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Regionalism and Politics

By ARON KRICH AND VINCENT GAROFFOLO

PART I: SOME ATTITUDES OF REGIONALISM

This is an area of unfulfilled revolutions. Full extension of the benefits of bourgeois democracy has not replaced feudalism for large portions of the village population; elementary, progressive features of this democracy await release, while already the movement for socialism has begun. These contradictions, unmistakably evident in the life of the Spanish-American population, have so charged this area with explosive and dramatic potentiality, that great changes in the life of the people await only the unifying spark of an uncompromising people's movement. Carefully dampened by betrayal from *caciques* and *políticos* this dynamite has been stored in great quantities. Now it has begun to dry; and the regionalist question is important again.

The present regionalism, avowedly a political, has built itself at the expense of the political and social disenfranchisement of whole national groups. Strongly dependent on the semi-feudal backwardness of these people, this regionalism becomes restrictive to the point of complete indifference to the day to day misery endured by them within the social frame-work of this discrimination. An area marked as a sore-spot in the national life becomes the "land of enchantment" for a few. But "cities different" and "lands of enchantment" do not fall from the sky. The role of regionalist-art-colonizer is one with strings attached. In exchange for an encouraged tolerance of a special Western bohemianism, the regionalist-intellectuals have paid a heavy price in the form of silence on matters of social importance. Now when they speak, it is a curious chirping about a pleasant "way of life" based specifically on those social lacks. As a cultural front for the Anglo-American subjugation of this area the regionalists have had their greatest

success. Heedless of social implications from the beginning, artists, writers, and regionalist intellectuals generally have played missionary, with costumes to match, in the quasi-colonial, certainly ruthless domination of this territory.

Identification of the basic population as servants to this regionalism with their actual conditions as the laboring mass, makes for an easy ideological basis for a considerable amount of village and city exploitation. This is a pattern of behavior not unique to New Mexico, but is generally applied where national minority groups are involved. Between a privileged group and the oppressed, there always develops a set of conventions to be used as a guide to inter-class and intergroup relations. In time, members of the privileged group tend to identify these conventions, and the habits that necessarily accompany them, with what they assume is the "essentially human nature" of the oppressed class. From this point, the privileged group begins to view the conduct that is canalized by these conventions as deriving, not from objective social relationships and situations, but from a myth called the "fundamental human nature" of the oppressed class or group. These mythical characteristics of the "fundamental human nature" of the minority group are endearingly preserved as an eternal quality inherent in the people. How much the local regionalists have contributed to this profitable myth is not hard to determine. Superstition, poverty, and ignorance have been decorated in terms of "the noble illiteracy of a happy, contented people." Certainly, the regionalist intellectual has labeled this area of communal poverty the land of *mañana*. There are some who hope tomorrow will be different.

But precisely where in regionalist theory does such custom find support? It is obvious that the present local regionalist leadership can only work for the death of truly creative regionalism. Regionalism must mean evocation. It must grasp the fact that it is not merely compatible with cultural advance, but it is an essential element in it. Regionalism is not a lost cause or a worn-out wish, but an

urgent contemporary fact which must be consciously directed and socially assimilated. Instead of fighting the conditions of modern life, the contemporary regionalist points out that the products of industry, telephone, radio, cinema, national and international press services, have shifted the balance of power to the local region. We no longer need be a nation divided into cosmopolitans and hicks. As Lewis Mumford has said: "Regionalism as a modern social reality does not mean the resurrection of a dead way of life, or the mummification of local customs and institutions, nor is it dependent upon excessive interest in the primitive, the naive, and the illiterate. It is, essentially, the effort to provide for the continuous cultivation and development of all the resources of the earth and of man; an effort which recognizes the existence of real groups and social configurations and geographical relationships that are ignored by the abstract culture of the metropolis, and which opposes to the aimless nomadism of modern commercial enterprise, the conception of a stable and a settled, a balanced and cultivated life."

Among the New Mexico regionalists there flourishes an ideology which, while attempting to give escape from pressing social realities, has succeeded only in illuminating those very problems. This ideology they hide behind the banner of regionalism. The objectives of these regionalists are such a distortion of the values of genuine regionalism that they become the agents of its destruction even as they go about building it. Regionalism implies the creative expansion of the totality of an ethnic area. The N. M. regionalist is an intruder and an exploiter interested not in the progressive development of local culture, but in its contraction and isolation. He has come to it as a dilettante and privileged visitor. *"As for me, standing outside, beyond the open entrance, I was no enemy of theirs; far from it. The voice of the far-off time was not for my ears. Its language was unknown to me. And I did not wish to know. It was enough to hear the sound issuing plangent from the bristling darkness of the far past, to see the bronze mask of*

