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Barry R. Gordon  
*West Virginia College of Graduate Studies*

Daniel I. Rubenstein  
*West Virginia College of Graduate Studies*

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THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTIVE ASPECTS OF OUTSIDE AGENTS  
IN COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING IN A RURAL AREA<sup>1</sup>

Barry R. Gordon

Daniel I. Rubenstein

West Virginia College of Graduate Studies

The "outside-change agent"<sup>2</sup> is dangerous, something to be feared (based on past experiences, long since blurred by boredom and powerlessness) and not taken into the community. The outsider offers few, if any, tangible immediately useable resources -- only promises and fancy talk. Limited experience has taught the Appalachian that promises fade into misery and fancy talk to poverty. The self-fulfilling prophesy of inhospitality and disbelief in oneself, turn the Appalachian against the change agent and challenge the agent to leave the area out of self-felt persistent futility.

THE APPALACHIAN, SOCIALIZATION, AND ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONS

Towards setting the stage for our discussion of how outside agents can help to establish community participation in decision-making, we ask you to ponder history for a moment.

West Virginia's unique history indicates that its land and peoples have served as a "colony"<sup>3</sup> and "colonials," exporting its vast wealth in human and natural resources. Concomitant with this imperialistic approach to the development of the material wealth of Appalachia came the exploitation of the human resources of the people in the same area.

The basic isolated and independent life style of the native Appalachian fits well with the schemes of the exploiters willing to treat the natives as "peasants (in) their own land." (Branscome, 1971:8) Appleby most graphically describes this phenomenon when she wrote that the Appalachian

has been taken advantage of by the clever, urbane entrepreneur who has been able to deceive him into accepting a token offering for the sale of his once productive lands. (Appleby, 1970:34-35)

This process subsequently fostered the almost total social and economic dependency on those outside exploitative interests, limited to a few large corporations maintaining power and rarely challenged.

The conditions of isolation, monopoly and self-containment lead to a considerable amount of provincialism, as experience repertoires and communications are limited. The terrain and lack of road networks in the area help to magnify the effects of the isolation. Social relationships tend to depend heavily on intra-family connections, and religious institutions.<sup>4</sup> Social life is severely limited, with recreation facilities lacking and boredom pervading.

This background is noted for the explanatory purpose of making the point that there has been historically in this area, a lack of institutional and organizational structures and a lack of opportunities that build social participation and encourage community participation in decision-making. Historically, colonialism has provided the industrial corporation as the major and only institution for the socialization of the Appalachian and this institution has shown no obvious concern for individual growth, nor respect of the individual as a person or for their quality of life. The person then becomes an object of use for production and profit. (Branscome, 1972:4)

In this context of isolation and limited development of institutions other than economic ones, controls on community life and community development are vulnerable to simple pre-emptions by the economic interests who desire to maintain their position and undermine the populace. (Rossi, 1959:115)

The political, economic, social and communication patterns are under the strong dominance of a few powerful corporate interests, managed indirectly to achieve a power vacuum and block the development of institutional alternatives, as well as the development of a community which could participate in community decision-making.

With a lack of indigenous institutions of socialization (organizations for participation and governance) particular social behavior is fostered and developed. These behaviors could (but not exhaustively) be related to isolation, non-communication, stagnation, alienation, anomie and apathy. These behaviors are expressed as fear of change and steadfastness to tradition, low-expectations, non-participation, non-expressiveness, blandness or lack of enthusiasm.

The Appalachian's limited concept of change, limited trust, and their family-centered ethos, prevents action in concert with their neighbors or for the common good. Much like Banefield's description of his work in Italy (1958:163), with corporations acting as the Padrones, the Appalachian has become provincial to protect himself and his family. Outsiders are dangerous intrusions that must be dealt with so as not to upset the zero-sum game that limited resources are perceived (by the Appalachian) to demand. "The possibility of planned change (which must start from a foundation of common recognition and participation in problem solutions) . . . can only be accomplished through the presence of an 'outside(r)' . . . with the desire and ability to (bring about change)." (Banefield, 1958:164) The Appalachian fears change for he feels incapable of dealing with unknowns and is suspicious of would-be cooperating neighbors led by outsiders.

Having come into the region to exploit, the Corporations stay and control by

blocking the formation of alternative institutions. They use power by fiat and for their own selfish reasons, and designate the "new change-agent outsider" as a scape-goat, a "Carpetbagger," which elicits the desired response from the exploited. Thus, this clever "reverse distortion" is used as a tactic to pre-empt efforts of the organizer to build a base for community participation in decision-making. The distortion achieves for the influentials a short-term strategic edge as the organizer attempts to achieve a "community" of interests to work from, among the suspicious, distrusting, exploited Appalachian.

