

Urban Anthropology and the Southern Mountaineer

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Abstract

As a science Anthropology is a little over a hundred years old. In the nineteenth century, cultural anthropologists pioneered the concept of culture and were primarily concerned with describing and recording the ways of life of so-called primitive peoples, such as the American Indian and the peoples of Africa and Asia. Since World War II, many of these ethnic groups comprise the emergent, independent nations. Meanwhile, the twentieth century has caught up with Anthropology, and less than nine percent of the U.S. labor force is directly engaged in agricultural pursuits. Our cities are filling up with formerly rural peoples, American Indians moving to the city slums and away from federal reservations. Millions of blacks from the rural South have migrated northward to find their dreams of freedom frustrated in the black ghettos of our major cities. This is a story of a less well-studied group of migrants, the southern mountain white, with whom I worked in two different slums for seven years. Since more than eighty percent of all Americans live in or near cities, it is apparent that a subfield of Urban Anthropology will emerge.

Introduction

The 1970 census will probably reveal that about eighty percent of U.S. citizens reside in the metropolitan areas of this nation. There seems to be little doubt that these urban areas now face a bewildering array of extremely serious problems. In an age of growing militancy of all kinds, the need for utilizing the best thinking of all the behavioral sciences toward the solution of these urban crises has never been greater. As one of the behavioral sciences, anthropology ought to be in a position to make many contributions to the solution of urgent national problems, especially those of our cities. In the last third of the twentieth century many detribalized ethnic groups will migrate to the slums of cities in the developing countries in ever-increasing numbers. In our own country, large numbers of American Indians have left their reservations to migrate to Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles. It is quite predictable that they are met by police, employment officials and welfare workers who lack even the most rudimentary training in cultural anthropology. Here is at least one situation in some of our cities for which the professional anthropologist ought to be able to develop a working program of applied anthropology. In addition to growing numbers of American Indians who have migrated to our industrial centers, there are other ethnic groups whose presence in big city slums creates problems for both the cities and the migrants themselves. One of these groups is the southern mountaineer. An estimated two million of them live in our midwestern industrial centers. Cultural anthropologists in the United States have studied the American Indian intensively for more than a century. With the exception of Prof. Marion Pearsall of the University of Kentucky, few anthropologists in this country have been concerned with studying or helping the southern mountain man and his family.

Most of the graduate schools of anthropology in the United States do not offer a course or seminar in Urban Anthropology. One of the themes of this paper is that there should be such a course developed experimentally in departments of anthropology all over the United States. I visualize such a course as being offered in the evenings, not during the daytime hours, so that local government officials, policemen, social workers with no training in anthropology and other urban officials might attend. After I received my M.A. in anthropology I had the experience of working for seven years in the cities of Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio with the southern mountaineer and his children. I often attended workshops and conferences sponsored by the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee in Cincinnati, the purpose of which was to examine all aspects of the culture and urban adjustment of migrants to that city, both black and white. As it became generally well known that I was the only person in attendance with an advanced degree in anthropology, I became acutely aware of the image of anthropology in the United States which is held by such urban officials. It goes something like this. Anthropology is viewed as the study of primitive peoples, especially the American Indians. The best known fields of anthropology are archeology . . . based on newspaper accounts of recent digs and ethnology, usually associated with the paperback books of Margaret Mead. To persons who have never studied anthropology, the field is seen as an impractical, romantic collection of interesting data about exotic, tribal groups. In other words, anthropology as they see it, cannot possibly have any real bearing on the kinds of practical problems such urban administrators and workers face on a daily basis. This is a stereotype, obviously. The point is that this stereotype is widely believed and acted on as though it were a reality by many responsible officials in major American cities. I might add that nothing remotely resembling a course in Urban Anthropology was ever offered at either the University of Cincinnati nor at the University of Dayton. It is quite true, that unlike Chicago or Denver, there are no American Indian migrant groups in the slums of these two cities, nevertheless the southern rural black and the white mountaineer arrived by the thousands every year in these cities. No anthropologist studied these groups.

In my experience with the southern mountaineers in both Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio, I noticed that their behavior varied according to the section of the city in which they lived. I also observed that these patterns of behavior differed in relationship to the length of time these people had resided in the city. One of the critical factors in determining the future adjustment of a mountain family to an urban environment is whether or not the male head of the family is able to find steady employment. The folk class mountain parents I worked with tended to have a median level of education of about eight years of schooling in rural Appalachia. This is a male-dominant subculture in which the future way of life of the entire family is directly tied to the occupational success or failure of the father. Thus the success or failure of the father in finding steady employment in a factory or garage usually determined to some extent the future residence of the family in the city. Some made it to

home ownership in an inexpensive suburb, others, failing to find steady employment for some reason or other, entered the drab, barracks-like existence of welfare-recipients in a low-cost public housing project. By far the largest group of migrant mountaineers are the more recent arrivals to the city, usually found in an ageing slum district which is known as the port of entry.