the face uplifted, the white, small, close-packed teeth showing all the time. It was not for me and I knew it. Nor had I any curiosity to understand." (D. H. Lawrence, *Indians and an Englishman*.) Emotions of revolt which were generated in the minds of certain middle-class people who felt the necessity of personal action against existing conditions, but who also felt it impossible to identify themselves with the people who might, and who undertake a real struggle to change conditions—with the working masses—is one of the crucial factors which have driven these people to the Southwest. In the Southwest these people found an area in which the problems of modern capitalism could be avoided by playing a dumb and appreciative role as worshippers of a "way of life" which was built on the backs of the Spanish-American people, and in a more special way, the Indian people.

To them regionalism means a particular "way of life" which is not permitted them in any other place. On the surface this would seem to be a product of living regionalism; but it is this very search for a "way of life" which so viciously militates against true regionalism. Mike Gold saw this very clearly during his visit to New Mexico during the summer of 1936: "D. H. Lawrence perversely believed that the Indian must be kept uncontaminated by modernism because he was as perfect as man could be. Marks of this surrender to primitivism are streaked like bacon fat through the thinking of the intellectuals here. It is the same crowd that once ravaged the nightclubs of Harlem and groveled before the cult of a mythically sensuous Negro, and thus misled a whole generation of young Negro intellectuals. And, as once in Harlem, on the trail of Lawrence and Mabel Luhan have followed the art shoppes of Santa Fe, the peddlers of souvenir junk, the fake blanket weavers, the Fred Harvey businessmen and the real estate sharks—rents are as high in Santa Fe as in New York! And on the streets Indians peddle jewelry and blankets to tourists; mystically, no doubt." (Michael Gold, *Mabel Luhan's Slums*.) Two

roles are played by these hand-woven intellectuals. As colonizers of art they keep Santa Fe and Taos alive for the tourists; they act as an unofficial advertising staff. As ideologists they comfort the bankers, sheepmen, entrepreneurs and neonized Indian-traders with the illusion of culture. In a region rich in material for significant works of art, they have been content to close their eyes to the life of the people and indulge in a snobbish game of ferreting out the lesser known Indian dances and Spanish fiestas.

The strategic position of New Mexico in national politics as a "lobby state" and the fact that this is an area in which politics is spoken of as "our greatest industry" has curiously enough, produced a group of artists and thinkers who shudder at the mention of the word. It does not matter to the N. M. regionalist-intellectual that the conditions of his "freedom" are built on the backs of a whole people already burdened with the weight of social and political conniving. They are not interested in politics. And they are so little interested in the relationship of their regionalism to the human problems of the region, that one cannot find a definite program of their making. For the most part New Mexico regionalism is based on will o' the wisp attitudes, on costumes, on decorations of the regional "way of life." For their ideological program they have leaned heavily on the writings of the Southern Agrarian-distributist movement, particularly as expressed in the anthology *I'll Take My Stand*. It is a curious and perhaps very important token, that the leading regionalist movements should find their roots in areas which contain national minority problems as well as special features of backwardness in relation to the general economic development of the nation. In the South, there is the pressing problem growing out of the plantation system and its accompanying enslavement of the Negro; further complicated by the rise of industrialism and the growing unity of Negro and White sharecroppers and industrial labor. In New Mexico the problem is related to the Anglo-American aggrandizement

of this territory and the breakdown of feudal forms of exploitation without raising the feudal status of the Spanish-American masses. Both in the plantation area of the South and in the area of New Mexico dominated by the Spanish-speaking culture, there is a strong feeling for national rights and national equality. The National Negro Congress, the inspiring growth of the Sharecroppers and Tenant Farmers Union in the South, the wildfire emergence of the Liga Obrera and its initiation in the last election of a Popular Front Farmer-Labor Party in New Mexico are just a few examples of the social awakening of these people. It is the fear of movements like these which have motivated the old, throttling type of regionalism.

