



Civic Life in Gray Mountain

Sizing up the Legacy of New England's Blue-Collar Middle Class

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When President Clinton took Congressional and business leaders on a tour early this summer to places where chronic poverty has persisted despite the nation's booming economy, they visited Appalachia's coal-fields, the Mississippi Delta, the Pine Ridge Indian reservation and inner-city neighborhoods in East St. Louis and Los Angeles. They did not visit New England. Not that New England's inner cities aren't plagued with poverty and social problems; they are. And many poor families are struggling to get by in rural Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Yet the notoriously bad conditions that took the president to the nation's "poverty pockets" are exceedingly rare in the six-state region. Why? Why have poverty rates stayed so high in the South compared with New England? And what can the region expect in the future?

The answers lie in the kind of civic culture generated by each community's economy and social structure. Chronically poor places are divided by race and class and saddled with corrupt politics, ineffective schools and self-interested elites. Distrustful of one another, people in these places look out for their own families only. Escaping poverty is possible only for the lucky few who have a kind relative, caring teacher or coach who pushes and inspires them to finish school and aim high. But most stay trapped in the same poor conditions their parents and perhaps grandparents knew.

In contrast, when communities have a large middle class, the poor are less likely to be cut off from the mainstream. And they are more likely to have the set of contacts, habits and skills—the cultural *tool kit*—they need to leave poverty behind. More importantly, the community institutions that poor families rely upon are more likely to be effective because the middle class is committed to them. The poor can get ahead without relying solely on personal intervention from a mentor or other benefactor.

During the 1990s, I studied poverty and community change in three remote, rural communities: a poor Appalachian coal county I call "Blackwell," a poor Mississippi Delta plantation community I call "Dahlia" and a more stable and economically diverse northern New England mill community, "Gray Mountain." The idea was to learn why poverty persisted generation after generation in Appalachia and the Delta, what made the difference when people did achieve upward mobility, and why it was so hard to bring about change. I examined 100 years of Census data detailing changes in population, patterns of work, income distribution and education. I read histories of each region, as well as the local weekly newspapers. But the heart of the study is the 350 in-depth interviews colleagues and I conducted with people living in these communities—not only the poor, but also the rich and those in between. These open-ended conversations revealed how each community's civic culture—its level of trust, participation and investment—shapes opportunities for both individual mobility and social change.

SEGREGATED, CORRUPT

Impoverished communities in Appalachia and the Delta are divided into *haves* and *have-nots*—"the good rich people and the bad poor people," as one young Appalachian woman put it. The *have-nots* live worlds apart from the *haves*, socially isolated outside the mainstream. Stigmatized and blamed for their poverty, the *have-nots* are often deliberately blocked from opportunities because of their family's class. "If I see those names, I trash the application," one employer said of the poorer families.

A laid-off coal miner observed: "If you have a rich name, they'll take you—otherwise you can't get no work."

A struggling black field worker said: "If you colored—and you ain't got no money, all they want to hear is 'yes sir' and 'no sir.'"

When the poor are cut off from the mainstream, they do not develop the habits, skills and ambitions needed to get steady work. Often they "mess up," dropping out of school, drinking or using drugs, having children out of wedlock and setting the stage for a lifetime of struggle.

But it is not only the mistakes the poor make that matter. Equally important is the fact that the community institutions that might help the poor—namely, schools, churches and youth groups—are segregated by class and race. While children of the *haves* go to college-prep-style independent schools in Appalachia and private white academies in the Delta, *have-not* children are relegated to schools that are chaotic and ineffective. The states and communities invest little in public schools, recreation programs and libraries that are available to everyone. One white woman said: "There is a standing rule that whites don't want to have anything public because the blacks might come."

Worried about their children associating with "bad, poor kids," middle-income families ally themselves with the rich and powerful and, as one community leader put it, "look out for themselves." They accept the corruption and patronage that pervades their community and do not challenge the status quo. In short, inequality has eroded the community social fabric, fostered undemocratic politics, destroyed trust and blocked the cooperation needed to build the community institutions that are crucial for helping poor families achieve the American Dream.

