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Discussion Notes 03

Power and Powerlessness in an Appalachian Valley – Revisited
Remarks for Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative Conference
Theme 2: How are People Resisting Authoritarian Populism –
Through what sorts of mobilization?

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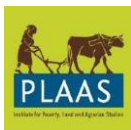


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Power and Powerlessness in an Appalachian Valley – Revisited Remarks for Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative Conference Theme 2: How are People Resisting Authoritarian Populism – Through what sorts of mobilization?

John Gaventa

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Introduction

Almost fifty years ago, I first entered a rural Valley in the heart of the Appalachian mining region, crisscrossing parts of Kentucky and Tennessee, which was to become the subject of my book, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Gaventa, 1980). The core opening question of that book is not dissimilar to the question that we are asking today: *why in a situation of glaring inequality ‘where one might intuitively expect upheaval, does one instead find, or appear to find, quiescence? Under what conditions and against what obstacles does rebellion begin to emerge? (1980:3)’*

The answer I argued could only be found in looking at the historical construction of power relationships, which in that setting were deeply related to the corporate control of land and the exploitation of mineral resources. Over time, I argued, power served to bring certain issues and voices into the political arena, while excluding and suppressing other, and in extreme form, could, as Stephen Lukes (1974) had also argued, lead to the internalization, acceptance and even defense of an unjust status quo. That initial encounter in Appalachian has continued to shape my thinking on power and participation to this day (Gaventa 2017, 2018).

Re-visiting the Appalachian Valley – persistent poverty but political change

As we fast forward to the situation of rural America today, the Appalachian Valley can be seen as a microcosm of the larger political economy affecting rural communities, and of the debates about why poor, rural communities at the blunt edge of inequality express political preferences for Trump, or engage in increasingly authoritarian politics. This community, as many like, has been buffeted by larger national and global forces:

- Always considered a ‘poor’ left behind area, its poverty continues to grow despite the simultaneous growth in wealth, as many other parts of rural America;
- Historically owned and controlled by external corporate land companies, the ownership of these minerals appears to have passed from formerly British (when I did my study) to American and now to Chinese hands, though the real ownership is opaque at best due to the financial maze which surrounds it;
- Once a largely coal mining region, with related jobs, mining has largely disappeared, or is done by large, environmentally destructive ‘strip’ mining technologies, which destroy the land, but offers few jobs. In the town closest to the heart of the rural Valley, the largest number of jobs are found in health care and social assistance (there is a small hospital), and the motel and fast food business (it is close to a large highway).
- Education levels are low, and while high school graduation rates have improved, the number of college graduates remains about a quarter of the US average

- As in much of the region, opioid addiction is high, from four – six times the national average, leading to a major public health crisis, leading one writer to coin the term ‘pharmaceutical colonization’ (Coombs, 2017).

One could go on – but the point is clear: patterns of desperate poverty and inequality persist in this rural area – indeed they seem to be deepening and part of a growing pattern of inequality and control of rural resources. But while the social economic characteristics reflect a historical pattern, *what has changed is the politics*. This was once a predominately union and Democratic area, and when I worked in the region decades ago, Presidents John Kennedy, and Franklin Roosevelt and union leader John L. Lewis, were popular heroes, with their pictures on the walls of many homes I visited. By 2016, this had overwhelmingly altered – with Trump receiving approximately 80% of the votes in the four counties in which the Valley lies¹.

The Trump landslide victory in these rural communities was extreme but not unique. As the *Washington Post* points out: ‘...in the 2,332 counties that make up small-town and rural America, he swamped his Democratic rival, winning 60 percent of the vote to Clinton’s 34 percent. Trump’s 26-point advantage over Clinton in rural America far exceeded the margins by which Republican nominees had won those voters in the four previous elections (Washington Post 2017).’² However, what this narrative also overlooks is that rural America is not monolithic – within months of Trump’s election, 40% of the voters in rural America disapproved of the way he was doing his job.

The overwhelming Trump victory in poor white rural areas has produced a cottage industry of studies of this region, as well as of white rural America more generally, searching for explanation both of the political behavior as well as of the continued poverty and inequality which underlies it. Some of these, such as the well-known *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance 2016), challenge the arguments that the Trump vote can be seen as a backlash based on economic insecurity, turning instead to arguments on culture and psychology of growing up in these communities. Others, such as the very good *Ramp Hollow* (Stoll, 2017) focus more on recounting the corporate exploitation of the region, which has left voters angry, alienated and dispossessed of their rural lands and values. Another excellent book, *For-Profit Democracy: Why the Government is Losing the Trust of Rural America* (Ashwood forthcoming) examines the political culture of white powerlessness, growing from the loss of land and livelihoods by government projects, such as defense plants, which are deeply linked to corporate interests.

In this short paper, I do not have time to examine this rapidly growing literature in detail. Also, the purpose of this panel is to focus not so much on the rise of authoritarian politics, but conversely on the nature of mobilization and resistance.

Quiescence or Resistance?

To approach this point, I find it useful to also return to my earlier book *Power and Powerlessness*. While the book has been widely used as a reference, one of the most useful critiques came from James Scott in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). Scott argued that while focusing on the question of quiescence, I had potentially ignored the extent of resistance that was also occurring, perhaps in ways hidden from researchers like me, as well as from other elites. To him, no system of power has been created which can ensure total consent or quiescence in the face of injustice, no matter how overwhelming that power might be. Rather, he argued, we need to reverse the question:

¹ It is very difficult to document the trends exactly, as the Appalachian Valley cuts across precincts, counties and states. There has long been a historical difference between the rural non-mining area voting, and the mining area voting patterns.