The basic premise of this paper is that there are three life styles to be found among the southern mountaineers in any urban community. Each life style consists of patterned behavior which differs from that observed in other parts of the city where the southern mountaineer clusters. The port of entry life style will be described first. The description will be as non-technical as possible to avoid cumbersome language and technical jargon. In Dayton, Ohio, for example, the port of entry slum district is the first part of that community with which the newly migrated southern mountaineer becomes familiar, while he is looking for a job. It is here that he hopes to break out of the intergenerational poverty that is choking to death so many of his kinsmen in rural Appalachia. Here is a sketch of the port of entry life style in Dayton.

Port of Entry Life Style

There is no deep sea harbor in Dayton and no plans to dredge one. There is no Ellis Island either to bring migrants from across the ocean in great sailing ships. But like Indianapolis, Dayton has a port of entry for its immigrants, and most of them speak the softly slurred speech of the rural South, not the tongues of Eastern Europe. There is no immigration service in the city to count their numbers but it is known they are both black and white, many of them making less than the poverty level of three thousand dollars a year. You won't find them at the local airport either. Most air travellers are middle class professional and businessmen, not former sharecroppers and out of work coal miners. The migrant to Dayton usually gets here in a wheezing old car full of kids with hungry bellies and maybe a guitar. In the pocket of his faded, blue work shirt is a letter from a second cousin or an uncle with an address near Fifth and Brown or Tecumseh St. in East Dayton. This is in the heart of Dayton's port of entry, a strange new style of life for the southern white mountain migrant. He brings his wife, four, five or six children and about eight years of grammar schooling because he's heard from his kinsman that "they're hirin' on at NCR" or somewhere else. The southern mountain man in the port of entry is most likely to be from one of the mountain counties of Eastern Kentucky. His kinsman on Tecumseh or Brown St. has four or five young 'uns of his own, but he'll not turn down Dayton's newest migrant. They will all pile into one big flat, sleeping on couches, on the floor or in nice weather, maybe some of the kids will sleep out in the car. The family baggage is meagre . . . a few changes of old clothes, a toy or so, some snapshots, a few trinkets and souvenirs of life back home in the hills and hollows of Eastern Kentucky. The family has brought the most important baggage of all with them . . . the culture of the southern mountaineer, unfamiliar with city life.

Most of the families in the port of entry hail from Eastern Kentucky, with a few from rural Tennessee and a handful from West Virginia. The much-abused term "ghetto" hardly applies to this section of Dayton. Given any kind of choice, the migrants from Appalachia would probably decide they would rather live near each other. It's easy to come across friends and kin from the same county just a block or two away. They have the same background, share common values and the old-timers in the port of entry probably offer a lot of practical help to the just-arrived friend or kinsman from Eastern Kentucky. The newcomers soon learn where the flats for rent are, that you usually pay by the week and in advance. They also learn that it's pretty hard to get a Dayton landlord to rent to a family from Eastern Kentucky with a lot of kids, except of course in the port of entry. For a few weeks the newcomer and his family may live with a relative or friend while the father looks for a job. In the meantime his wife may be able to line up a temporary job as a waitress or barmaid, probably the first time she has ever been a wage earner. When this happens, the oldest daughter in the family usually takes the place of the mother, even if it means staying out of school. Mountain men and their wives seldom go out socially together. They each have their friends and acquaintances of the same sex as themselves. In the jargon of the social sciences, these are called reference groups. If a man works on the assembly line at a plant, some of his cronies on a Friday or Saturday night are likely to be co-workers and others may be immediate neighbors. The fathers will probably get together on a regular basis at certain bars and at least one or more of them will be heavy drinkers. The middle class world of P.T.A.s joining the Junior Chamber of Commerce and involvement in community-wide projects is not for the southern mountain man. He is likely to be a union man and if he hasn't backslid, may belong to a storefront church, much like the ones they have down home. His religion is intensely personal, promising immediate salvation and offering the kind of emotional release not to be found in a suburban church. The mountain man is proud and fiercely independent, but not much of a joiner, and he'd just as soon snoopy social workers left him and his family alone, as he doesn't like outside interference.

The economics of the port of entry differs greatly from that of Kettering or Huber Heights in many ways. The southern white migrant is attuned to an existence of weekly payments. Local furniture and clothing stores encourage this deliberately and often charge the migrant family exorbitant rates of interest for their garish, poorly made products. When the credit manager notices that only a few more weekly payments remain, the family is encouraged to add something else onto the bill, whether they need it or not. In an inflationary economy it is difficult for most people to develop budgeting skills even when the family size is small and the income adequate. It is even more difficult for the mountain family, unaccustomed to high prices, not used to handling the unexpectedly larger salary in the city and the attractive lure of easy credit. Slumlords know their customers well in the port of entry . . . all too well. They know the migrant is desperate for a place to stay, that most areas of Dayton will not rent to him on a

monthly basis if he has too many children and uncertain job prospects. Besides, if the migrant gives up in defeat and slips off quietly for Eastern Kentucky, at least the landlord will lose only a week's rent, not a month's rent. It is also true that coming from the grinding poverty of Eastern Kentucky, that the migrant is not likely to have much experience in caring for his own home. Mountain youngsters are apt to be given the same kinds of unsupervised freedom they enjoyed back home, where there wasn't much else to do but roam free in the cool green hills and hollows. A boy or girl in Eastern Kentucky can do a lot of this without getting into trouble with the law, because there are few opportunities for delinquent behavior in such a rural environment. The migrant newcomer to the port of entry doesn't realize he is bringing his children to one of the highest delinquency rate areas of Dayton. In East Dayton, the same casual parental supervision can lead to a police arrest and a referral to the Montgomery County Juvenile Court.