These class and race divisions, along with the atmosphere of distrust and pat-

terns of corruption, emerged in the 1800s when coal operators and plantation bosses established tight control over workers, deliberately discouraging both education and participation in community life. Workers became indebted to company and plantation stores, lived in company housing or plantation shacks and were vulnerable in every aspect of their daily lives to the powerful men who controlled the only work available in the county. The combination of ignorance and justifiable fear of repercussion made the poor prey to, and often participants in, a corrupt system. Those who challenged the status quo found themselves ostracized, blackballed or openly encouraged to leave—forced to choose exit over voice, as noted development economist Albert Hirschman has



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described outmigration and political activism. In both Blackwell and Dahlia, the potential middle class left. The inequality and political hegemony of the powerful remained, blocking mobility and change.

A very different history unfolded in northern New England.

RICH CIVIC CULTURE

Gray Mountain is a paper mill town in northern New England where social life is dominated by a large, blue-collar, middle class. Unlike Blackwell and Dahlia, the area has benefited from substantial income equality, relatively high educational attainment and, until the late 1980s, stable work opportunities. Nearly 40 percent of families have had incomes around the national median since 1960, compared with 23 percent in Blackwell and 14 per-

cent in Dahlia. In 1960, fewer than 20 percent of Blackwell and Dahlia adults had completed high school, compared with more than 40 percent in Gray Mountain. By 1990, the percentage of adults with high school diplomas was edging toward 50 percent in Blackwell and Dahlia, and reached 77 percent in Gray Mountain.

Moreover, income differences that do exist in Gray Mountain appear to have little effect on lifestyles and everyday interaction. "There's really no sense of class," one community leader said. "There's a kind of bond, a membership of the valley and the region, that is more important than other kinds of distinction." People appreciate that doctors and truck drivers golf together at the public course, that surgeons and maintenance workers eat together in the hospital cafeteria. One teacher noted that people he plays "broom hockey" with might earn half what he makes or twice what he makes. One woman receiving public assistance explained: "We're not called 'welfare people.' We didn't have a lot, but some of my friends' parents were quite well-off. It doesn't really matter about your social standing."

In Blackwell and Dahlia, those who "run things" are known for their greed and feared. In Gray Mountain, leading local businessmen are known for their community involvement. "There are a few people that are outstanding, that are always doing volunteer work and leading things and doing things." But they do not hold themselves apart: "It's not like some people are higher than the rest of us. Our kids play baseball together. They're probably in scouting together. They talk and get along."

Community leaders in Gray Mountain—businesspeople and professionals as well as mill workers—support community projects with time and resources. When community problems arise, they meet and haggle over the issues in public forums. Among the tangible results have been a family planning initiative that brought the rate of teen pregnancy down in the 1970s, a public playground and hockey arena built with materials donated by local businesses and community labor, youth programs that make room for the kids "at the end of the road," and numerous programs to help struggling single mothers get an education and find work.

Just as the divisions and distrust that mark Blackwell and Dahlia have 19th century roots, the rich civic culture of

Gray Mountain, and the equality in income and relationships underlying it, has origins in the late 1800s when the mills were established. Industry leaders lived in town next to the workers and sent their children to the same schools. They invested in education and brought cultural performances to the community, in part because it fit their sense of community responsibility and in part because they saw it as good for business. Importantly, the workers in the mills and surrounding timber forests came from diverse ethnic backgrounds—Italian, Russian, French-Canadian, Irish, and German—and they brought cultural traditions and organizations with them. Groups like the Masons, Knights of Columbus, Scottish Clan and Fraternal Order of Eagles, ski and hockey clubs and churches provided social cohesion and identity, but also real services and resources. Workers acquired habits of participation in these organizations.

