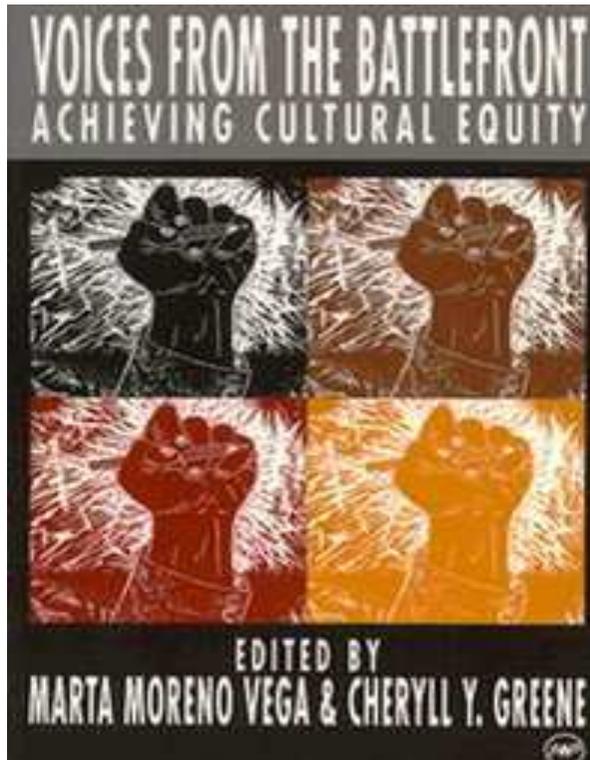


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Appalachia, Democracy, and Cultural Equity

by Dudley Cocke

A joke from the Depression goes: Two Black men are standing in a government breadline; one turns to the other, "How you making it?" The other looks up the line, "White folks still in the lead."

Although central Appalachia's population is 98 percent white, the region joins the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the Mississippi Delta at the bottom of the barrel in United States per capita income and college-educated adults. Two out of five students who make it to high school drop out before graduating, which is the worst dropout rate in the nation. Forty-two percent of the region's adults are functionally illiterate. In eastern Kentucky's Letcher County, half the children are classified as economically deprived, and almost a third of the area's households exist on less than \$10,000 a year. What's the story here? Why are these white people doing so poorly? Part of the answer lies in the beginnings of the nation.

In the ascendancy of antidemocratic ideas such as those expressed by Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists were buried some of the seeds of Appalachia's poverty. In opposition to Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton proposed that the president and Senate be elected for life; he wrote: "All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well-born, the other the mass of people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right." In the next 200 years, this old-world idea would be cultivated by the few for profit.

Capitalism didn't arrive in central Appalachia until the 1890's (coinciding with the official closing of the western frontier). Before then there were no banks, no railroads, and no industry on the Cumberland Plateau. Monopoly capitalism arrived late and with a vengeance. Timber and mineral rights were snapped up by absentee corporations for a fraction of their market value. Within twenty-five years, these corporations dominated the region's economy, controlling the land, the labor pool, and the county courthouse.

Now, a hundred years later, central Appalachia is a mineral colony of national and supranational energy corporations. Now the region avoids at its own further peril international savvy. Union Carbide was responsible for small chemical leaks in Institute, West Virginia, as well as for the tragedy in Bhopal, India, in 1984. A recent American appointee to the British Coal Board was partially responsible for the destruction of a Mingo County, West Virginia-Pike County, Kentucky community during the bitter 1984 to 1986 A.T. Massey coal strike. At the time of the strike, A.T. Massey was a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, which also mines in South Africa. These absentee corporations, often with only a pretense of national interest, continue to carry off Appalachia's wealth, leaving behind unemployment, poor schools, poor health care--in sum, the poverty that Appalachia has come to represent.

A story points to how confusing poverty is to those who are poor and those who try to empathize with it. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared the war on poverty. As part of the national media's coverage of that domestic war, CBS produced "Christmas in Appalachia." Charles Kuralt narrated: "Up on the hill is the Pert Creek School. And up there on this one day is the only sign in this hollow that it is Christmas in Appalachia." The camera cut to half a dozen kids around a coal stove singing "Silent Night." After the broadcast, a little town in Virginia named Appalachia received so many pairs of shoes, simply addressed to "Appalachia, U.S.A.," that the mayor and his coworkers were being pushed out of city hall. As the story goes, when it looked like the jail would be filled up, leaving no room for meanness, a shoe-burning party was proclaimed by City Council. The town helped rid the nation of its extra shoes and then returned to the routine of daily dealing with its lot.

