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Four Perspectives on Appalachian Culture and Poverty

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Poverty in The Appalachian Context

Poverty is as closely associated with the Appalachian region as coal mining and the hammer dulcimer. Appalachian poverty has seldom been portrayed simply as poverty, but as the expression and symbol of something larger. Images of poverty—poorly dressed, sooty, emaciated, barefooted, mostly white, rural children and adults beside cabin porches—are as closely associated with Appalachia as cowboy hats with the West or moss-covered trees and white-columned mansions with the Old South.

Buried deeply beneath the images and stereotypes, the realities of poverty in the Appalachian region have changed greatly in the past 25 years. Yet our views of poverty have remained remarkably stagnant during that period. Such a situation might be tolerable if there were evidence of the continuing decline—and eventual disappearance of poverty as a major fact of life in the region. Current data suggest a quite different picture, however. Poverty rates in Central Appalachia remain nearly twice the national average (Tickamyer and Tickamyer, 1987). The collapse of employment in the steel industry has been added to the earlier decline of mining employment to make the problem of structural unemployment a region-wide phenomenon. Further, recent indications
are that the situation for poor children in Appalachia may have gotten significantly worse during the 1980s, after nearly two decades of gradual improvement (West Virginia Human Resources Assn., 1988).

An electronic media wag on one of the all-news channels suggested (in 1988) that nobody believed theories of poverty anymore—not even the theorists who had developed them. This statement may represent a slight exaggeration—academic theorists are generally quite reluctant to give up on their favorite theories. It does not, however, adequately convey the present overall lack of enthusiasm with theories and explanations of poverty.

While we have recently been subjected to a number of laser-like penetrating insights into contemporary poverty, summed up by terms such as “new poor,” “near poor,” “feminization,” “urban underclass,” “rural ghetto” and “deindustrialization,” nothing like the sustained interest of two decades ago in theorizing about (or, even thinking about) poverty appears to be evident at present. And no single theoretical approach or perspective seems capable of provoking much reaction. Even the seemingly heretical view that federal programs are the ultimate causes of poverty draws largely a yawn from most of the academic community.

Such lack of interest is particularly true with respect to poverty in Appalachia. With the notable exception of poverty among the elderly, most of the poverty-related problems which attracted significant attention in the 1960s are more or less as serious in the 1980s, while some new forms of poverty have emerged alongside the older forms. Yet, nothing like the sustained interest of that earlier time can be found today. Two decades of energy crisis, federal deficits, social program cutbacks, accountability, and privatization has had remarkably little impact on the remaining poverty problems in Appalachia. Mine and factory closings have made problems worse; inadequate public benefits, occasional new industries, and outmigration have, each in its own way, acted to lessen the severity of problems without ever offering a realistic hope to completely eliminate them.

One of the things which is most needed, at present, is renewed discussion and debate over the nature and circumstances of poverty in Appalachia. First and foremost, researchers and scholars with interests in the Appalachian region need to recognize the continued existence of poverty as an important economic, political, and social fact of life. One way to begin refocusing our attention on the phenomenon of poverty in the region, is to begin where we left off: to reexamine some of the thrusts and foci of previous research and writing on Appalachian poverty.

In the most general terms, there are probably four identifiable positions on poverty in Appalachia which have impacted most directly
upon issues of public policy and community life in the region. These four positions, outlined in Table 1, can be termed: Bureaucratic Realism, Appalachian Culturalism, Predatory Capitalism, and Domestic Colonialism. It is possible to begin with any of these four dramatically different world-views on Appalachia and to reach startlingly different conclusions regarding the problem of poverty in the region. Like the television commentator cited above, however, each of these perspectives rings somewhat hollow in the world of the 1990s.

We shall briefly examine each of them in turn:

**Bureaucratic Realism**

This is a view of the Appalachian region shared by most federal and state public agencies, including the Appalachian Regional Commission and the state government departments which administer the categorical aid programs for the eligible poor. From this vantage point, the Appalachian Region is a congressionally defined, 12 state, multi-jurisdictional, administrative district characterized chiefly by a number of inter-related social and economic problems, the solutions of which are important objects of public policy concern. The region as a whole is the administrative domain of a federal agency, the Appalachian Regional Commission, which has ultimate responsibility for the problems of the region.

