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The Changing Society of Southern Appalachia

James C. Hite

Prologue: Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and Appalachia

Sociologist Ronald Eller, in his 1982 book *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: The Modernization of the Appalachian South* (a classic sociological study of southern Appalachia), notes that

[f]ew areas of the United States...more closely exemplified Thomas Jefferson's vision of a democratic society than did the...southern Appalachians. Long after the death of Jefferson and long after the nation as a whole had turned down the Hamiltonian¹ path toward industrialism, the southern Appalachians remained a land of small farms and open-country villages. Although traditional patterns of agricultural life persisted in other parts of the nation...nowhere did the self-sufficient family so dominate the culture and the social system as it did in the Appalachian South.

By the turn of the present century, the individualistic, self-sufficient "Jeffersonian" society in the southern Appalachians began to come under intense pressure from the more centralized "Hamiltonian" nation. During the first half of the 20th century, southern Appalachia went through a major transition as outside capital associated with mining, timber, and, increasingly, manufacturing moved into the region. The federal government was also a major force in bringing about that transition. The Roosevelt

administration's New Deal programs, particularly the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the socio-economic changes associated with World War II hastened the transformation of the pre-industrial, pre-capitalist institutions that had provided a structure to traditional Appalachian life.

By 1950, all but the most remote hollows of southern Appalachia had been integrated into the national capitalist economy. Because Appalachians generally are a conservative people, many of the old traditional social institutions remain. But these institutions are a residual of the disappearing Jeffersonian social organization, and they erode with each successive generation as the mode of production that spawned those institutions recedes into the past.

Three institutions—the family, churches, and education—have undergone especially significant changes in southern Appalachia. These changes can be seen as an evolutionary adjustment of a traditional agricultural economy to external pressure from powerful capitalist forces. This evolutionary process is fundamentally the same as has occurred, or is now occurring, in other parts of the world where traditional economies are being displaced by capitalism. In Appalachia, changes in traditional institutions are most clearly explained as part of a movement from a subsistence, largely non-cash economy to a market economy integrated into a global system.

Subsistence and Community

While part of southern Appalachia—that part lying within the "Great Valley" stretching from Pennsylvania into Alabama—has produced agricultural products for

¹ Referring to Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804), first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury. An advocate for a strong national government, Hamilton was a leader of the Federalist Party and a political opponent of Thomas Jefferson. (*Encyclopedia Americana*)

Beyond Southern Appalachia

The focus of this paper is the changing character of one largely rural region, southern Appalachia. But the changes described here are not confined to a single rural area. Indeed, changes in southern Appalachia are part of broader changes that challenge the whole notion of "rural." As anthropologist Janet Fitchen, in her book *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places*, has put it (p. 2):

Change is nothing new in rural America...Now, however, many changes are occurring in a compressed period of time. The cumulative effect of this quickening pace challenges not only what goes on in rural communities but what people think about their communities and their lives. In many rural places, the entire image of rural life is being called into question, and rural identity is becoming blurred.

One may question why it is important to define "rural"; to know, for example, what or where "rural Virginia" is. A good answer, if one is concerned about the places we call rural, is that only by understanding their present reality can rural people and communities rationally prepare for and confront their future, with all of its changes. Quoting Fitchen again (p. 265):

Negotiating a firmer, current identity that is better matched with present-day economic, demographic, and social realities can help communities adjust to and benefit from, rather than be engulfed in and swallowed by, this era of change in rural America.

—REAP Editor

external markets since before the Civil War, the dominant feature of the traditional Appalachian economy was a subsistence agriculture that produced within the local community almost everything a family needed. Cash was needed only to purchase a few staples—such as coffee and sugar—that could not be produced locally, and to pay property taxes. Any additional exchange was confined largely to the local community and was often conducted on a barter basis.

