’s rent gap in this context).

Control over land cover, therefore, whether agrarian or urban, may rest in the hands of distant parties who are neither producers nor consumers. These regionally external parties include investors, developers, or speculators who typically have little interest in, or knowledge of, environmental conditions, but are prone to make ecologically relevant decisions concerning landscape features (e.g., road density, clustering of housing). The question may not be “which is better for ecosystems, cows or condos,” but instead, “what variety of specific agrarian, urban and exurban forms are proliferating under conditions of uneven rural development and how might they be controlled or directed in the interest of specific ecological structure and function?”

Is Local Governance Best?

A question of control sits at the heart of the fourth dominant theme in New West studies. Given the state of flux and conflict over the several issues outlined above, challenges to traditional management and decision-making regimes are common throughout the region. For many, a turn to localized control of decision making has been encouraged to adjudicate disputes and set priorities (Brick, Snow, and van de Wetering 2001; Kemmis 2001). In New West studies, for example, a growing number of scholars are writing about, and in many cases championing, an approach to environmental governance that is variously called “community based natural resource management” (Walker and Hurley 2004), “collaborative natural resource management” (Conley and Moote 2003), “grassroots ecosystem management” (Weber 2003), “collaborative conservation” (Brick et al. 2001), or simply local governance (Kemmis 2001). These approaches are congruent not only with some of the libertarian tendencies typically ascribed to the politics of the West (Reading et al. 1994) but also with the tendency in critical socioenvironmental research to trust local decisions over externally imposed ones (Brown and Purcell 2005).

Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000), for example, posit that dialogue between groups and open-minded listening to alternate perspectives can lead to resolution of local disputes, but they caution that the

opinions and understanding of local groups must be integrated with research-based scientific understanding from outside experts. Weber (2003) concedes that grassroots ecosystem management can sometimes result in special-interest government, accelerated environmental degradation, and subversion of national environmental law; but he argues that it can also achieve democratic accountability given the right combination of traditional-informal institutions and formal governance, resulting in outcomes that are more socially and ecologically sustainable than “top-down” approaches.

Local and consensual procedures appear to generate more consistent outcomes and longer-lasting settlements as participants view the proceeding as more legitimate (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Even if not necessarily more socially just or ecologically beneficial, local decision making is often somewhat more “decisive” than the alternative, in the sense that local arbitration leads to settlements that are not overturned in the medium term. The necessary interactions provoked through local management may increase “knowledge pools,” which can be drawn on for addressing future challenges, and to create networks of relationships or social capital to address yet unanticipated problems. This model of decision making, following Yaffee and Wondolleck (1995:68), makes it possible to “draw on expertise wherever it is located—in the Forest Service, other agencies, universities, nonprofits, communities, or firms.” Such collaborations become all the more essential for conflicts that span multiple political and jurisdictional boundaries, which make community-based advocacy groups more effectively positioned than territorial authorities (Thompson and Thomas 2007).

Other research, however, raises questions about the inherent benefits of local decision making in terms of both social and ecological outcomes (McCarthy 1998, 2002; Walker and Hurley 2004, among others). This research argues that pro-local-governance advocates often assume that locals tend to be disenfranchised, poor, marginal, or politically silenced by external authorities, a claim that does not consistently bear out. As Walker and Hurley (2004) demonstrate, considerable local political and financial capital can dominate and derail even the best laid “collaborative” local decision-making systems. Discursive appeals to local control rather than foreign, external, or central authority often allow specific local interests to dominate debates over planning and land use. In some cases, even amid dissatisfaction with external (i.e., federal) management priorities, communities do not consistently vest resource-management decisions with local authorities (Krannich and Smith 1998). As a result, growing evidence of resource

conflicts bring predispositions toward localism into question, “serving as a reminder that local agendas are not inherently more legitimate than state or environmental agendas, and that centralized state resource management is not always a bad thing, for social or ecological goals” (McCarthy 2002:1298).

Clearly local control can cut in any number of ways. What is most notable about the ambivalence over localism in New West research, however, is the degree to which it is entirely congruent with research anywhere else in this regard, whether that is urban New Jersey or rural India (see Lemos and Agrawal 2006 for an overview of general trends toward decentralization in environmental governance). In a more global view, research has challenged whether local management achieves environmental consensus among diverse groups or instead produces compliance in cooperative environmental subjects (Agrawal 2005). Research has examined the more general trend of localized neoliberal governance to reveal its linkage to an often narrow set of economic interests (Heynen et al. 2007). The questions raised by this research undermine assertions of any consistent relationships between good governance and local scale.

This again raises questions about the coherence of a region, especially in evaluating the scalar character of political geographies of community and resource governance. Local versus nonlocal, like new and old, West and East, may be a misleading starting point from which to launch an analysis. More profitably, we might think about the processes that make governance local and the assumptions that fix the scale of debate and governance (Marston 2000). The question may not simply be “what are the relative merits of local versus nonlocal control?” but also “at what scales do power and decision making converge, and what determines or constructs the ‘appropriate’ scale for decision making under divisive political conditions?”

