

# SLATE

 SOME INSTITUTIONAL SENIORITIS AT THE END OF THE YEAR

 HISTORY

## Condescending to Our Country Cousins

A new book wants to lay the fault for our rural–urban divide at city people’s feet. Again.

BY STEVEN CONN

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Growing up, when I got into fights with my siblings—and let’s face it, they were annoying—my mother would pull me aside and, rather than adjudicate the squabble, say to me: “You can afford to be generous, Steve.” I was the oldest of four, and my little brother and sisters were, well, little. I was more mature, allegedly; I knew better.

That’s essentially what Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, a professor of public policy and urban and regional planning at the University of Southern California, asks of readers in her new book, *The Overlooked: The Resilience of Our Rural Towns and What It Means for Our Country.* Stop looking down your nose at “rural folk.” Stop condescending to and making fun of them. Dear reader, you can afford to be generous to those people.



Since 2016, divining the hearts and minds of rural Americans has become a veritable industry among journalists, sociologists, policymakers, and others. Mostly, in Currid-Halkett’s view, these analysts are coastal elites who parachute into some part of rural America to pathologize the locals. They see only tobacco being chewed under bright-red MAGA caps. Currid-Halkett wants to tell a different story about rural America, and she stakes her bona fides not on her academic work but on the fact that she grew up in a rural part of Pennsylvania (though she left after high school and has lived in a variety of big cities ever since). She seems personally angry at those coastal commentators, whom she blames for our national divisions and for fundamentally misunderstanding the overlooked.

Currid-Halkett makes two broad arguments, one analytic, the other emotional. Combining large-scale survey data and interviews with rural people, she finds that “rural Americans are doing much better than the conventional wisdom suggests,” economically speaking, and

“by most measures are living prosperously and decently.” What’s more, they’re good people, not roiling with anger or simmering with grievances.

It is a useful corrective to demonstrate that materially—according to measures like employment rates, homeownership, and income—rural America is doing better than some might imagine, and not much differently from metropolitan America. But Currid-Halkett seems even more interested in pinning down our shared attitudes and values as Americans. On a whole host of topics, she finds, ruralites and urbanites have more in common than you might expect. To the question of the hour—“Why is America so divided?”—Currid-Halkett responds, “Are we so divided? Maybe not.” Given that, she insists, we need to focus on our commonalities, to summon our compassion, and to find the goodness in each of us.

The book ends with a plea, and we can feel its sincerity from her tone and choice of vocabulary: “Don’t let culture obscure our basic humanity... . Americans are full of tenderness, of love, of an ability to understand and respect one another. We just have to listen.” This is a deeply humane book, and Currid-Halkett seems like a warm, caring person.

I want to believe. I really do. But belief often requires a leap of faith, or in this case, a set of elisions, some false equivalencies, and a few fatuities, all of which make this book hopelessly muddled.

## ***The Overlooked: The Resilience of Our Rural Towns and What It Means for Our Country***

by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett

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Part of the trouble is that even the data Currid-Halkett consults force her to backtrack on some of her central assertions. After telling us up front that rural America isn't worse off economically than the rest of the country, she has to acknowledge that, in fact, things aren't great in Appalachia. Or the South. To which admission she could have added much of the rural Southwest and rural Native America. (Her interests seem to be largely with the middle of the country, and the white part of it at that.)

Likewise, she must concede that health outcomes in rural areas are not as good as they are in metropolitan regions, and that divide is getting worse. But she manages to lay this at the feet of "liberal elites" who "must learn how to better communicate with rural Americans" about healthy lifestyles. As far as Currid-Halkett is concerned, "that's the biggest issue plaguing America today." This failure on the part of liberals to explain the dangers of smoking and poor diet is apparently more troubling to her than all the rural hospitals and clinics closing in such alarming numbers.

Rural Americans aren't angry, Currid-Halkett insists at the start, telling us that what we call "the politics of resentment" "may actually be a politics of contentment"—though I've struggled to figure out quite what she means by this catchy rhyme. (I'll offer that this "rural contentment" looks to some of us like the self-righteousness that comes from believing that rural America is the "real America.") In any event, by the end of the book it turns out that rural Americans are, in fact, filled with "implicit" "resentment and resistance," but that, too, turns out to be "a reaction to the piousness and condescension in how the meritocrats, aspirational class, coastal elites, and creative class—whatever we want to call them—express their values." Apparently, even the resentments rural people *don't* feel are the fault of liberal elites.

Currid-Halkett is no more specific about these elites than the litany of labels I quoted above. These labels salt the book on almost every page, and always as epithets. The irony here is that while Currid-Halkett wants to give depth and humanity to rural Americans, their counterparts—Ivy-educated snots like me—are presented in caricature, straw people holding cappuccinos and the New York Times in their straw hands. Here's a typical sentence: "All across America," she writes, "I met the loveliest, kindest people in the places most vilified by mainstream media and liberal elites." In decrying the stereotyping of rural people, Currid-Halkett has leaned into a stereotype of metropolitans that might have come out Tucker Carlson's mouth.

Sometimes Currid-Halkett sounds less like a scholar and more like a Unitarian minister I used to know in her repeated appeals that we put aside our differences in order to celebrate our shared humanity. But after 300+ pages, I could never figure out where Currid-Halkett

landed on this. Sometimes we really aren't all that different, as when Keith, one of her interviewees, tells her that "my favorite time in my life was when my kids were born," and Currid-Halkett writes, "I did know what he meant, because I felt that exact way, at the exact moment when my kids were born too."