Appalachia's geographic isolation made this localized, subsistence economy necessary. Isolation gave rise to self-sufficiency. It also gave rise to intermarriage, producing communities that were bound together by generations of kinship. Community, church, and school were basically family institutions, all rooted deeply in a particular place. These extended-family institutions also facilitated a barter economy that allowed limited specialization of labor without the necessity of more than a nominal amount of cash. Even in the Great Valley, where the limestone soils produced enough surplus that a rudimentary commercial agriculture could develop, labor-intensive farming activities were accommodated by swapping of labor between neighbors, who likely were also cousins.

In an economy where cash was only rarely the means of exchange, confining most economic transactions within the extended family was a rational

adjustment to reduce the perceived risks of such transactions, specifically the risk that obligations would not be honored. Risks were also perceived to be reduced if economic transactions were concentrated within the community's church-goers. Members of churches expected one another to follow a moral and religious imperative to satisfy legitimately incurred obligations and to believe that one's word should be one's bond.

Thus, the institutions of the extended family and the community church helped to assure the fulfillment of what in a capitalist economy would be contractual obligations. Risks were perceived to be substantially increased by dealing with people outside the extended family, and particularly with non-church goers. One of the reasons that non-church goers may have remained relatively poor and landless was because they were often perceived (rightly or wrongly) as a greater risk, especially if payments could not be made immediately.

In the southern Appalachian economy, one gained few economic benefits from formal education beyond rudimentary reading and mathematics. The only substantial number of jobs for people with a college education were as school teachers or school administrators. On the other hand, practical knowledge—gained from experience in farming or in one of the necessary local trades (e.g.,

blacksmithing)—was essential. Indeed, an educated man or woman who lacked the common sense of survival skills was treated with some scorn as an “educated fool.” As a result, formal education was not greatly valued by many individuals; moreover, because the support of an improved public school system required higher taxes in an economy where cash to pay taxes was apt to be scarce, many Appalachian communities tended to neglect formal education.

Some Appalachian scholars have tended to paint pre-industrial life in southern Appalachia as a lost Utopia. It was not Utopia, but neither was it the nasty and poor existence of the “hillbilly” stereotype, as described, for example, by Albert Toynbee in *A Study of History* (see Vol. I, pp. 145-49). Most Appalachian families had an abundance of good, albeit coarse, food; they were decently (if perhaps unfashionably) clothed and housed; and they enjoyed a communal life that was rewarding and in harmony with their environment (for this perspective, see the references by Davidson, Dykeman, and Thornborough). The institutional structure was, for the most part, well adapted to the practical conditions in which Appalachian people found themselves. The one notable exception to this, however, was the extended family.

The extended family presented a problem because the southern Appalachian existence and level of living were sustainable only with substantial emigration of the surplus population. As that occurred, however, those people who left and travelled further up into the mountain hollows found it more difficult to make a subsistence living. On the other hand, if children chose to stay close to home, division of land resulted in smaller and smaller farming units as, simultaneously, some depletion of the soils was occurring. As a result, the extended family as an institution became unsuited for the available environment. In fact, this institution was already under attack even before industrialization; for example, many Appalachians migrated to new land in the West throughout the second half of the 1800s.

Responding to the Modern Economy

The intrusion of the modern capitalist economy into southern Appalachia began in the late 1800s with the coming of coal mining and timber operations financed by outside capital, and it continued after World War I with a developing manufacturing economy. These new capitalist enterprises gave Appalachian people

a chance to increase substantially that thing that they had most lacked—cash. The capitalist economy broadened the range of goods and services exchanged within Appalachia. It also provided an opportunity for some of the surplus population to remain at home, making a living from wages rather than from subsistence agriculture. So, while modernization of the Appalachian economy placed certain stresses on the family, dividing the making of a living from the everyday family life, it also, in many cases, allowed the extended family as a clan to remain in the home community.