For those living under such dominance and exploitation where powerlessness and isolation are at a maximum, and the experiential opportunities of self-determination and active participation in life are at a minimum, it seems appropriate to recall Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (1942:398). Without the experience and knowledge of the world outside, and without the benefit of the conceptual understanding of alternatives, one can only see the reflection of himself on the wall -- yet once the outside is experienced, one can never come back to the same limited world. By way of transition therefore, this allegory brings us to the need for the outside change-agent who can introduce some conceptual and "process" fresh air and new experiences -- as community participation in decision-making is instituted through organization, and the building of viable alternative social patterns and institutions.

#### COMMUNITY AND THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The maintenance and development of a community is enabled through the decision-making process that utilizes the autonomous strengths and resources of its people to confront their problems and create resolves for a better way of life. To have a more precise understanding of the decision-making process at the community level, it is most important to have some image or perspective of the definition of community for a frame of reference. Our point here is neither to attempt to expand definitions of community nor to challenge concepts and formulations of community definitions. Too often, when the term "rural community" is used, an image of pastoral life is brought forth. Alternatively when the community-decision perspective is viewed, we conjure up a New England Town Hall meeting where all neighbors are acquainted and decisions are made from the needs of the individuals.

One recent popular characterization of the rural community is specified by Vidich and Bensman (1960:81-100). "Perhaps most important are the mass decisions of business and government . . . , and they comprise the invisible social chain reactions that are made in centers of power in government, business and industry. The invisible social chain reactions emanating from the outside no doubt alter the life of the community more seriously than the action of visible agents such as the (change-agent)".

While the rural Appalachian non-farm community may seem similar to the description above, we draw your attention to the lack of acting change agents or institutional structures that might support the developmental work of social institutions.

The Vidich-Bensman model presupposes a vertical-horizontal affectation in community decision-making (Warren, 1963:237-302). In the absence of a community decision-making process at the local level, the communities we refer to in this paper must be understood to reflect the lack of social institutions in the form in which they are traditionally characterized, and the lack of change agents. (Warren, 1963:9-20).

The impact of a single extractive industry (coal mining) in a rural nonfarm social setting has a direct relationship to the Gerhard Lenski (1966) idea that the type and level of technology shape a society's institutional structure.

An extractive industry does not shape, or contribute to social institutional development in the same fashion as do manufacturing or processing industries. It would appear that developed social institutions do not serve the purposes of extractive industries. The concept of "non-community" and the lack of alternative social institutions<sup>5</sup> serve them more efficiently.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of social institutions readily manifests social behavior limiting participation in community decision-making or facilitating participation. The emergent pattern of behavior combining powerlessness, fatalism and subordination is illustrated by Aquizap and Vargas (1970:137).

In rural Appalachia there are coal mining communities with relatively monolithic power structures that are maintained by a combination of punishment contingencies in a very limited physical and social environment. The strict suppression of any type of adaptive behavior on the part of the member of the poverty class is almost guaranteed. In such a society the reinforcement system sufficiently rewards dependent and unaggressive behavior in the subordinate class member . . . By definition, the controlling class manipulates the conditions for both reward and punishment as related to the behavior of the subordinate class members.

#### THE CHANGE-AGENT'S CONTRIBUTION

"The mind can . . . be thought of as a 'theory bin' housing an assortment of attitudes toward the self and others, a set of values, impressions, expectations, notions of many sorts." (Ferguson, 1969:408) This assortment is learned from a variety of sources including "significant others" and those in ones limited environment. These multiple perspectives on directions of thought and development of ones self-concept lead to choices and decisions made on the basis of learned behav-

ior patterns. Behavior is significantly directed by the constraints and structural limitations within which one lives.

The previous discussion has illustrated some of the constraints and limitations on social participation and growth of alternative institutions within which the Appalachian lives. Conceptually, alternatives do not lie within the Appalachian's reality until some outside event or person introduces them into the spectrum of reality. This, then, is one of the leading roles of the outside change-agent. By introducing, directing and training a community through maximizing their ability to best utilize resources, the change-agent "enables" the community to participate in a decision-making process which will have direct bearing on the general community's well-being.

Arnstein states that community participation . . .

is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic process, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society.

It is important for an agent to be able "to assist in the illumination of alternatives, or formulation of options, and to help the (group or community to) make responsible choices among them." (Ferguson, 1961:409) By the distortion achieved through the scapegoating of change-agents with the brand "Carpetbagger," this illumination is immediately under suspicion, and the change agent's dependence on the foundations of community are tenuous at best.