Yet at other times we are quite different—different aspirations, different expectations, different ways of seeing the world. "They don't want special treatment," Currid-Halkett assures us. "They ask only that they not be judged because they fail to embrace the same ethos as the nation's coastal elites." After all, she writes almost confessionally, "My life [in a posh section of LA] is not better than those in my hometown [in northeast PA]. I am not necessarily happier." Perhaps not, but Currid-Halkett gives no indication that she's moving back to Danville, PA, anytime soon.

Currid-Halkett and her informants blame "the media" for inflaming our differences and stoking our anger at one another. That's not a particularly original analysis, but it, too, is drawn asymmetrically. The *New Yorker* and MSNBC are the problem, as Currid-Halkett sees it, and it takes until page 176 for her to acknowledge that "studies suggest that conservative media is more biased than liberal media." Still, she's only interested in chastising the *Times*, because as she argues, the liberal media has "demonized" and "mocked" rural America.

Chapter 4, "Cognitive Dissonance," encapsulates many of the book's confusions. I had expected that Currid-Halkett would explore how some of the quantitative data she examined did not square with what her interviewees were telling her. Or that she would dig a little deeper to figure out how those interviewees wrestled with some of the contradictory things they said. No, this chapter is about Currid-Halkett's own cognitive dissonance at the warm feelings she has toward one of her informants whose worldview is exactly the opposite of her own. "I hope it's obvious that I like Shannon tremendously. I honor where Shannon is coming from," she writes. Shannon is a thrice-married born-again Catholic from rural Kentucky, a Trump voter and anti-vaxxer who believes (among other conspiracy theories) that COVID vaccines were made with aborted fetuses. But she's a *good person*, Currid-Halkett insists.

For Currid-Halkett, this is far more important than Shannon's political views, because Shannon does not come "from a place of hate." In the end, Currid-Halkett writes: "Shannon is full of contradictions, but the truth is, we all are." OK, but some contradictions are more consequential than others. Currid-Halkett had planned to visit Shannon in Kentucky in summer 2021, but by then COVID cases were rising again, and "the vaccination rate in Clay

County was just 30 percent, and Shannon herself was not vaccinated.” She “honors” where Shannon comes from, but only from a safe and sensible distance.

Over and over again, Currid-Halkett tells us that to a person, the people she talked with are “kind,” “gracious,” and “generous,” and that they “represent the best of America.” Her interviewees are racially tolerant and they care about the environment just like the rest of us. As she complains, “We focus on the Freudian small differences rather than the things most of us believe in: democracy, freedom, equality, family.” Currid-Halkett never really specifies just what those small differences might be that, in the Freudian sense, cause fractiousness in inverse proportion to their significance.

What she also doesn’t tell us is what those concepts mean at a more granular level to the people she talked with and how those meanings might differ from those understood by us latte-chugging elites.

Not drilling any deeper on those attitudes—how many Americans, after all, would offer that they don’t believe in freedom?!—is a way for Currid-Halkett to evade questions of politics and political choices. Yes, she admits, “far-right state legislatures and the Supreme Court have decisively reshaped the nation’s laws,” but she does not seem interested in whether her kind and gracious interlocutors voted for these vicious extremists, though no doubt many of them did. I expect Currid-Halkett would get upset with me if I reminded her that rural Georgians sent Marjorie Taylor Greene to Congress.

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The political elephant in Currid-Halkett’s room is abortion. Astonishingly, she simply doesn’t talk about this at all—not with her informants, nor does she engage with survey data on the topic, of which there is an abundance.

A quick refresher: Rural voters report opposition to abortion rights more than urban and suburban ones. More than that, however, religiously committed people—and Currid-Halkett spends a great deal of time discussing just how important faith and church are to her informants—are much more opposed to abortion rights than those for whom religion isn’t so important. And since much of this book consists of analysis by anecdote, I’ll offer my own

experience doing political work in rural Ohio. Consistently, voters in rural counties put opposition to abortion as the most important, and sometimes the only, reason they vote. On a recent trip through rural Wisconsin, I counted more anti-choice billboards than adverts for cheese—seriously! I don’t think disagreeing over whether women have the right to basic bodily autonomy constitutes merely a Freudian “small difference.”

Currid-Halkett concludes this about anti-vaxxer Shannon: “Shannon means no harm, and even though her sources of information are political, I never get the sense she has a political stance regarding Covid.” She does not believe that Shannon (or any of her other informants) should have to be held to account for the consequences of their political choices. She doesn’t even credit her interviewees with being engaged with politics much at all, because as she points out, “most people are focused on things other than politics: their families, upcoming holidays, paying their bills, their church and faith.” That’s a cop-out on her part—these people are political actors, just like the rest of us, and their choices deserve some interrogation.

Ultimately, Currid-Halkett winds up sounding just as condescending toward her subjects as she accuses the rest of us liberal elites of being, albeit from a different angle. The work that needs to be done, in her view, is one-directional. The responsibilities to fix things are all “ours,” not “theirs.” She asks “us” to understand their point of view but does not ask the same in return from “them.”

Sorry, Mom. I wish I could be more generous about this book. 🍷

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