Stereotyping has been a modus operandi consistently used by the relatively few to rationalize dominating the region's people and resources for profit. The inevitable missionaries, for example, chimed in with a chorus that had been singing since the early 1700's. In this instance, Marie Louise Poole opined in 1901: "Sometimes, unknown by them, I get a glimpse into their minds, and I am sick. There is filth in their thoughts. I want to save them." In 1912, the New

York Times editorialized: “The majority of mountain people are unprincipled ruffians. There are two remedies only: education or extermination. The mountaineer, like the red Indian, must learn this lesson.” Arnold Toynbee, in *A Study of History* (1935), writes by report, never having spent time in Appalachia: “The Appalachian mountain people at this day are no better than barbarians. They are the American counterparts of the latter-day White barbarian of the Old World, the Rifis and Kurds and the Hairy Ainu.” The irony here is that the Ainu, who are people from the northernmost Japanese islands, have light skin, Caucasian features, and hairy bodies-- we can imagine what some of the Japanese thought of them. The effect of this entrenched stereotyping has been to undermine a people’s self-esteem.

In this demoralizing and divisive process, racism also has played its part: “They are of good stock . . . They will overflow from their mountains, offset some unpromising foreign elements-- and reinforce the nation,” proclaimed Teddy Roosevelt. “In my opinion they are worse than the colored,” remarked a Chicago police captain in a 1958 *Harper’s Magazine* article. In the workplace, it was common practice for white coal operators to pit Black workers against Appalachia’s white miner – and both against immigrant workers. For example, agents were sent to the deep South covertly to offer Black sharecroppers a rail ticket and a job up North in the mines. The new miners weren’t told when they were being recruited as scab labor by the company to break the nascent union. After a while in many coal camps, it became company policy to keep, in their phrase, “a judicious mixture” of races and ethnicities, each group living separately and each speaking a different native tongue.

Given the despairing economic and social history in central Appalachia during the past 100 years, it is not unusual for someone to say, “Why don’t you people just pick up and leave?” Almost always the tone implies, “After all, you are white.” In the 1960’s some of the absentee corporate owners, with input from the Army Corps of Engineers, sketched out such a plan: The region would be declared an energy preserve, a national sacrifice zone, and all but the necessary work force would be relocated. Especially for Appalachians with Indian blood, the plan had a familiar ring: In 1838, Cherokees turned to the mountains to hide their children from the forced march west – the Trail of Tears.

The leaving proposition also presumes that there is somewhere to go. When the coal and timber industries arrived after the Civil War, many families did pick up and move west to the Ozarks and then into Indian Territory, when it was taken back from the Indians. Or they scattered to other diminishing frontiers to pursue freedom. This marked migration of the 1890’s dispels the then popular, economically convenient stereotype that Appalachian people were stuck in their hollows, too ignorant to find their way out – too dumb to discover progress. Throughout the boom and bust coal cycles of the past 100 years, tens of thousands of Appalachians have come and gone, often moving to industry jobs in cities like Flint, Michigan, coming back to visit regularly, despite more time spent driving than visiting, and coming home to be buried. Flint is not an option any longer. Neither is the frontier. In the face of ongoing hardship, many Appalachian people are determined to stay in their adopted homeland. In order to have a homeland to stay in, however, Appalachians will have to become less confused and

more self-reliant.

There are signs of stiffening resistance to domination. During the 1990 United Mine Workers of America-Pittston coal strike, the union borrowed the Civil Rights Movement's strategy of massive nonviolent resistance, and Jesse Jackson's speeches were cheered by thousands of white miners, their families and supporters. Citizens' groups in numerous counties in the past several years have nixed plans for new waste dumps (New Jersey already buries 16 percent of its garbage in Kentucky). Now, for the first time in 100 years, corporate property taxes on unmined mineral wealth in eastern Kentucky are about to be assessed at something like full value. In 1988, by an overwhelming 80 percent, the voters amended the state constitution to outlaw the hated Broad Form Deed, which gave corporate mineral rights precedence over individual owner's surface rights. And in 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled the State's public school system unconstitutional because of its inequity.

