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APPALACHIAN PROBLEMS ARE NATIONAL PROBLEMS. The Bicentennial is also the approximate centennial of the "discovery" of Southern Appalachia as a unique subcultural region by the writers of the "local-color" movement in the mid-1870's. Within twenty years the missionary movement had transformed the notion of cultural difference into the idea of Southern Appalachia as a social problem. Today we are faced with the task of reassessing the claim that Appalachian problems are exceptional in character. If they are not, solutions to the social and economic difficulties of Appalachia may lie primarily in national, not regional, social policy.

The idea of Southern Appalachia as a distinctive social problem area was created, nurtured, and sustained by a relatively small social movement composed mostly of such middle-class professionals as ministers and educators affiliated with the boards of home missions of the major Protestant denominations, private colleges, or philanthropic foundations. Beginning in
the 1890's, such figures as William G. Frost promoted an environmental ex­planation of the mountaineers' poverty and backwardness in contrast to the genetic explanation of historian John Fiske and others. The conference of Southern Mountain Workers, founded by John C. Campbell in 1913, and Mountain Life & Work, begun in 1925, were the movement's primary institutions of organization and communication. The Russell Sage Foundation and Berea College provided most of the modest external financial support available to the movement.

Surprisingly, the most prominent leaders of the missionary movement did not overdraw the special character of Appalachian problems. Writing in the first issue of Mountain Life & Work in 1925, Olive Dame Campbell stated, "There is no real fundamental reason for separating mountain people from lowland people, nor indeed are mountain problems so different at bottom from those of other rural areas in the United States. It cannot be stated too often or too emphatically that the so-called mountain problem is only a part of the whole national rural problem. Its differences are of degree rather than kind."

The missionary movement was grounded in a cultural idealism common to regionalists of the early decades of this century. Like the "country life" movement of the time, the missionary movement in Southern Appalachia looked to people's ties to the land as a potential source of renewed vitality for the nation as a whole. With the Great Depression of the 1930's came a shift in emphasis from culture to economics. Problems of the mountain region came to be seen as a compounded version of the problems of the national economy. The charitable resources of churches and private foundations, greatly reduced by the stock market crash, were clearly inadequate to the needs of the southern mountains. The Tennessee Valley Act of 1933 set a precedent for using the resources of the federal government for regional development. A call for rational planning throughout the region was issued by the U. S. Department of Agriculture study of The Economic and Social Problems and Conditions of the Southern Appalachians in 1935.

The experience of the Tennessee Valley Authority suggests an important shift in the philosophic underpinning of the prevailing school of regional thought. The cultural idealists—advocates of small community development, cooperative industries, and "bottom up" planning—were pushed out; Arthur E. Morgan, the first chairman of the TVA, is the foremost example. The technocratic, instrumental rationality of such "top down" planners as David Lilienthal won out. TVA's rhetoric of "grass roots democracy" disguised a policy of conceding the farm and related rural development programs to the local agricultural elites in exchange for a free hand for federal planners in public electrical power generation.

Following nearly two decades of quiescence, Appalachia was rediscovered as a social problem in the 1960's. Much discussion surrounded the "subculture of poverty" interpretation of Appalachian problems, which sees solutions in terms of education, social casework, and psychiatry. This pejorative side of cultural idealism drew a rejoinder from the champions of the virtues of the traditional Appalachian subculture. But the real power went elsewhere: the approach to development embodied in the Appalachian Regional Development Act in 1965 was based in the instrumental rationality of the technocratic planning tradition. The roots of this tradition lie both in
the TVA experience and in the regional economic development theory elaborated since World War II. In this approach, development is seen as best fostered by planners working with modernizing elites.

Both the subculture of poverty model and the regional development model posit a regional, not a national, solution to Appalachian problems, the former in cultural adaptation and the latter in providing social and economic overhead capital, promoting growth centers and attracting private industry. There can be little question of the need of the Central Appalachian area for the social and economic "overhead capital" provided through the ARC programs—the roads, airports, water systems, industrial sites, vocational school and health facilities, and the like. But even when provided they have proven no more successful than the disappointing experience of attempts to attract private industrial corporations to the European Economic Community's peripheral areas of Ireland, northern Britain, southwest France, and southern Italy. These modest inducements to industrial location in a market economy are clearly inadequate.

