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PUBLIC POLICY AND HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Almost a generation ago, the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty called attention to the plight of millions of impoverished rural Americans whom it called "the people left behind."[1] Now, after several decades of economic restructuring and political indifference, Americans once again are beginning to recognize rural poverty as a persistent and escalating phenomenon of social life in the United States. Although urban poverty currently commands more attention in the popular media, several recent surveys document the deepening of poverty in rural areas throughout the United States.[2] The rural poverty rate is 50% higher than in urban areas and it is estimated that one out of every four children in rural America is living in poverty.[3]

Just as earlier – when President Lyndon Johnson launched his widely heralded War on Poverty in 1964 from the home of an impoverished family in Appalachian Kentucky – no region of the United States remains more deeply mired in poverty and economic distress than Appalachia.[4] Central Appalachia in particular, as a region of chronic and persistent low income, is virtually synonymous both with rural poverty and with difficulty of implementing effective policies of social betterment.[5] Despite decades of sympathetic attention to the economic distress of Appalachia, however, the *social origins* of its rural poverty, that is, its long-term institutional basis, remain obscure.[6]

Today, there is a pressing need for public policy aimed at eradicating poverty in persistently poor rural areas like Central Appalachia, especially in light of policy demands to move people from welfare to work, but the ability to design effective programs for such areas is hampered by the paucity of basic research on persistently poor communities and populations.[7] The overwhelming emphasis of today's so-called "welfare reform" on changing the behavior of poor individuals diverts attention from the question of how *places* grow poor. The absence of a long-term view on the social dynamics of poor rural areas means that relief measures in Appalachia, however essential, confront symptomatic but not necessarily systemic problems. Contextual and historical patterns have not been adequately investigated.

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The severity of Appalachia's seemingly insuperable economic problems and the relative lack of success in efforts to combat its endemic poverty represent important challenges for those committed to a new round of struggle in the twenty-first century against persistent rural poverty. Our goal is to contribute to basic research on the historical roots of chronic rural poverty by investigating cultural, economic, and political development in an especially impoverished section of the eastern Kentucky mountains in rural Appalachia. We hope that a better understanding of the nature of chronic rural poverty will contribute to more fruitful policy initiatives in Central Appalachia and in other persistently poor rural areas in the United States.

Mapping Persistent Poverty

Chronic rural poverty is concentrated in several regions. Figure 1.1 displays the most persistently poor rural counties in the United States. Each of these 540 nonmetropolitan counties is characterized by having had 20% or more of its population living in poverty for each of the past four decennial census years from 1960 through 1990. A cursory glance reveals easily recognizable regions of economic distress – the coastal and delta regions of the Deep South, predominantly Hispanic regions such as the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas and New Mexico, Native American territories in Alaska and the West, and, of course, Appalachia.

Defined officially as the 406 counties served by the federal government's Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), Appalachia is a highly diverse regional entity that includes counties in thirteen states, ranging from New York in the North to Mississippi and Alabama in the South. Although each of its three officially defined subregions (Figure 1.2) is characterized by significantly higher rates of poverty than average for the United States as a whole, the total region – like other poor regions – is highly varied.[8] Northern Appalachia, like other northeastern areas, is currently experiencing economic distress associated with deindustrialization whereas portions of Southern Appalachia benefit from economic growth. Central Appalachia, however, continues to suffer from persistent poverty and underdevelopment. In 1990, for instance, roughly 25% of its population was impoverished, a rate almost double that of the United States as a whole.[9]

A closer examination of Figure 1.1 reveals not only that the most persistently poor Appalachian counties are in Central Appalachia, but that they are mostly in Kentucky. Sixteen of the twenty poorest ARC counties, including nine of the top ten, are there. Indeed, 10% of the poorest counties in the United States are in Kentucky; almost all of these are in the Kentucky mountains. Of the twenty-five counties with the lowest per capita income in the