² At least in the Appalachian Valley, it is important to note that this shift was not sudden – in this predominately white area, there was a major shift in the 2008 and 2012 elections, when Obama also received far less than his Republican counterpart. One could argue then that Trump consolidated a growing disillusionment for these white working class voters, but this was capitalizing on a longer term trend.

How is it that subordinate groups such as these have so often believed and acted as if their situations were not inevitable when a more judicious historical reading would have concluded that it was? It is not the miasma of power and thralldom that requires explanation. We require instead an understanding of a **misreading** by subordinate groups that seems to exaggerate their own power, the possibilities for emancipation, and to underestimate the power arrayed against them. If the elite dominated public transcript tends to naturalize domination, it would seem that some countervailing influence manages often to denaturalize domination (Scott 1990:79).

If we bring this perspective back to our Appalachian Valley, side-by-side of a story of exploitation and expressed political conservative (if not authoritarianism) sits another story. This area, as well as many like it, have also been the source of strong grassroots led organizations and mobilizations which challenge the status quo. ***In this regard there is a key point: those studies which focus only on electoral behavior in Presidential politics miss another narrative. Such national level electoral behavior may disguise, or at least not reflect, subaltern patterns of organizing and resistance which are also occurring in these communities.*** In fact, I would argue, simultaneous to the rise of conservative voting in white rural communities in America, has also been a rise of non-electoral forms of citizen action, many of which challenge the underlying forces that continue to impoverish and exploit these communities. What is at play is the difference between a form of discourse-based national politics and a more radical and potentially transformative local place-based politics.

Without going into details in this short paper, examples include:

- Over the last forty years, two large community organizing groups have emerged in this area which have fought back on issues of destructive mining practices, unequal taxation, and now transitions to a new economy. These include the group Statewide Organising for Community eMpowerment (SOCM <https://socm.org/>) in Tennessee and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC <https://www.kftc.org/>). Both of these emerged from the actions of small groups in communities highly controlled by powerful corporate mining interests, and now both have expanded across their respective states to build inter-racial grassroots organizing platforms that challenge many other issues as well. These are widely held up as two of the best examples of rural community organizing in America.
- In the midst of tightly controlled communities dominated by corporate absentee ownership, other groups have worked to create alternative forms of land control including community land trusts and community housing (e.g. Woodland Community Land Trust).
- Other groups have focused more on direct action, on such issues as ‘mountain top removal’ and other forms of environmental destruction (Mountain Justice, United Mountain Defense), deliberately building on tactics of the ‘sit ins’ or ‘Freedom Rider’ tactics of the civil rights movement. Many of these have been linked in alliances across the region.
- Others have focused more on forms of cultural preservation and resistance (<https://www.appalshop.org/>), challenging cultural hegemony of the region through creating their radio stations, theatre, music and storytelling.

Deeply connected to and supportive of much of this bottom-up grassroots organizing activity is a strong tradition of engaged scholarship. In fact, the first two community organizing groups emerged from activist research that documented unequal land ownership patterns and mobilized citizens around it. There is also large body of regional academic literature, largely ignored in outside literature now trying to explain the political culture of the region, which documents these stories of resistance around place, globalization, and power (e.g. Fisher 2009, Fisher and Smith, 2012, Billings and Kingsolver, 2018). An active Appalachian Studies Conference brings together scholars and some activist from the region on a yearly basis. Regional academic journals and presses offer outlets for activist based scholarship. In a forthcoming review of some of this work, sociologist Barbara Ellen writes that

‘place is becoming politicized in important ways that deserve attention from those who believe a more socially just world is possible.’ (Smith, 2018).

Joining up the narratives

My point is this. We face two competing narratives, at least in emerging explanations of political response to poverty and inequality in rural America. On the one hand there are those who look more at voting behaviors – yet these are disconnected from a narrative of more localized place-based projects of resistance and mobilization. Side by side the formal national politics are dozens of examples of relatively small scale, yet often interlinked, local forms of mobilization, often around issues of corporate control, environmental exploitation, and loss of land and place, yet somehow the anger and challenges to authority these represent fail to penetrate national politics and discourse.

But in reality, are these not two sides of the same coin: If we ask the question of ‘why quiescence in the face of inequality?’, as I did some years ago, the answer may risk under-estimating the emergence of resistance as it does occur. If, on the other hand, we ask the question that Scott suggests, of ‘why does countervailing action occur in the face of enormous power differences?’, then we may valorize local action, but also risk not focusing on the question of how these small scale actions contribute to larger change. The puzzle is why we have two narratives – of action and inaction, authoritarianism and challenges to it - and how they manage to sit side by side simultaneously.

Both narratives are important. As we look to the future, we need to ask both sets of questions, and their intersection: *when and under what conditions does mobilization occur or not occur, **and also**, when and how do small scale actions for change and resistance come together for larger scale transformations of the dominant political landscape? How do local place based actions add to larger national and global forces for transformative change, and how do national and global politics fuel or diminish local place based action?* No matter how important individually, a few - even dozens or hundreds - of local forms of mobilization, may sit invisibly beneath the larger political discourse. Joined up with one another and with others around the world, at the right times and moments, we may discover these smaller efforts have the potential to become building blocks for a new, more transformative future.

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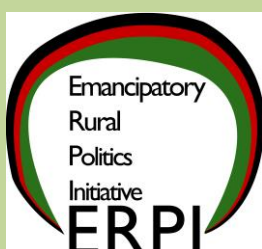
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John Gaventa is a Professor and Director of Research at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, and has been a Research Fellow at IDS since 1996. Linking research and practice in his own career, he has written and worked extensively on issues of citizenship and citizen action, power and participation, governance and accountability, and participatory forms of research. He is author of the award winning book *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. He has also served as Director of the Coady Institute in Canada and the Highlander Center in the US.

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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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