The radicals' critique of Appalachian development programs in the 1960's also contributed to a regionalization of the problems by adopting a loosely defined internal colonialism analogy. By "colonialism" some writers meant no more than uneven development and absentee ownership, characteristic features of peripheral regions within an advanced capitalist economy. The policy implications of de-colonization were not always made clear. Few radicals seriously suggest that Central Appalachia would be better off if the entire coal industry of the region were controlled by the local business elite of "hillbilly millionaires" whose generally anti-union and conservative political views are widely publicized. Radicals proposed Public Utility Districts in the coalfields, but such suggestions appear utopian in the absence of a national political movement for public ownership of energy resources, given the vast power of that sector of the coal industry owned by national and international energy and mineral corporations.

Appalachian problems are national problems. For Appalachia to attain the national "norms" of poverty and unemployment is not an acceptable solution. The whole country is faced with the challenge of restructuring our economic system to provide full employment, adequate income maintenance, health care, decent housing, fair taxation, environmental protection, and public control of natural resources.

The national context of mountain problems has been recognized at the grassroots if not in the academy or at the planner's desk. The strongest social movements in the region in the late 1960's and early 1970's were the Black Lung Associations and the Miners for Democracy within the United Mine Workers. Although both had their origins within the Appalachian region, their objectives were not regional in focus but pertained to the coal industry generally. In both cases, these movements had to reach out for support from miners in the interior and western coalfields. Similarly, the movement in the mountains to obtain adequate strip-mining regulations has had to build alliances with groups in the northern Great Plains and elsewhere.

In terms of results, more money has gone directly into the hands of poor and working-class families in the Central Appalachian coalfields through the Black Lung compensation program in six years than through the War on
Poverty's Community Action Program in twelve. Increases in such national transfer and service programs as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, and Food Stamps have meant more for the well-being of Appalachians than all the regional development efforts combined.

To conclude that Appalachian problems are national problems is not to slight activity in the local community. If a movement for social change is to avoid the elitism of the technocratic planning tradition, it must be based on grassroots organization. At the same time, local organizations and struggles must be brought together regionally and ultimately nationally. The basis of regional linkages will be common interests more than common culture. As an example, the foundation of an alliance between the Black Lung Associations in the coalfields and the Brown Lung Associations in textiles is less some supposedly shared traditional subculture than the benefits of mutual support and the possibility for learning from each other's experience.

The national context of Appalachian problems suggests that class is a more relevant analytic concept than culture. As the People's Bicentennial Commission reminds us, the American business aristocracy has skillfully defended its position of privilege in our society. A social movement to overcome persistent structures of inequality in American life must unite that substantial majority of the American people—both white-collar and blue-collar workers—who neither own nor control the organizations within which they work. As any organizer knows, such subcultural traditions as mutual aid and solidarity and such institutions as the family and church may provide important sources of strength to oppose oppression and domination. But a social movement must draw selectively from a living working-class subculture, not romanticize everything folksy and traditional. Within the Central Appalachian area, such a strategy of unity among poor and working people appears to underlie much of the recent activity of the Council of the Southern Mountains.

With the current programs of the TVA and the ARC we may have approached the limits of reform within a business-dominated society. To emphasize the national context of Appalachian problems, as I have, is of course not to suggest that mountaineers leap into the polluted mainstream. Lacking any influential domestic tradition of democratic socialism, we are challenged to devise new forms of worker, community, and consumer participation and control that promise to extend democracy to all the organizations that affect our daily lives. Thus the social programs initiated in the 1960's have led us to the limits of what can be attained by seeking recognition for Appalachia as a special social problem area. In an irony that might have surprised Frost and the Campbells, only now can Appalachians effectively begin to help the rest of the country explore alternative courses of development for the nation as a whole.

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