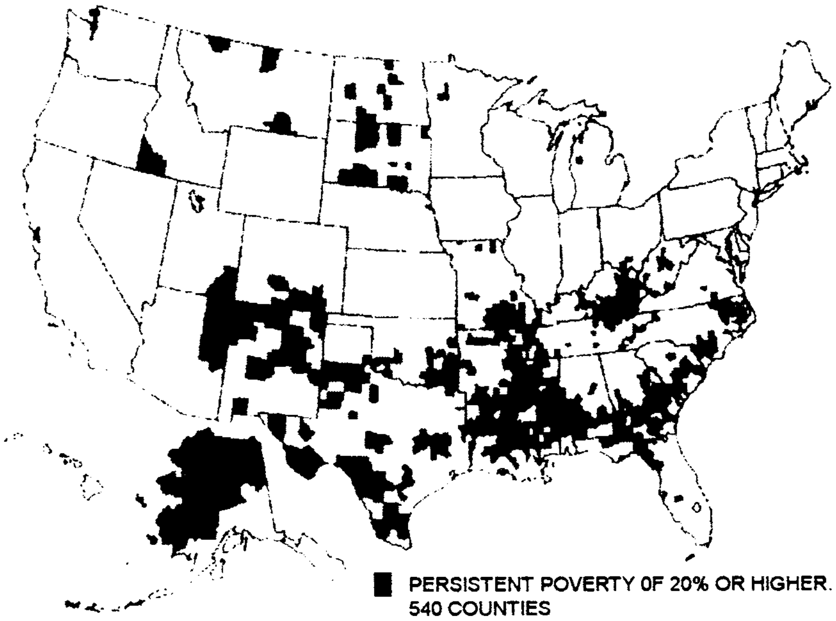

Figure 1.1 Nonmetro counties with persistent high poverty, 1960–90. (Courtesy of Calvin Beale, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture).

United States in 1990, six were in Appalachian Kentucky.[10] In this book, we explore the roots of entrenched poverty in Central Appalachia by probing the history of impoverishment and its opposite – the making of wealth – in Appalachian Kentucky. (See Figure 1.3.)

Perhaps it should not be surprising that Appalachian Kentucky would manifest an extreme version of Appalachian poverty. John Fox, Jr., the Kentucky novelist who did much to popularize negative images of Appalachia at the turn of the century, once claimed that "any trait common to the Southern mountaineer seems to be intensified in the mountaineers of Kentucky." The geographer Ellen Churchill Semple argued in 1901 that the "conditions of the Southern Appalachians" could be found "nowhere in such purity or covering so large an area as in the mountain region of Kentucky."[11] Unfortunately, poverty has not been Appalachian Kentucky's only reason for notoriety.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Appalachian Kentucky was nearly synonymous with violence and social conflict in popular image. Twenty

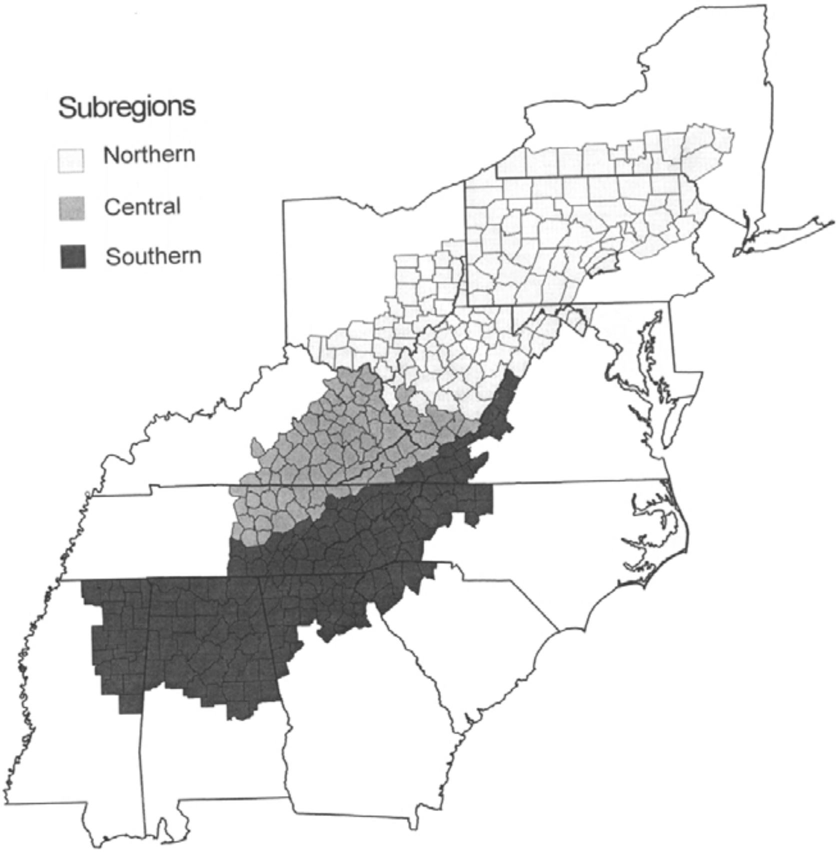

Figure 1.2 ARC designated Appalachian subregions. (Courtesy of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center).

