

Cautionary Tales: Ford Critique

Instructions: Review the following critique of Thomas Ford (ed.) The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey.

Critiques of Ford's Study

Excerpt from Sociologist Dwight Billings' 1974 study "Culture and Poverty in Appalachia: A Theoretical Discussion and Empirical Analysis" (*Social Forces* 53: 2 (December), pp. 325-23).

"Many of the distinctive qualities writers attribute to the Appalachian subculture—as well as the best evidence for it—originate in an influential essay by Thomas Ford entitled "The Passing of Provincialism..."

"The effect of Ford's research has been to turn most subsequent discussion of Appalachia toward the value dimensions he sought to identify. To the extent that this is true it has tended to freeze the conception of Appalachian subculture as unique. Although Ford's findings support the passing of provincialism, his own interpretations of his data reify a hypothesized frontier legacy and attribute importance to it. Consequently, in subsequent research, the social organization of the region and the exigencies of the everyday life of the poor have been neglected..."

"So many others focus on personal and cultural characteristics of the poor rather than social situational factors. Some of these writers stress the persistence of a maladaptive cultural legacy [folk traditions], while others explain mountain culture as an adaptive device for coping with frustration [a culture of poverty]. In either case, their claims for the distinctiveness of mountain culture have not been well tested. Most writers simply articulate their observations with Ford's findings for support. But this will not do. Ford's research design was not comparative...It is not at all clear that the responses he analyzed were distinctively regional."

Discussion:

Twelve years after the first publication of "The Passing of Provincialism," University of Kentucky sociologist Dwight Billings tried to resolve some of the questions left unanswered by the Ford study by systematically comparing the attitudes and beliefs of Appalachian and non-Appalachian respondents in a large, statewide opinion survey conducted in 1965 in North Carolina. Billings produced a four-item scale tapping fatalism, achievement orientation, outlook on the future, and social class identification which he interpreted as a measure of "middle class orientation." The particular questions used to measure the latter were similar to those used in the Ford study such as "Does respondent think that God is pleased with people who try to get ahead, or with people who take things as they are?"

Billings found only a modest gap in middle class orientation among rural Appalachians in comparison to urban piedmont and rural tidewater North Carolinians and he showed that the gap was explicable in terms of the extent of rurality rather than region. (Region predicted middle class orientation less well than did respondents' race,

occupation, age, rural-urban location, or education.) Significantly, he also found that the oldest age cohort in the piedmont—the age group that participated most directly in the economic development of that region—were virtually identical in their attitude response pattern to older respondents in the mountains. Billings wrote:

“Since the same level of middle class orientation characterizes both the mountain and piedmont areas for this age cohort, and since this level did not prevent modernization in the piedmont, then attitudinal characteristics cannot be used to explain the lack of economic development—and therefore poverty—in the mountains.”

According to Billings, several methodological problems limited the value of the Ford study.

- 1) Most important was the fact that Ford’s survey employed neither longitudinal nor comparative research designs. Since it was practical to interview respondents only once, and since there were no earlier regional surveys with which to compare their responses, it was difficult to infer processes of cultural change from single, point-in-time measurements. Ford thus used attitude differences between age groups and between rural, town, and city dwellers as proxy indicators of unmeasured temporal and geographical changes. He interpreted the fact that rural and older respondents were less progressive in outlook than younger and urban respondents as evidence for the “passing” of traditionalism in the region. But it was unclear what such responses really indicated about past cultural realities in Appalachia, not to mention how important they may have been in the past nor how distinct they were from other regions.

Even more problematic, according to Billings, was what to make of the levels of agreement that Ford discovered among respondents on the four value dimensions that he measured. Because no non-Appalachians were sampled, it was impossible to know what such levels of agreement or disagreement meant as far as the possible existence of a regional ethos was concerned. Would respondents in other regions have answered his questions differently? Did their responses indicate the effects of a distinctive Appalachian culture or simply the directly observed effects of variables such as place of residence, social class, and age. There was no way to answer such questions. Ford’s own discussion, though it stressed the passing of traditionalism, nevertheless reified a hypothesized frontier cultural legacy, i.e., “provincialism,” and attributed importance to it as well. Ford himself admitted that “the very attempt to present conclusions [on the basis of admittedly “impressionistic” data] about the values and beliefs of Southern Appalachian people may create an impression of homogeneity that [did] not in fact exist” (p. 29).

- 3) Ford did not discover the four value themes he examined in his study on the basis of a statistical analysis of how attitude items were inter-correlated as is commonly done, for instance, with factor analysis. Instead, his questionnaire items were selected on the basis of their face validity as measures of cultural traits that were themselves derived not from the survey but from, in Ford’s words, “the literature on the isolated rural highlander in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (p. 11). That is, Ford wrote questionnaire items that

appeared to measure the extent of agreement with beliefs commonly attributed to mountaineers in the past, i.e., with stereotypes. In the absence of comparable data from non-Appalachians, according to Billings, there was no way to know whether there was anything at all “Appalachian” in his findings. In fact, the study had the effect of lending scientific status to stereotypes which, in the absence of comparative data, it could not challenge and to which, unintentionally gave renewed significance.

- 4) Finally, the Ford study utilized a narrow view of that equated culture with attitudes and values only. Today, besides this subjective view of culture, scholars also conceptualize culture as embodied in texts, as actively performed and transformed by social actors, as an institutionalized in domains of power and organization. In his critique of Ford, Billings called attention to the actual social history of the region that challenged the assumptions of economic and geographical isolation in Appalachia’s past and attempted to direct scholarly attention away from attitudes and beliefs viewed in isolations form contexts and toward actual practices, social relations and social structures in the region.