The lack of employment opportunities for residents of the region is a high priority consideration in any list of such problems (Zeller and Miller, 1968). Economic development, heavily concentrated upon capture of new industries for the jobs and tax revenues they bring, is perhaps the most important proximate objective of recent public policy in the Appalachian region. In bureaucratic realism, the problem of poverty has dissolved into the more general problem of economic underdevelopment.

The sources of this dissolution are not hard to trace. Shortly after its creation in 1965, the Appalachian Regional Commission embarked upon its imaginative, but controversial, regional development strategy, which stressed highway construction and health care facilities as the key elements in the improvement of the economic infrastructure of the region. This strategy still tends to enrage many in the region who see it as a strategy of bringing a distinctive cultural minority into the homogenized middle-class mass, or who feared that “highways in are also highways out” and will contribute further to the depopulation of the region.

To administrative realists, poor people are fairly normal people—clients of public assistance, perhaps distinguishable by their eligibility or “ineligibility.” Poverty is an economic condition whose principal characteristic is lack of money. Work is what people must do in order to enjoy a
satisfactory quality of life. Unemployment, or underemployment therefore, are the principal proximate causes of poverty.

Above all else, stress upon national public policy and economic development tends to discount most of the unique or distinguishing characteristics of poverty in Appalachia. Poverty is defined in largely statistical terms following standard methods. Orshansky (1966, 1968), Perry (1979), and Tickamyer and Tickamyer (1987) are among the many statistical studies of poverty in the region. Poverty may exist in the region in greater numbers and proportions, but the essential characteristics of Appalachian poverty are not seen as fundamentally different from poverty elsewhere.

Traditionally, bureaucratic realism has been built for the past two decades upon a two-fold strategy against poverty in the region: On the one hand, reliance upon the same programs and services found elsewhere in the U.S., and, on the other hand, the Appalachian Regional Commission "growth centers" strategy in which health and other services are concentrated in areas with high growth potential while highway development provide egress to these areas from more isolated pockets of poverty. (U.S. News and World Report, September 27, 1965; WVGOECD, 1980; WVGOECD, 1983). Largely because of this continuing Appalachian Regional Commission strategy, community-level economic development remains as the preferred anti-poverty strategy of bureaucratic realism in the 1970s and 1980s. (Whitman, 1986; Trent, Weigand and Smith, 1985; Blair, 1973; McNeill and Miller, 1971). Grave doubts continue, however, about the efficacy of bureaucratic realism as an anti-poverty strategy.

Appalachian Culturalism

One of the sources of those doubts is a view of poverty which is grounded in a social outlook on the region which can be termed "Appalachian Culturalism," and which tends to stress the uniqueness of beliefs, attitudes, and folkways in the region as important factors in understanding poverty. At least since the time of the local colort writers of the 19th Century, and probably well before, there has been a conception of the Appalachian region as a place apart in which ways of life unique and distinct from those known by most Americans existed. Whether in the form of pop-culture stereotypes like Lil Abner and Snuffy Smith, or in serious scholarly studies of Appalachian values, or Appalachian arts and crafts, the sense of a unique and cherished cultural heritage has been encouraged and promoted. One of the defining characteristics of this strange place is the acceptance of subsistence life styles and high levels of poverty as normal or characteristic.
From this vantage point, Appalachia as a cultural unity is not in any fundamental sense the large region associated with the federal administrative district served by Appalachian Regional Commission, but a much smaller area composed of parts of western North and South Carolina, eastern Tennessee and Kentucky and most of southern West Virginia. (Approximately this same area is known in the Appalachian Regional Commission argot as "Central Appalachia.")

Weller (1965) identified a long list of traits which he says define Appalachian culture. Probably the most important for an understanding of the Appalachian poor is the sense of resignation and fatalism. Irelan (1966) summarized studies of social attitudes, family patterns, education levels, health, and consumer practices among the poor in Appalachia and other "subcultures." Dial (undated) has discussed the uniqueness of Appalachian language, and Coles (1971) has discussed distinctive Appalachian child-rearing practices.

In its more romantic strains, Appalachian culturalism is prone to view work as passé in the world of the hollows, where people survive by hunting, fishing, gardening, and collecting welfare. As with other cases of romantic poverty in distant, remote and picturesque places, poverty may not be viewed as quite so negative because it is part of a traditional way of life.