so-called "family feuds" involving hundreds of casualties and repeated interventions by the state militia earned the Kentucky mountains a reputation as "the Corsica of America" and contributed to enduring stereotypes of Appalachia as a "community of lawlessness."[12] Sensationalistic travelers' accounts exploited images of feuds to depict Appalachian Kentucky as a primitive and untamed place:

> We swept deeper and deeper into the mountains, and traces of civilization became scarcer. . . . We were getting into the feudists' country, where the sun set crimson and the moon rose red.[13]

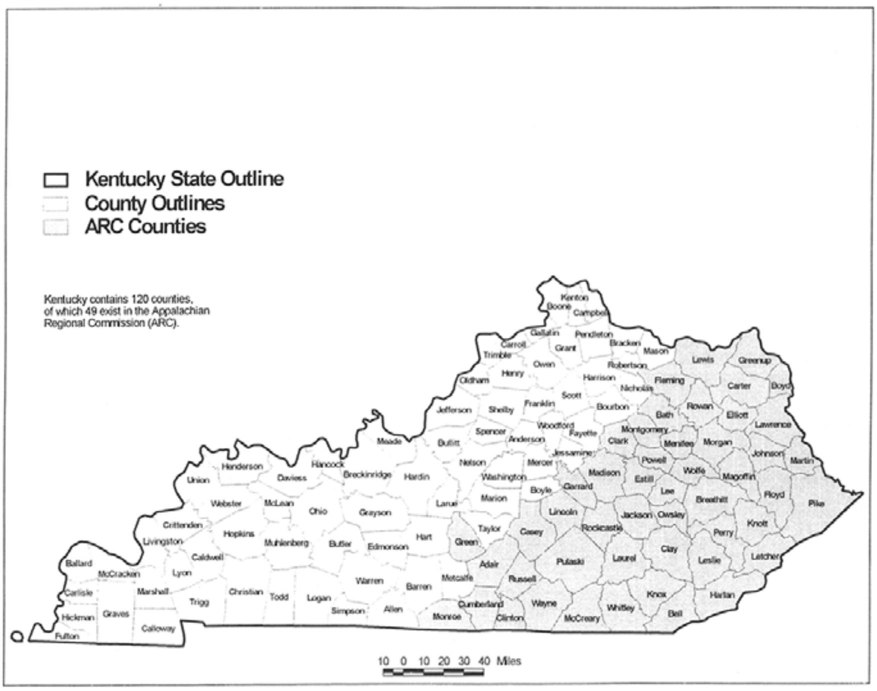
Kentucky State Outline
County Outlines
ARC Counties
Kentucky contains 120 counties, of which 49 exist in the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC).
Kenton
Boone
Campbell
Gallatin
Pendleton
Carroll
Grant
Bracken
Mason
Trimble
Owen
Robertson
Lewis
Greenup
Henry
Harrison
Fleming
Oldham
Scott
Nicholas
Carter
Boyd
Franklin
Bourbon
Bath
Rowan
Elliott
Lawrence
Jefferson
Shelby
Woodford
Montgomery
Spencer
Fayette
Anderson
Clark
Menifee
Morgan
Johnson
Martin
Meade
Bullitt
Jessamine
Powell
Wolfe
Magoffin
Hancock
Nelson
Mercer
Madison
Estill
Henderson
Breckinridge
Hardin
Washington
Garrard
Lee
Breathitt
Floyd
Pike
Union
Daviess
Boyle
Larue
Marion
Lincoln
Jackson
Owsley
Webster
McLean
Ohio
Grayson
Taylor
Casey
Rockcastle
Knott
Perry
Crittenden
Hopkins
Green
Clay
Livingston
Muhlenberg
Butler
Edmonson
Hart
Caldwell
Adair
Pulaski
Laurel
Leslie
Letcher
Ballard
McCracken
Lyon
Metcalfe
Russell
Warren
Barren
Carlisle
Marshall
Christian
Todd
Logan
Knox
Harlan
Trigg
Cumberland
Wayne
Whitley
Simpson
Allen
Monroe
Clinton
McCreary
Bell
Hickman
Graves
Calloway
Fulton
10 0 10 20 30 40 Miles

Figure 1.3 Kentucky counties and Appalachian Kentucky. (Courtesy of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center).

Together with images of poverty and backwardness, stereotypes about feuds seemed to set the Kentucky mountains apart from national norms and suggested that they comprised a culturally distinct region.

In the course of our analysis, we will challenge many stereotypes about Appalachia, including the nature of its feuds, but we will nevertheless explore the historical relationship between feuds and poverty in order to understand how a history of protracted violent conflict has contributed to the inability to address chronic poverty in Appalachian Kentucky.