Historians disagree over whether Appalachians freely chose to sell their labor as a commodity in a market economy, or whether they were forced into that economy by the foreclosing of traditional opportunities by capitalist exploiters (Einstein). Regardless, as the capitalist economy intruded, goods that Appalachians desired—radios, automobiles, electricity, etc.—became available, provided people had cash or credit to pay for them. Consumerism appears to be addictive, and once these basic consumer items were acquired, new opportunities arose to learn of still more consumer goods that could be had, if one had money. Appalachians also discovered debt financing. While the older generations often tended to be skeptical of consumerism, and especially of borrowing from strangers or impersonal institutions (a skepticism justified by the high risk for illiterate buyers of dealing with sellers who were strangers), that skepticism has weakened among successive generations of Appalachians.

Automobiles led to road improvement and the breakdown of the geographic isolation that had shaped many of Appalachia’s traditional social institutions. A wider community developed that encompassed more than the extended family, including co-workers at the new capitalist enterprises. Church communities also expanded. No longer were congregations drawn almost exclusively from residents of the immediate vicinity; instead, congregations included members who drove several miles to church.

These developments caused economic interactions to become less personal. Individual parties to various transactions expanded well beyond the extended family whose behavior was influenced by ties of kinship and by common church attendance. The result was that Appalachian economic relationships were formalized in a manner characteristic of a capitalist market system.

Those Appalachians who were reluctant to join the rush to modernity nevertheless confronted circumstances that forced them in that direction. For example, to finance road improvements, property taxes were increased, and Appalachians found that they needed more cash to pay these taxes. The general need for cash, in turn, undermined the traditional subsistence agriculture. Accordingly, in the years after World War II, farmers in areas of Appalachia with favorable soils and proximity to markets gradually moved toward a commercial agricultural system centered, in many areas, on burley tobacco and dairying, or more recently, on burley tobacco and beef cow-calf operations. Landholdings were often too small, however, for these new commercial farmers to earn sufficient income to avoid poverty. These small landholdings, coupled with new wage-earning opportunities from the post-World War II expansion of branch-plant manufacturing, have resulted in Appalachian agriculture increasingly becoming organized as a commercial, part-time farming system. (For a Virginia example of this, see the REAP Report entitled *Permanent Part-time Farming in Virginia*, by Judith Stallmann and Jeffrey Alwang.)

One of the most significant institutional changes in Appalachia has been in education. As the Appalachian economy modernized, more people realized the economic benefits of advanced education. It was easy enough to see that some of the better-paying jobs required a high-school education, and that the best jobs were reserved for engineers and managers with a college education. Manufacturing, therefore, created incentives for Appalachians to seek improved education. Alan DeYoung, in a 1983 study of formal education in Appalachia, documented the positive relationship between public school quality and manufacturing development in Appalachian counties. Indeed, DeYoung's research shows that, in the Appalachian counties of Tennessee where manufacturing job opportunities developed relatively early, public education is superior to that in the non-Appalachian portions of the state.

The value of education also was increased by expansion of economic transactions beyond the family, neighbors, and fellow church members. Formal legal documents, such as contracts and bills of sale, became necessary to contain the risks of transactions as those transactions increasingly took place with people from outside the family or church.

That is not to say that formal education is highly valued today by all Appalachian families. As was stressed by Eldon Smith in a 1988 paper on human resources and rural economic development, the value placed on formal education depends on observing first-hand its utilitarian value. In coal-mining counties, for example, where formal education may have little value in obtaining a job within the local economy, there is evidence that school drop-out rates remain quite high. The important point, perhaps, is that the Appalachian experience has taught people to take a practical position that emphasizes survival skills. If the type of skills required in a particular community are best gained by experience, then formal education may not be highly valued. On the other hand, if the local conditions require skills that can only be acquired through formal education, formal education becomes a matter of high priority. (For more on the connection between economic opportunities and perceived value of education, see the REAP Report entitled *Educational Performance in Virginia's Rural Schools*, by David Broomhall.)