As one source puts it:

Thus, the mountaineer appears to be at variance with the standardized image of the American in everyday life. Consequently, he is accused of possessing negative attitudes, of being a defeatist, of having an inferiority complex, and of lacking appreciation for education. His lack of social skills in modern social situations is dubbed by some as having a "backwoods flavor." His inability to follow expected behavior patterns in group situations is assigned to what some call "rural values." (Zeller and Miller, 1968.)

Appalachia, it is often said, was a region settled by rugged individualists, more interested in "their own private little worlds" than in any large-scale plans for society or the state (Zeller and Miller, 1968).

This view of Appalachian uniqueness as an indigenous cultural product has not been entirely unchallenged. While others have viewed the region as a distinct subculture within contemporary American life, Shapiro (1980) views "the myth of Appalachia" as largely a fabrication of journalists and intellectuals which began in the colonial era, when the region was the "wild west." It was substantially supplemented by the missionaries and local color writers, who among other things, fostered the arts and crafts movement in the region—thus originating mountain
music, quilting, and clogging—some of the more colorful cultural artifacts found in the region.

This view has often been associated with other culture of poverty arguments, for obvious reasons. It is even quite likely that such culture of poverty explanations have been largely discounted as general explanations of poverty in Appalachia. For example, Billings (1974) casts doubt upon the theories of Ford, Weller, Photiadis, et al, that traditional Appalachian culture is a cause of continuing poverty in the region, and suggested that fuller understanding of the causes of poverty in the region would “require a comprehensive social history.” It seems likely that Appalachia might better be viewed as a culture of subsistence than a culture of poverty. It is also reasonable that poverty is not an individual, but a family and community concern. Everywhere in the region, localism prevails, with relative indifference to the outside world.

Appalachian culturalism accounts for a large portion of the total research output on poverty-related phenomena in the region. Rebow, Berkman and Kessler (1983) isolated “learned helplessness” as a component of the culture of poverty in Appalachia. Lowndes (1972) examined the impact of mass communications on modernization among the Appalachian poor. Ball (1968) examined Southern Appalachians in what he termed an “analgesic subculture.” Peterson, Stivers, and Peters (1986) studied the role of family members and others in the career decisions of low-income Appalachian youth.

Gender is one of the most examined issues in this literature. Thus, Philliber (1982) examines the phenomenon of working wives in relation to low-income status of low-income Appalachian migrants. Kenkel (1980) examines the occupational and marriage plans of low-income high school girls in Appalachia and the Southeast. Hennon and Photiadis (1979) investigated the changing role of rural Appalachian males in low-income family structures.

**Predatory Capitalism**

Bureaucratic realism and Appalachian culturalism generally fail to capture the sense of frustration and anger among the Appalachian poor and those who speak for them. Others have sought in various ways to get at these questions.

One of these views is the “social control” thesis which posits that the function of public assistance in capitalist society is to regulate the poor and keep them underemployed for the benefit of corporate profits. The most extensive general statement of this view of poverty is by Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven in the book *Regulating the Poor* (1971), and a paper presented by them at a conference on public welfare held at West Virginia University in 1971.
Although the paper discusses the Anglo-American public welfare tradition, and makes numerous references to contemporary national issues, it contains no unique or distinct references to the Appalachian region. Piven and Cloward (1972), and Walls (1976), however, applied a similar perspective to the region.

From the vantage point of predatory capitalism, poverty is a necessary precondition of the effective functioning of labor markets in capitalist economies. Succinctly stated, in Appalachia, profits of outside corporations are dependent upon a large, enduring class of workers who are kept unemployed and/or underemployed. Walls (1976), for example, speaks of this as "cultural hegemony and capitalist domination."

Two issues have been particularly important to an understanding of poverty from the viewpoint of predatory capitalism: The declining importance of mining (and more recently, manufacturing) as a source of employment in the region, has resulted in a growing "surplus population" of workers. In addition, ownership of a large percentage of the land in Appalachia is by outside interests (Miller, 1972; Gaventa and Horton, 1982). One of the most persistently heard criticisms of the Appalachian Regional Commission development strategy from this perspective is the view that the principal effect of economic development will be for the natives to become the servants of middle-class retirees and vacationing second-home owners (Whisnant, 1974).

In large measure, predatory capitalism has served the historic mission of giving voice to the alienation and sense of powerlessness often shared by poor and nonpoor alike in the region. At the same time, from this perspective poverty is often reduced to a mere background or preamble concept serving only to introduce other questions. Alas, the essentially sound insight that an understanding of poverty also requires an understanding of the wealthy and powerful, has proven to be the pretext for a generalized loss of interest in the problem of poverty in the region.

**Domestic Colonialism**

A fourth model is based on an implicit comparison of Appalachia with "underdeveloped" regions in Africa and Asia formerly colonized by European nations. Although this view overlaps to some degree with that of predatory capitalism (e.g., Walls, 1976), the primary emphasis here is generally more political than economic.

In one of the earliest statements of the domestic colonialism view, Friedmann (1966) suggests that comparisons of characteristics common to poor regions and poor nations suggest the existence of a syndrome of collective poverty, but do not support a hypothesis of structural similarities. Kahn (1970) blends aspects of the culturalism and colonialism views in his comparison of rural Appalachian and urban poverty.
Appalachia, he says, is an economic colony, drained of important resources by absentee ownership and political control. Parsons (1969) raised questions about the appropriateness of the comparison with underdeveloped countries as a basis for issues of public policy. Lewis (1978) brings together a variety of perspectives on this issues.

The colonialism model appears to be largely an outgrowth of the experiences of local community organizers in the War on Poverty. Much literature from that period is approached from that standpoint. For example, Bould (1977) argues that rural poverty is a political, as well as an economic, problem.

The domestic colonialism perspective often shares much of the anger and stridency of poverty in the context of an unbroken history of Anglo-American class domination; adherents of this view tend to set issues within a unique regional history of exploitation.

The basic view of domestic colonialism is that Appalachia represents a domestic colony within the United States—with a largely surplus population stockpiled for national emergency purposes, and rich mineral resources exported by outside sources with maximum cost and minimum gain to the state. Unlike any of the other three positions, the domestic colonial view typically links public welfare issues directly with environmental issues (strip mining, air, and water pollution), land ownership, housing, and other issues.

The following excerpt summarizes important aspects of this view:

Appalachia is America’s Third World. The absolute control the coal companies had over people’s lives in the old company towns is no more, but the power of absentee corporate owners to affect the economic future of local communities is still massive. The situation is most severe in the coal counties, where half the land surface is corporately owned and 72 percent is absentee-owned. In Logan County, West Virginia, 11 corporations own nearly everything... (Southern Exposure, Jan-Feb, 1982, 41).

One of the most basic issues raised by the domestic colonialism model is a definitional one: What exactly is that that is being referred to as poor? The region itself, or a portion of the population within it? Simon, for example, focuses on the region in his contrast of domestic colonialism with what he calls the “uneven development” model (1981). The question, then, which is begged by domestic colonialism is one very comparable to that raised by Appalachian cultures: Is the experience of poor persons in Appalachia in any way different than that of being poor elsewhere in American society?
Universes of Discourse and Poverty

The essential differences between these four perspectives are less a matter of rival hypotheses about the nature and causes of poverty than a matter of the different universes of discourse with which they are anchored. Without remarking at all on the truth or values of the statements produced in these perspectives, we can make some observations about each perspective solely as a system of terms. For example, the language of bureaucratic realism is primarily the language of policy analysis, with heavy accents of political and economic utilitarianism and individualism. In general, the language of bureaucratic realism tends to rationalize poverty into a series of negative strategic choices that tend to infuriate Appalachian culturalists in particular. "Unemployed? Then move where the jobs are!" and so forth. Statements of Appalachian culturalism are often spoken in local dialects of the region, with heavy reliance upon metaphorical or archaic localisms. Appalachian culturalism often tends to romanticize Appalachian poverty into a developmental experience, moral challenge, or personal and family struggle. The words "poor but happy" come easily in this language. Predatory capitalism, and to a lesser extent, domestic colonialism tend to be built on a substructure of Marxian sociology and critical theory, relying heavily on terms like "alienation," "class," and "exploitation." Such language seems, to many, particularly apt to describe aspects of the localism, Jacksonian populist politics, and tradition of exploitive business practices of the region. At the present time, speakers of these dialects are finding it easy to adopt the term "underclass" as a suitable descriptor of the Appalachian poor.

It is almost as though we were faced with theoretical statements about poverty in English, Swahili, Farsi and Korean. So long as the purpose of statements in these various languages is (as it often may be) to support the general world views of their respective communities, one need feel little discomfort with this state of affairs.