Such victories in a one-industry economy are threatened, however, at every turn. Some argue that it is too little, too late. In less than a decade, mechanization has reduced the mining workforce by 30-plus percent, and the supranational corporations are looking to cheaper labor and more abundant coal in faraway places like China. More and more, Appalachia appears to be less the exception than the national norm: Many communities now find themselves playing host to businesses that have little sense of community responsibility and are owned by someone somewhere else. The paradigm of domination rests on what is proving daily to be a tragic misperception: that the interests and welfare of the few are more important than the

interests and welfare of the many. To wit, the 1980's saw the greatest shift in wealth in the history of the United States: The bottom 20 percent of the American people on the economic ladder have lost 9 percent of their income, while the top 2 percent have gained 29 percent more income. Now, we find ourselves with a millionaire president, Cabinet, Congress, and media. If they are not millionaires themselves, they owe their office to great wealth. There now exists what Appalachia knows all too well and what Thomas Jefferson – who, nominally at least, stood for a broad-based democracy reliant on the will and consent of the majority of the people – likely feared the most: an almost perfect confluence of wealth and power. Is not such a plutocracy as odious as the monarchy of King George?

For many Appalachians, it has been acutely embarrassing to be poor and white. But the fact is, Appalachia never has been white-white. Central Appalachia, with its rugged terrain of mountains, was one of the last pockets of the U.S. frontier. For such people as the Cherokee, it was hunting grounds of virgin forest. For a hundred years, runaway slaves made their way up the Appalachian chain toward the Susquehanna and the promise of freedom. Daniel Boone roamed thereabouts along with those relatively few hardy folk who chose to pursue their happiness away from civilization and get by on wild game, subsistence farming, barter, and herbal remedies. Many of these first frontiersmen and women were of Scotch-Irish descent. Today Appalachians hear themselves in their African-derived banjos, still eat their native corn bread and poke salad, and occasionally doctor themselves with herbal remedies. Scotch-Irish is

not the only blood that flows in our veins. Those white Americans who are not making an effort to come to terms with the fact that they do not live in a white-white world, nation, or community are not realistic.

Appalachia's struggle for change in the nineties must continue to center itself in its communities, where the problems are tangible and one can get a grip on the solutions. One by one Appalachian communities must extricate themselves from the debility of feeling inferior, the morass of dependency, the divisiveness of blaming someone else, the slavery of trickle down. Self-reliance must be bolstered all around: economically, politically, and culturally. In this struggle, one hopes that each community will not sell itself short, but aspire to the highest ideals that its citizens can imagine. In so doing, a community will have to risk its insecurities and sensitivities by implicating itself in the wrongs that it has perpetuated and allowed to happen to itself. Only then can we have something like a second American revolution, and only then will it be possible for us to be a freer and happier people. One ringing lesson of this quincentenary from an historical perspective is that democracy is an arduous, sometimes fearful undertaking, and that the alternative is servitude.

Democracy's Cultural Correlative: Cultural Equity

To move toward a paradigm of cultural equity, those in the dominant order – and I suspect that there is a part of all of us here in that – those of us with one foot in the dominant order can help move us toward such a paradigm by giving up the terms of domination. What are some of these terms? Domination's definitions are linear, hierarchical, top down, trickle down, done to.

Equity's terms are circular, nonhierarchical, all around, done by. Domination calls for exclusion; equity values inclusion. Domination creates dependence; equity independence and self-reliance. Listen to their respective educational terms: to train him, to teach her; in contrast to building and sharpening one another – the South African concepts expressed in the Bantu *uakana* and *uglolana*. The paradigm of domination places efficiency (profit) before participation, product before process, mobility before attachment to place, the man-made order before the natural (and spiritual) worlds. It makes claims of objectivity, criticizing others for being too subjective. In the arts, it pretends to value formalistic concerns before concerns of content, because it takes its content of domination as a given. This has the effect of placing beauty (the beauty of domination) before issues of morality (leading directly to art for art's sake).