While we were working on this book, one of Kentucky's two statewide newspapers ran a nine-part series of articles entitled "Little Kingdoms: Local Government at Your Expense" that described widespread corruption, abuses of patronage and nepotism, fiscal irresponsibility, and misgovernance among Kentucky's counties.[14] To the surprise of few in Kentucky, a disproportionate number of the newspaper's examples came from Appalachian Kentucky.

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Although the mountain region has been the target of repeated antipoverty and economic development programs, many of these have not lived up to their promise. Economic stagnation in the Kentucky mountains has been reproduced by severe political inertia. Just as contemporary poverty cannot be fully understood without an investigation of its social origins, we cannot comprehend the contemporary corruption, political stagnation, and governmental incapacity that mark so many counties in Appalachian Kentucky today without attention to that history. As we examine the social history of Appalachian poverty, we analyze also the lasting consequences of early political conflicts that deformed public life, helped to define local government as an instrument for private gain, and blunted the capacity of local government to confront poverty and envision alternative futures.[15]

Conventional Models of Appalachian Poverty and Politics

Appalachia's rural poor have been discovered and rediscovered many times throughout the twentieth century.[16] Two principal explanations have been offered for their poverty. Culture-of-poverty theory directs attention to how families and individuals in Appalachia, for better or worse, cope with poverty. The theory of internal colonialism, on the other hand, attempts to focus attention on the structural causes of poverty in Appalachia. Both yield insights, yet each is seriously deficient.

Culture-of-poverty theory gained popularity during the 1960s, but its application to Appalachia was dependent on discursive traditions of Appalachianography that emerged during the late nineteenth century. Conceptualized as a distinct region and people, Appalachia first came into American consciousness in the decades that immediately followed the Civil War. Writers such as James Lane Allen and John Fox, Jr., contributed to a distinct genre of local color fiction that simultaneously created, exploited, and tried to explain images of the mountain South as a place that was vastly out of step, culturally and economically, with the progressive trends of industrializing and urbanizing late nineteenth-century America.[17]

By the turn of the century, William Goddell Frost, president of Berea College in Kentucky and one of the most influential creators of the discourse on Appalachia, had named the people of the southern mountains "Appalachian Americans" and reconciled their presumptive backwardness to the social dynamics of fin de siècle America by pointing to the region's geographical, sociocultural, and economic isolation. Mountain people, Frost said, were "our contemporary ancestors," a surviving remnant of the white pioneer culture that had first settled the eastern seaboard and contributed to the building of early American institutional life.[18] Frost's writings influenced

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George Vincent's description of Appalachia in a 1908 article in the *American Journal of Sociology* as a "retarded frontier."[19]

Frost portrayed the people of Appalachia as impoverished yet morally upright and therefore deserving of the charitable and educational uplift efforts that institutions such as Berea College were prepared to offer, with the help of northern philanthropy. Many accounts, however, called attention to seemingly darker aspects of southern mountain culture such as moonshining and feuding. The cover of a 1913 issue of *The Berea {College} Quarterly* focused on "Men Proud of Being Dangerous" (see Photo Essay). This publication, like many others of the period, included articles on "The College and the Feud" and "How to Make Something out of This Fighting Stock" that linked Appalachian poverty and violence to cultural isolation and, at the same time, promoted the efforts of educational institutions like Berea College to modernize the Appalachian region.

As Henry Shapiro's intellectual history of the idea of "Appalachia," *Appalachia on our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*, has ably shown, such early writings about life in the mountain South contributed to the social construction of Appalachia as "a coherent region inhabited by an homogeneous population possessing a uniform culture."[20] Regardless of how people in the mountains defined or identified themselves, the popular representations that created "Appalachia" stressed sameness and identity to the neglect of locality differences and population diversities. Early documentary accounts of the region such as John C. Campbell's *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (1921), James Watt Raine's *The Land of the Saddle-bags* (1924), and Samuel Wilson's *The Southern Mountaineers* (1914) contributed to highly selective interpretations of preindustrial Appalachian life that shaped a discourse about the mountains that continues to influence current thinking. They helped to create the enduring image of Appalachia as a region apart, an *other* in the heart of America.