A list of roles a change-agent plays, represents not only the roles of the change-agent but, importantly, the kinds of skills and roles the agent must pass on to and instill in the community in which he works. As long as these roles remain the specialty of the change-agent, and not the capability of those the change-agent is working with, or within their spectrum of activity, then all gains are severely limited to short run. Dependent on a community foundation in which individuals act together for their own development and understanding of the utilization of these skills, the community's access and participation in decision-making groups will be achieved and goals will be within the reach of the community to the extent that the change-agent's skills can be assimilated. This is the real role of the change-

agent, to direct the group or community with which he/she works, through the process of learning how to gain access to power and participation in decision-making apparatuses.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to draw attention to the uniqueness of the communities of rural Appalachia. In viewing these communities, extra care must be taken in noting the characteristics of their decision-making process. It appears that extractive industries add a new dimension, not previously emphasized, to the consideration and development of social institutions and citizen ability to participate in community governance.

Furthermore, traditional characterizations of the development of social institutions in communities, do not seem to apply to rural Appalachia. Depending on historical developments, type of corporate controls and commerce in the area, and the quality and quantity of social participation at the community level, one must readjust their conceptions of rural communities to correspond to the multiple models in existence -- from the company town as it develops into a more urbanized area, to the areas in which extracting corporations rule supreme. These are just two among many non-farm rural models.

Areas in which extractive corporations control large amounts of resources, are characterized by an absence of the development of social institutions and alternative organizations in which the populace can participate to practice the democratic skills of governance. Capitalizing on the fears and limited experiences of the isolated Appalachian, "Carpetbagger" is a phrase illustrative of the subtlety by which deception and social control is practiced by the exploiters. A strategic edge over the change-agent is achieved, through which penetrations based on building a sense of community, are blocked by enhancing distrust, suspicion and recalling distortions of past experiences with outsiders.

The outside change-agent brings with him/her, the tools with which to build a sense of community and need to act in concert. To the extent that these skills can be utilized and passed on to the local citizens, their efforts to form meaningful coalitions and achieve cooperation will lead to development of social, organizational, and institutional alternatives. With these established, and leadership and organizational skills internalized, access and participation in decision-making processes will be insured.

The importance of the change-agent's input in the improvement of the decision-making process, is heightened by a United States sensitivity toward the valued belief and necessity of "participatory democracy."<sup>7</sup>

In a political era of decentralization, with its "new" practice of revenue sharing, participatory democracy is especially vital for those who have the least and need the most.

The role of the change-agent is to direct the populace in their acquisition of perspective and broadening of their role repertoire, which in turn will enable local participation in decision-making processes, and the ability to influence outcomes by their marshalling of resources.

The institution which is unresponsive to the changing needs of its recipients is not likely to be responsive to its critics who operate on a lesser level of power.

Work for change within the system may be an essential pressure upon the system but without external pressure there is little likelihood meaningful change will occur -- since, after all, meaningful change is contingent upon acceptance of a different value construct, an acceptance which is not likely to occur lightly. (Kagen, 1972) (Emphasis added)

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This paper was originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association Joint Session with the Rural Sociological Society, August 1973. It also appeared in the West Virginia University School of Social Work publication Social Welfare, Vol. 6, 1974/75.

<sup>2</sup>The peculiar term "carpetbagger" which was once applied to the Northerners rushing to exploit the situation of the defeated South, has now come full circle to refer to any "outsider" coming to work on reform in a corporate-dominated area. The fact that the Corporates are the "exploiters" has long been forgotten as they assumed dominance, control, and longevity. Through subtle manipulation the normal citizen is only aware of the disruptive effect of the "new outsider" who will bring the wrath of the Robber Barons against the already defeated and passive routine of life "enjoyed" by the Appalachian public.

<sup>3</sup>It is reported that General Imboden, in the late nineteenth century, went before the state legislature to argue that ". . . within the imperial domain of Virginia, lie, almost unknown to the outside world and not fully appreciated by their owners, vaster fields of coal and iron than in all England, maybe than all Europe." (Branscome, 1972:3)

<sup>4</sup>The small churches are analogous to the Black experience. "The Negro Church . . . has been and continues to be the outstanding social institution in the Negro genius. It is the only institution . . . that the Negro controls. It is more than a religious organization; it is also a social order and an education and welfare agency. Denied the opportunity . . . in civic and political affairs, in business



enterprises, and in recreational and intellectual activities the Negro has turned to the church for self-expression, recognition, and leadership. (Davie, 1959:191; also Gerrard, 1970; Coles, 1972)

<sup>5</sup>Illustrative of this lack of alternative institutions is the situation of education; "When he was in the ninth grade, young Willie was called aside by his father one August evening, 'Willie, I don't believe I can send you to school this year. I can't send you and the little ones, too, and they just have to go.' The son replied, 'Daddy, I'll step out and maybe something will happen and I can go back later on'." (Bagdikian, 1971:102) Willie never returned to school. Alternatives didn't exist.

<sup>6</sup>This point merits more research to empirically substantiate the claim.

<sup>7</sup>As structured into such programs as OEO, Model Cities, and other Federal Projects.

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