If the problem is defined as one of constructing a coherent general theory of poverty in Appalachia, however, quite a different problem arises. Before we can possibly compare or evaluate these four perspectives on Appalachian poverty in any great depth, it would be desirable to translate them into a single language. Except that, in this case, there is no apparently neutral fifth language into which to translate statements about Appalachian poverty. Thus, the challenge of furthering general understanding of Appalachian poverty at present may well boil down to translation of the key insights of each perspective into the theoretical languages of the other perspectives. Some of this translation happens already on a more or less ad hoc basis. One commonly hears references to "empowerment" scattered among statements of bureaucratic realism.
and Appalachian culturalism, for example. And, at least for a time, the term "underclass" may well permeate all four perspectives.

Conclusions

What is needed at the present time is yet another "rediscovery" of poverty in Appalachia. A contemporary rediscovery of Appalachian poverty has not one, but four, rich traditions of research and inquiry with which to work. Each of these perspectives has its strengths and weaknesses. These perspectives are, however, as a group somewhat dated and out of touch with the realities of poverty in the region in the late 1980s. The simplistic division of the region into Northern, Central, and Southern Appalachia by the bureaucratic realists of Appalachian Regional Commission, for example, fails to deal adequately with the essential social, economic, and political boundaries within the region. However, the tendency of the Appalachian culturalists to deal only with the Central subregion as the real Appalachia is similarly limited. Both might well benefit from the much more refined subregions offered by the Economic Research Service Population Section in the U.S. Department of Agriculture which divides the counties of Appalachia into at least five separate subregions.

The rediscovery of poverty in Appalachia should seek a more balanced view of the continuing political, economic, and social phenomena of poverty in the region and in the nation than that offered by any of the four past perspectives. Future studies of Appalachian poverty should take into account such factors as regional urbanization and deindustrialization, and the impact of recent national trends such as rural poverty, deinstitutionalization, growing homelessness, and the feminization and racialization of poverty. Such approaches are likely, of necessity, to touch upon many of the themes most central to each of the four perspectives.

One of the most important themes for contemporary research on poverty is likely to be the convergence of the Appalachian poor into the mainstreams of poverty in the U.S. In the past twenty years, the Appalachian Regional Commission growth centers strategy appears to have brought a clustering of populations—poor and nonpoor alike—into the cities of the region. As a result, it is quite likely that both the urban Appalachian poor and the rural poor left behind are much more like urban and rural poor of the rest of the country than they were twenty years ago. In this context, family breakup may be as important a factor in Appalachian poverty as in mainstream America (Pierce, 1978). Similarly, deinstitutionalization, deindustrialization, urbanization, and an increasingly ancient housing stock have all contributed to the phenomenon of homelessness in the region as they have elsewhere.
This convergence thesis is likely to be closely associated with the perspectives of bureaucratic realism. Acceptance of such convergence arguments should not necessarily be equated with rejection of culture of poverty explanations of the causes of poverty. There is still a role for studies of the family structure and other subcultural characteristics of the Appalachian poor. Such foci need not dwell exclusively on the poor, however. There is probably still merit in Weller's (1967) question asked in the title of an article in Volume 1 of Appalachian Review: “Who is the Target Group?” (of research and intervention)? His recommendation in that article was to concentrate upon studying wealthy industrialists and economically secure residents of the region to gain a more complete picture of the problem of poverty in Appalachia. In many cases, studies of small town businessmen, politicians, social welfare professionals and other “middlemen” would prove equally rewarding.

Nor should one ignore or reject the insights possible with the Predatory Capitalist and Domestic Colonial approaches. The Appalachian land ownership study (Gaventa and Horton, 1982), as well as recent indictments of local officials in a southern West Virginia county, shows that there is still merit in such approaches in a region where economic exploitation and political corruption remain important realities bearing upon the condition of the poor.

The cleavages in ideology, politics, and world views which are behind the four viewpoints on Appalachian poverty identified in this paper, remain strong within the region and the scholarly community today. Thus, it is probably naive to argue for any theoretical or research convergence among them. It is not naive, however, to suggest that each of these perspectives is a bit dated and showing signs of age due to the general neglect of any research interest in Appalachian poverty in recent years. Yet, each points to important research questions which have gone uninvestigated and to hypotheses which have gone untested. At the same time, none deals adequately with the “new poverty” which has arisen in the region and the nation. All things considered, therefore, the time has come to reopen serious study of Appalachian poverty.
Table 1

Four Perspectives on Appalachian Culture and Poverty

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The Poor Are:

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