The early social construction of Appalachia as a distinct sociocultural world was reinforced by reform efforts that adapted settlement house programs and other urban-based strategies of benevolence and education to the task of bringing the rural Appalachian poor into the majority culture.[21] Reformers' vision of the region was likewise reinforced by efforts to document and preserve preferred versions of the folk culture of the southern mountains by enthusiasts, for example, of highland crafts and music.[22] Their accounts of the cultural isolation and separateness of the region were augmented by the writings of social scientists and even more importantly by journalists and popular writers. Between 1904 and 1927, at least 476 silent films depicted life in the Southern Appalachians to American moviegoers; 145 of these films

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featured moonshining and 92 featured feuds along with countless assaults and homicides.[23]

Positively, the early construction of preindustrial Appalachia as an isolated folk culture inspired a later tradition of ethnographic studies of rural Appalachia that continues to provide an indispensable viewpoint on social change in the mountains because of its close attention to daily life, especially family and community institutions.[24] Our study builds on this rich ethnographic legacy in ways we describe in what follows and elsewhere.[25] Negatively, however, the cultural approach reinforced the image of Appalachians as a "people without history" by defining the study of the region as belonging largely to the professional domain of anthropology rather than historiography. Appalachia, it seemed, offered good material for ethnographers, as well as novelists and story writers, but little to warrant the serious attention of historians. Symptomatically in 1922, William Connelley and E. M. Coulter concluded an influential two-volume *History of Kentucky* whose 1,211 pages almost never mentioned Appalachian Kentucky with a brief ethnographic addendum on the "Cumberland Gap Region."[26] As a result of this discursive tradition, a popular writer in the 1960s described the whole of early Appalachia as a place where "time was standing still."[27]

When Appalachian poverty was rediscovered in the 1960s, it was but a short conceptual step from viewing Appalachia as a traditional folk culture to viewing Appalachia as a regionwide culture of poverty. More than any other popular work of that era, Jack Weller's *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* made explicit the link between folk society and the culture of poverty in Appalachia.[28] Weller claimed that "independence-turned-individualism" had become a great "stumbling block for [the mountaineers'] finding a place in our complex and cooperative society." Mountaineers' "traditionalism," he argued (quoting Horace Kephart), was "stubborn, sullen, and perverse" and where "fatalism" had become a way of life in Appalachia, "there [was] no rebellion, little questioning, little complaining." In Weller's bleakly pessimistic view, "The greatest challenge of Appalachia, and the most difficult, [was] its people."[29] Such people simply did not want to change in order to improve their lives.

With poor families totaling more than half the population in many Central Appalachian counties during the late 1960s,[30] the depiction of Appalachian culture as approximating a regionwide subculture of poverty made sense to many social scientists, policymakers, and popular writers.[31] Rupert Vance, a distinguished expert in the sociology of the South, wrote:

> Thus mountain isolation, which began as physical isolation enforced by rugged topography, became mental and cultural isolation, holding

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> people in disadvantaged areas, resisting those changes that would bring them into contact with the outside world. The effect of conditions thus becomes a new cause of conditions, but the cause is now an attitude, not a mountain.[32]

The practical implications of this approach were clear: "to change the mountains," Vance asserted, "[was] to change the mountain personality."[33]

Efforts to transform Appalachian personalities by modernizing Appalachian culture went hand in hand with regional economic development efforts. These efforts were based on the assumption that Appalachia suffered economically because, in the language of the President's Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia was a "region apart," a place insufficiently integrated into the national "free enterprise orbit."[34] Thus, culture-of-poverty theory, with its stress on cultural isolation, was bolstered conceptually by the combination of neoclassical economic theory and central place theory that guided the development strategies of the Appalachian Regional Commission, which aimed at overcoming economic isolation. "The resulting regional development model," according to one of its critics, was "concerned with providing social overhead capital, training people for skills for new industrial and service jobs, facilitating migration, and promoting the establishment or relocation of privately-owned industries through a growth center strategy."[35] Local projects designed to encourage "maximal feasible participation" of the poor in community development during the War on Poverty thus complemented federal investments by ARC in transportation, education, and health care that were designed to overcome isolation and stimulate economic development, especially in federally designated "growth centers."[36]

VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) workers and Appalachian Volunteers, like their Peace Corps counterparts in the Third World, initially devoted themselves passionately to cultural modernization in the mountains.[37] Soon, however, many antipoverty workers began to develop a more radical approach. By enlisting the poor in projects designed to overcome fatalism and alienation, they came up against major obstacles to participation – the political and economic powerlessness of those who had been trapped in poverty for generations and the reality of entrenched local power structures that served the interests of absentee corporate owners who monopolized land, mineral resources, and politics. Influenced by the writings of Third World scholars, they began to describe Appalachia as an "internal colony."[38]

Analyzing the causes of Appalachian poverty in 1968, Bob Tanner, a VISTA worker in West Virginia, wrote: