

(3-1) Cautionary Tales: Ford Synopsis

Instructions: Read the following synopsis of Thomas Ford's (ed.) The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey.

Ford, Thomas, et al, eds. *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1962.

In the late 1950s, Dr. Thomas Ford, a University of Kentucky sociologist, directed a large survey and edited a large, multidisciplinary report on the Appalachian Region that was published as *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey* (University of Kentucky Press, 1962). This landmark study, funded by the Ford Foundation and coordinated through Berea College, included an appraisal of many facets of mountain life including population change, family patterns, the economics of farming, industry, and tourism as well as cultural aspects such as religion. Perhaps its most influential chapter was Ford's own contribution, "The Passing of Provincialism" in which he analyzed survey data from a representative sample of thousands of individuals in the region to assess change in their attitudes and values. By attempting to identify core attitudes among Appalachians and ask how they were being changed by processes of cultural modernization, Ford defined a paradigmatic model of Appalachian culture. Additionally, his selection of 190 counties in West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky constituted an important geographical definition of Appalachia. His model was popularized by Jack Weller in *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (University of Kentucky Press, 1965) and utilized by David Loeff in *Appalachia's Children: The Challenge of Mental Health* (University of Kentucky Press, 1971). . In an introduction to Weller's book, sociologist Rupert Vance characterized the approach of both Ford and Weller by writing: "Thus mountain isolation, which began as physical isolation, enforced by rugged topography, became mental and cultural isolation, holding people in disadvantaged areas, resisting those changes that would bring them into contact with the outside world. The effect of conditions thus becomes a new cause of conditions, but the cause is now an attitude, not a mountain" (1965, p. vii). Even though these works are still read and cited today by some scholars, they have been severely criticized by Appalachian social scientists.

Excerpts from Ford

On the survey focus:

"In the early planning of the Southern Appalachian studies, it was decided that some attempt should be made to probe beneath the statistics that measure social and economic changes in order to gain some insight into the relationships between those changes and the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the people affected by them."

On the research question:

"Have the Appalachian people clung to their frontier-agrarian traditions, resisting the philosophical premises of industrial society, or are they willing to accept the social consequences of the new economy whose benefits must be purchased at the price of a radical alteration of an accustomed way of life? Are there evidences of major discrepancies between new modes of behavior and old patterns of thought? If so, what

do these portend in the way of future social problems? And what implications do the beliefs and values of the Appalachian people, whatever they may be, hold for those who are actively working to promote social and economic change in the Region?"

On methodology:

"The means selected for collecting information that would help to answer these questions was a survey of Appalachian residents drawn from a representative sample of households in the Region..."

"There was still the crucial issue of which specific culture traits should be examined. No culture is simply a collection of traits, of course, yet each has its distinctive attributes and emphases. The distinctive themes of Appalachian culture in an earlier day were not difficult to identify, inasmuch as they attracted the attention of practically all who wrote about life in the Region. The problem, then, was to select those which seemed most significant in view of the social changes taking place. Since a major focus of interest was in the persistence of frontier-agrarian values, the selection was largely guided by the literature on the isolated rural highlander in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."

On the attitudes that define Appalachian culture:

"From a considerable variety of themes, a number were chosen for analysis of which four will be discussed in this essay 1) individualism and self-reliance 2) traditionalism 3) fatalism and 4) fundamentalist religion containing a powerful strain of Puritanism..."

On individualism and fatalism:

Ford did not find the rugged, self-reliant individuals he expected. Their positive attitude toward accepting government welfare suggested otherwise, as did their appreciation of the efficacy of collective action. Nonetheless, he speculated that a maladaptive "individualism bordering on social irresponsibility" may have prevented the community development that would have improved life in Appalachia.

While he rejected fatalism as a core cultural trait of the region as a whole, he left open the possibility that fatalism may have served as a "major adjustment mechanism for many of those less able to cope with their life circumstances" (p. 19). The mountaineer's fatalism, he concluded, "is less now than formerly a deterrent to action but rather serves as a psychological insurance against failure that he [sic] half anticipates and half fears will shatter hopes and ambitions raised too high" (p. 31).

On the survey conclusion:

Ford answered "NO" to the question of whether Appalachian people had clung to their frontier-agrarian traditions and resisted modernization. They were, he concluded, "'progressive-minded' and 'achievement oriented' to a surprisingly high degree" (p. 32). He interpreted his data as evidence for "the passing of provincialism" rather than the tenacity of a subculture resistant to change.