There are social attitudes which accompany that type of regionalism which express a deep political fright. Primarily, this fear has been incorporated into hatred of the modern machine culture. A careful analysis of the politico-social implications of industrial development could be made by any number of these regionalist writers, some of whom are not only keen students of classical political economy but well acquainted with Marx as well. But this task seems to be intellectually taboo. They apply their erudition only when attacked. Thus, in answering certain remarks of Miss Grace Lumpkin directed at the Southern Agrarians, Allen Tate advised the Communists to study Marx more carefully, while he himself flaunted a program filled with ambiguous contradictions. "If a community, or a race, or an age, is groaning under industrialism," he said in the introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* ". . . and well aware it is an evil dispensation, it must find a way to throw it off . . ." But how? Although the program of the Agrarian-distributist group is not well defined, we can see that essentially it offers the replacement of industrial capitalism by small agricultural holdings and individual craft shops; in other words, a restoration of the age before industrialism began. What does this hatred of the machine signify? Does it mean that the regionalist is appalled at the exploitation

which industrial capitalism forces on the workingman? This can hardly be. For the regionalist has no care about exploitation if it is in primitive agriculture or in handicraft manufacture. Is this hatred of the machine motivated by the fact that industrial capitalism in its highest stage has produced hard and fixed class relationships? The regionalist does not wish to disturb these relationships. Is the regionalist set against the machine because it is a product of capitalism? But he is not opposed to capitalism as such, if it can be molded into earlier forms. No, the Southern-Agrarians had hoped to arrange society into a hierarchy dominated by the intellectual elite, and in which there would be a large group of ignoramuses to do the work for them under a gentlemen's agreement drawn up by the elite. Is this regionalism, or is it the dilettante efforts of certain literary playboys to combat the forces which threaten their comfortable social position? It would be safe to say that the basic manifestations of Southern Agrarian regionalism have been political. The slogan "Down with the machine!" never was, and cannot be a realistic battle-cry for a regionalist movement. It is simply camouflage. Behind it hides the desire to turn back the wheels of history. This basic Fascist conceit, although it does not make Fascists of the Southern Agrarians, does certainly lay the basis for a reactionary political movement. We offer in evidence the following excerpt from an amazing interview between Seward Collins, editor of the *American Review* and Grace Hutchins, the southern novelist, which appeared in the magazine *Fight* for February, 1936:

Miss Hutchins: Some of the things you have said make me think you are a Fascist. Are you?

Mr. Collins: Yes. I am a Fascist. I admire Hitler and Mussolini very much. They have done great things for their countries. I do not agree with everything they do, but . . .

Miss Hutchins: You have said that you wish to go back to medieval times. You wish to do away with all progress?

Mr. Collins: Yes.

Miss Hutchins: And do you wish to have kings and nobles, counts, dukes, etc., in America?

Mr. Collins: Yes, exactly.

Miss Hutchins: You wish to live as people did then?

Mr. Collins: Yes, do away with the automobile and go back to the horse.

Miss Hutchins: You wish to do without conveniences?

Mr. Collins: Yes.

Miss Hutchins: Without bathtubs?

Mr. Collins: I never use a bathtub.

Miss Hutchins: You don't bathe?

Mr. Collins (dignified): I use a shower.

The Southern regionalists have not taken their stand. This is what they are trying hardest to avoid. The same holds true of their followers in New Mexico. The sky-writer regionalist is an anxious preserver of special regionalist data. There is always the whining anxiety to assure listeners that the date of this regionalism is "peculiarly invisible." Here it is the eternal landscape, the eternal mountains, the eternal sky, the eternal banality. Everything is breathlessly fixed either in the infiniteness of the landscape or the everlastingness of their own awe. Awe and wonder are now available at bargain rates. The regionalist practitioners of this area have been selling "awe" for a long time now. The market appears to be steady, though exposed to the "per-versities" of markets everywhere. The wrapper is getting thin and the product is becoming unpleasantly green from over-exposure.

The data of regionalism as found in this state is less "landscape-ish" than its promoters would allow. It is rooted in the social and economic relationships between an exploited and disenfranchised national group and chamber of commerce Americanism. The servant status of the Spanish-American, insidious discrimination, supreme exploitation practiced by large sheep owners through sharecropping techniques, employer terror against trade-union organiza-

tion, the abominable lack of public health facilities, poverty and illiteracy—are also data of our regionalism. Across the infinite landscape of the awed-regionalist are shadows. And a regionalism that denies, often with frantic ignorance, or decorates the experiences of a people with the fastidious jargon of culture salesmen, must be clearly accused of being more than an amiable ally of conscious reactionaries.

Could I But Choose

By MABEL MAJOR

Could I but choose one virtue of the seven,
 Those sisters white, confronting the Deadly Sins,
 My choice would be the last within the line,
 Stern Fortitude with lineaments unmoved
 By swift-wheeled pleasures or the hours that burn.
 Faith, Hope, sweet Charity are well
 Enough for self-sure youth wrapped blind in dreams;
 Spare Temperance and fruitless Chastity
 For those whose eyes held fast on other bliss
 Find no temptation in the world of flesh.
 Prudence, the most unlovely of the seven,
 Belongs to age who talks and ventures none.
 Thou Virtue stern, lips pressed and tears unshed,
 Make firm the step of us within the stream.