Northern New England offered steady work in the forests and pulp and paper mills, and later in manufacturing enterprises and recreation-related jobs. Shoe factories closed, but new electronic or stitchery businesses opened in the 1960s and 1970s. In Blackwell and Dahlia, coal operators and plantation bosses had consistently and deliberately blocked new enterprises that might threaten their absolute control over the workforce. In contrast, Gray Mountain had long hosted small manufacturing plants in addition to the mill, and sustained a citizen's committee to foster further industrial development.

Steady work in a stable industry—combined with community-wide commitment to education under mill leadership—laid the foundation for a broad, independent blue-collar, middle class. The middle class, in turn, created a rich civic culture. Children of all income levels attend the same public high school—an orderly, clean place where teachers boast about the lack of vandalism. Public recreation and child care programs are the norm. The poor are not isolated, and when young people who have “messed up” are ready to settle down, they have options. They received a relatively good education while they were in school, and they do not dress or speak differently from those in middle-class families with steady work. They know the people who do the hiring at local businesses, and may be friends with their children. And a committed group of women—some long-term residents, some “from away”—have created programs to

help them get on their feet, including special training at the community college, subsidized child care programs and mentors to help them out. In Blackwell and Dahlia, a young woman who “runs wild,” drops out of high school and has a child out of wedlock is probably destined to live out her life in poverty, no matter how much she regrets “messing up.” In Gray Mountain, community programs, as well as the young woman's relationships with locals who are not poor, will give her a second chance.

Can life in Gray Mountain really be this good compared with life in Blackwell or Dahlia? All three rural communities are remote from metropolitan centers. All share an emphasis on family, a familiarity and small-town scale that inhabitants appreciate. People in all



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three communities tend to choose work that enables them to stay put rather than get ahead in a career. So why are there such notable differences in civic culture? Why do people in Gray Mountain create ladders for the poor, while the majority in Blackwell and Dahlia distrust and distance themselves from the poor?

For starters, poverty was *never* as severe in this northern New England community as in the two other communities. Jobs have always been more plentiful and stable, and educational attainment has long been higher. In addition, early mill owners displayed a sense of community responsibility, while diverse ethnic groups established vital organizations run by working people. The mill owners were powerful, but not all-powerful. Recreation interests moved in early, and summer residents have made the community less isolated and more diverse.

Yet while all these factors played a role, the single most important difference between Gray Mountain and the more impoverished communities elsewhere is the large blue-collar, middle class, which cared about building strong community institutions for their own families and then drew their less fortunate neighbors into them.

Today, however, the good manufacturing jobs that nurtured and sustained this middle class are disappearing in Gray Mountain, as they are across the United States. In the 1960s, manufacturing accounted for more than 40 percent of total employment in Gray Mountain; by 1990, it accounted for less than 15 percent. Mill employment has been declining since the late 1980s, and more and more young families must rely on a patchwork of service-sector jobs that often pay low wages and do not provide health benefits. The rich civic culture and strong institutions that Gray Mountain established will be tested over the next few years, as manufacturing jobs continue to decline, federal programs shrink, in turn, placing greater reliance on community-level resources, and an aging population shows little appetite for tax increases and expanded school funding.

With its blue-collar, middle class an endangered species, Gray Mountain will have to build a sustainable economic base in a new restructured economy, and capture knowledge-based information industries, which unlike their resource-based predecessors, can locate virtually anywhere.

In approaching this new economy, Gray Mountain again will enjoy big advantages over America's Blackwells and Dahlias with their corrupt civic practices and low educational attainment. But Gray Mountain will also want to preserve its relative equality and community norms of inclusive participation and cooperation. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam found that prosperity followed good government in northern Italy, not vice versa. Numerous studies in developing countries confirm that greater equality not only nurtures democratic institutions, but also leads to greater economic prosperity. Gray Mountain, like many places in New England, has its work cut out. ■

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