Moving Forward in “New West” Research

Our review of New West literature demonstrates a range of difficult questions posed by a complex region. Our aim has been to suggest that the most promising research efforts seek to explain economic, ecological, political, and ideological conditions not solely as “old” and “new” but as a function of transformations occurring as the region articulates with (and is constituted by) more global political and economic forces. Specifically, we find that new economies do not wholly displace old ones, but that shifting sources and flows of capital change the financial and regulatory conditions for both traditional and

emerging economic interests. Nor is it necessarily accurate to argue that “new” people in the region consistently differ from “old” ones, especially in their relationship to the environment. Focusing on conflicts between these communities may deflect attention from deeper trends that pull control of land and resources away from both groups, and which elide other axes of differences, especially among and between overlooked minority communities. So, too, it is not clear that ranches or ranchettes are more or less sustainable, only that the exigencies of economic change drive many of the landscape features in both cases, with ecological implications for each. Finally, it is not always clear to what degree local governance is a cause of socioecological outcomes or in fact a consequence of previous iterations of socioenvironmental struggle. In moving forward, we suggest several specific reorientations.

New West Economic Transition

Because old and new economies coexist and respond to parallel problems of attracting investment and surviving fluctuating economic cycles, we suggest the application of a transregional explanatory model, specifically drawing on the persistent problem of the mobility and fixity of capital and resultant cycles of devalorization and later reinvestment in land (Harvey 1982). Extending Lobao’s (1990) key work in the field of rural sociology on the integration of agrarian and industrial development models, research might explore further the difficult question of how and under what conditions cycles of stagnation, recovery, expansion, speculation, and crash—inherent in both cattle economies and suburban real-estate development—produce uneven effects across regions with diverse primary/tertiary economies.

Re-negotiating “Western” Values

Because both old and new residents are likely to invoke private-property rights and the protection of common amenities as guiding principles, we suggest more rigorous engagement with theories related to the production and negotiation of culture under conditions of economic change and conservation practice (Tsing 2005). We emphasize that these cultures are far more heterogeneous than portrayals of Anglo amenity buyers versus ranchers might suggest. Research might leave aside efforts to document the superficial incompatibility of different communities and knowledge systems, and instead query both how similarities in values may mask differences that matter in terms of equity between and among communities, and conversely, how apparent differences are underlain by common socioeconomic experience.

New West Sustainability

Both old and new landscapes provide different conditions for maintaining biodiversity and both are subject to priorities enmeshed within the economics of development. But because no “pristine” environmental condition is easily known or achieved, we encourage more conservation-oriented research that documents how specific human-made landscape features of all kinds (e.g., fencing, lighting, pets, swimming pools, grazing, and roads) influence ecosystems and the habitats of key species. With such information, the patchwork trade-offs in the inevitably complex landscapes of western investment, disinvestment, protection, and abandonment might be better pieced together for desirable ecological outcomes. This involves reconciliation (following Rosenzweig 2003) of diverse human uses with conservation, rather than simple reservation or “restoration” of nature.

New West Governance

Given that the various approaches to governance in the region are diverse products of existing hierarchical institutions and knowing that neither pole of central-local authority necessarily produces more desirable outcomes, we recommend more attention to institutional theory that explores the inevitable diversity of forms of governance and identifies the key common constituent elements, rules, and outcomes of each (Ostrom 2005). Finding common patterns in uneven experiments, researchers may better explain and predict where stable and sustainable outcomes are more likely, and may more coherently explore the intersections of political engagement, personal rights, and the protection of common resources. Most of these areas for research, we further suggest, would benefit from transregional, nationally focused comparative analysis (and even international comparisons with other postindustrial rural landscapes where similar changes are taking place, e.g., Australia). Insight will come from comparative examination of exurban land-use change and amenity economies east of the Mississippi (Darling 2005), uneven rural restructuring across the breadth of the United States (Lobao and Schulman 1991), local environmental practices and resource uses in the urban Northeast (Robbins, Emery, and Rice 2008), regional racial identity during immigration in New England (Vanderbeck 2006), and landscape structural characteristics and biodiversity in the agrarian Midwest (Freemark 1995).

We acknowledge that these recommendations are predominantly theoretical and analytical in nature. We believe, however, that if

researchers reconceptualize the West as part of a larger political, cultural, and ecological transition, not only can practical lessons be derived from previously overlooked sites (both within the United States and around the world) but insights emerging from research on the U.S. West will inform research in other places. If the unique or exceptional quality of the New West is sacrificed in such analysis, the number of resources brought to bear on understanding, producing, and maintaining sustainable communities might multiply.

What we have not argued here is that the last decade of literature has been unproductive in terms of developing a rich understanding of regional change. To the contrary, the lack of clear consensus on complex issues of economic, cultural, ecological, and political change is a tribute to the depth and rigor of this emerging area of research. We do suggest, however, that, given what we increasingly understand about the effects and drivers of socioeconomic and ecological change, it may be time to reorient our analysis using a wider lens. In this sense, writing the New West, like all intellectual enterprises, can make the best of its own inherited limitations. We look forward to the next decade of research, more broadly focused on the socioecological processes of development that make the West neither entirely new nor regionally unique.

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