Finally, the paradigm of domination causes a hardship for the individual, because the paradigm doesn't really value most individuals. (To different degrees, this has proven true in both capitalist and socialist systems.) At best, within this paradigm of domination most individuals experience mild and regular disorientation, a sense of dislocation; at worst, a feeling of invisibility, in which they finally may be unable to perceive even themselves – a kind of walking death. Always, the paradigm of domination puts us at some (evolutionary) distance from being

full human beings.

Let me emphasize that a new paradigm of equity would not rely on the either/or quality of my description. The desired synthesis, in dialectical terms, will be characterized by both/and. Thus, in our new paradigm we will not lose the usefulness of the straight line to the circle, objectivity to subjectivity, beauty to morality, disorientation as a way toward orientation. What will have changed is our conception of these terms, because our conception of ourselves and the world will have changed to make a new pattern of meaning. A paradigm that values neighborliness and peace and restores the primacy of the common good is what I believe we should be working for. If we could but see it, this is in our self-interest.

Appalshop and Roadside Theater, where I work in Appalachia, attempt to operate out of something like this kind of paradigm. This effort is reflected in our collective organizational structure and in our goal to make films, television, music recording, radio, and theater that are relative to the region's daily life.

Exactly how do we, then, make our work? Most all of Appalshop's people were born in the region; all have an allegiance to the working class. Roadside has developed both an indigenous performance style and an indigenous body of plays by drawing on its heritages of storytelling, balladry, oral histories, and church. The community participates in the creation of new plays first as resource for the script and later as respondent and critic during the various stages of play development. Some of our productions incorporate local talent in the performance event. When completed, the production is performed throughout the region – in churches, community centers, outdoor amphitheaters, wherever people come together. The play is often the occasion for community discussion.

Likewise, if we are making a half-hour television show about the high cancer rate of those drinking the water from Yellow Creek, Kentucky, we make the show as a coproduction with that part of the Yellow Creek community concerned with the problem. Thus the television show not only informs a broad, five-state regional audience (and sometimes a national audience) through broadcast, it also provides the host community with an organizing tool.

And what, then, when the work travels out, as it very often does? We are constantly devising ways for our context to travel out with us. Poet Marianne Moore remarked that people don't like what they don't understand. Roadside believes that it must provide the opportunities, in as many ways as it can, to that understanding. Wherever we go, we make a special effort to invite working-class and rural people to our events.

Crossing cultural boundaries is not like attending a cocktail party with strangers. It is more like being brought into a family circle. It is an intimate experience that requires patience and respect. It takes time. Fifteen or so years ago, an internationally famous folksinger from California came to the mountains to perform in the county's high-school auditorium. A big crowd was on hand as a local string band opened the concert. The band held the audience's

rapt attention. The famous folksinger followed with some success. Backstage, she made a point to congratulate the local band on their performance, noting that she, too, often sang from the same Appalachian repertoire. She went on to say how keenly the audience had been listening to their music and wondered what their secret was. "What is that little something extra you seem to have?" she asked emphatically. She pressed for an answer. Finally the fiddle player spoke up, "Well ma'am, the only difference that I could tell was that you were playing out front of them ol' songs, and we were right behind them."

The final measure for Appalshop's work is the health of our community, the well-being of our people. Appalshop's role is to nurture a creative discourse with its tradition. In such a way we hope to help our community meet the challenge of the present and prepare for the future.

Culture, and art as one of its potent expressions, is fundamental to our we-ness. Without our stories and songs, paintings and sculpture, we have difficulty recognizing ourselves. To deny a people their cultural expression is to deny them their existence. This is why oppressed people cling so tenaciously to their cultural practices. It is why their art is often encoded, its power and meaning hidden behind screens through which only those in solidarity can pass. One fears loss, dilution, cooptation. Culture carries a people's profound expression of their self-hood. Only when peoples can meet as equals, without the threat of domination, can they risk their art and culture. Cultural equity, then, is integral to democracy and the making of an American people from our many diverse strands.

Appalachia's culture, like the majority of North America's more than one hundred identifiable cultures, is not now accorded this equity, respect, and right to self-determination. A large tangle of Appalachia's roots reach back to western Europe, and especially to the British Isles. There, too, it is the grand tradition, what has become the art of the few, that presently rules. The fact that most American cultures have living links with artistic traditions in other parts of the world is a compelling argument for international exchange – and a reason for most of us to offer ourselves as students before our continent's Native peoples, whose roots here have the benefit of ten thousand years of cultivation.