Enduring Appalachia

All of the foregoing suggests that social institutions in southern Appalachia are becoming more and more like those of the rest of the modern United States. That conclusion is valid only if not pressed too far. Granted, commercialization of Appalachia can be seen at such tourist attractions as Dollywood (near Pigeon Forge, Tennessee), and Appalachian arts and crafts are popular with a class of mostly college-educated artists and craftsmen. Nevertheless, as Patricia Beaver's 1986 study of mountain communities in western North Carolina confirms, certain traditional Appalachian institutions endure, baffling newcomers who come into close contact with these institutions.

In Beaver's study, these enduring institutions are associated with two strong elements of a traditional Appalachian value system—*independence* and *egalitarianism*. Independence in the Appalachian culture may mean "minding one's own business" (p. 152), and "don't tell me what to do" (p. 153). Egalitarianism is a related value rooted in the common kinship that pervades Appalachian people. Generally conscious of this kinship, Appalachians tend to deny that anyone else, having sprung from common roots, could possess any inherent superiority.

These enduring values can cause problems when Appalachians become wage workers. As a foreman in an Ohio factory employing a large number of native eastern Kentuckians generalized, "They don't like to be bossed..." (Schwarzeweller *et al.*, p. 160). What Appalachians generally *do* like is that respect be accorded to the worker as an individual and as a member of an extended family wherein family obligations often take precedence over anything else. In many cases, industrial employers of Appalachians have discovered that sending representatives to family funerals, asking frequently about children and other family members, and generally accommodating the Appalachian regard for egalitarianism can pay dividends in terms of labor productivity and loyalty. If such regard for the worker as an individual and family member is ignored, however, Appalachians have shown a marked tendency toward militant unionism.

Conclusions

Institutions such as the family, organized religion, and public education are not uniform across all the communities of southern Appalachia. While the basic Appalachian value system appears to remain strong, many traditional institutions, developed in response to an environment of isolation, are disappearing. Whether traditional institutions remain in place depends, to a large degree, on the extent to which a community's economy has been integrated into the national or international capitalist economy.

In most of southern Appalachia, the process of economic integration has now proceeded sufficiently that the well-being of Appalachian people is largely dependent upon the health and vitality of the international capitalist system. There may always be pockets of poverty in isolated areas, and there may always be some very poor Appalachians who, for a variety of reasons, have been unable to adapt to the

changing requirements of a market economy. But nothing within the peculiar institutional structure of Appalachia should prevent the region from prospering if the larger economy of which it is a part prospers.

The change from an isolated Appalachia to one more connected to the larger economy is well-illustrated by consideration of the future of another Appalachian "institution": cultivation of burley tobacco. Should the existing government programs that control burley tobacco production and marketing be eliminated, many small, part-time farmers in Appalachia would experience substantial reductions in income and, perhaps, in net wealth. Few Appalachians depend upon income from tobacco to provide the basic living for their families, but many have incurred debts for new houses, land, equipment, or other things on the assumption that the receipts from the tobacco crop would provide the marginal income needed to pay off that debt. Elimination of the tobacco programs could cause considerable financial hardship, including, in some cases, the loss of homes. Such unfortunate possibilities illustrate how the process of institutional change in southern Appalachia has made the people of the region increasingly dependent upon decisions made in the larger society from which Appalachians traditionally were isolated.

Whether one judges institutional change in southern Appalachia to be good or bad depends upon whether one embraces or rejects the values of modernity; to return to this paper's opening analogy, whether one welcomes the triumph of Hamiltonian capitalism over Jeffersonian agrarianism. If, as Ronald Eller contends, southern Appalachia was the last bastion of Jeffersonism in practice in America, that bastion has now fallen. Regional peculiarities in institutions may remain for generations as cultural artifacts of the Jeffersonian past, but, for better or worse, southern Appalachia has joined the mainstream of American life.

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