There are few large cities in Appalachia, the rural areas are not heavily policed and a boy who gets into trouble in Eastern Kentucky is not likely to be arrested and hauled into a juvenile court. If a sheriff does arrest a boy in a mountain county he is likely to reprimand him on the spot or take him home where the sheriff will be personally acquainted with the boy's family. If a boy steals from a neighbor the two families are inclined to try to work it out in a personal, face to face manner, without calling in a constable or sheriff. Fights occur at roller rinks, outhouses get dismantled and sometimes tires or gasoline are stolen in rural Appalachia and some of this never gets recorded for the benefit of statisticians. Still, there isn't as much juvenile delinquency in rural Appalachia as in the port of entry slum of any large midwestern city. The sheer numbers and high level of efficiency of the Dayton Police Department ensure that a fair percentage of delinquent children in the port of entry will eventually be apprehended, especially the recidivists or repeaters. The schools, flats, streets and alleys of the port of entry are well known and heavily travelled by an army of police officers, social workers, probation officers and visiting teachers.

When the mountain man brings his wife and children to Dayton he often betters himself financially by going from a chronically unemployed, hopeless way of rural poverty to a well paying, highly skilled factory job. But the real price he pays for pulling up his cultural roots in Eastern Kentucky and transplanting them to the port of entry is often paid by a son or daughter who someday winds up in the Boys Industrial School or the Girls Industrial School. In the city, justice is a vast, faceless bureaucracy of police, probation officers and social workers. They are all strangers and most of them uphold different cultural values from the southern white migrants. The person to person ways of handling family crises back home don't seem to work in the vast, impersonal sterile environment of the city.

Welfare-Dependency Life Style

In Dayton, Ohio there is a public housing project known as Parkside Homes. There are many southern mountaineers residing in this project.

Their way or life is quite different from their fellow migrants in the port of entry. I'll call this the welfare-dependency life style. One of the basic requirements in most cities for welfare benefits is a residency requirement of not less than one year in the city. Unlike some of the migrants in the port of entry, the Parkside Homes mountain family has usually been in the city some time. The family is most often intact, consisting of both parents and anywhere from three to seven children. The presence of the male head of the household in the Appalachian migrant family makes the social structure of these families different from the so-called matrifocal family of the welfare-dependent black families. The role of the wife and mother in projects such as Parkside Homes is not really very different from her familiar role in rural Appalachia or in the port of entry. She is still the housekeeper, cook, laundress, main baby-sitter, nurse to younger children and all the other roles acceptable to mountaineer women regardless of where they live. For some of these mothers, the small welfare check makes possible a more stable supply of food than they have known since their marriage. I did not observe a great deal of voiced discontentment on the part of many mothers in Parkside Homes, even on the many occasions when I had the opportunities to interview them alone. The children young enough to be in school do not seem to be essentially different in values or in behavior from similar children in the port of entry. The tendency to be bored with the sedentary school curriculum is a trait shared by most mountain youth, irrespective of the school attended. Parkside Homes is no stranger to the probation officers of the Montgomery County Juvenile Court and the impression is that the delinquency rate in this small housing project, if it could be accurately computed, is rather high.

In my experience the member of the mountain family most damaged by the welfare-dependency life style is the father. Without a job or even the prospect of a job, the mountain man's life is almost without meaning. For this man Parkside Homes is a prison cell lined with velvet. The reasons why he cannot find employment in the urban labor force vary with each man ultimately. Sometimes it is failing health, in other cases functional illiteracy or alcoholism, sometimes a combination of reasons. The unemployed mountain man, especially if he gets a welfare check, serves unwittingly as the model for the city stereotype of the "lazy, shiftless hillbilly." For some reason the unemployed mountain man is not a target group for an army of civil rights organizations and Federal programs. His problems go unpublicized and as a group, the southern mountaineer is not organized. Many a good old country boy from Eastern Kentucky has arrived in the port of entry in Dayton, Ohio only to find himself in Parkside Homes a couple of years later, the empty years stretching endlessly ahead of him. Under such conditions and especially coming from dry counties in Eastern Kentucky, it is no wonder that so many turn up as alcoholics in the workhouse or Montgomery County Jail. The older teenage son of such a man always has the hope of joining some branch of military service when he drops out of school, especially if the boy cannot find a job. Today's restrictive labor market, with its heavy emphasis on increased formal education, offers even less to the

high school dropout of both races than was true only two decades ago. The mountain lad who drops out of school today at age sixteen faces an even more dismal occupational future than ever. The situation becomes even more hopeless when the armed services demand a high school diploma of potential enlistees. In effect this means that still one more traditional avenue of vertical social mobility is closing to the undereducated southerners of both races. The implications are that millions of our citizens have become technologically obsolete.

The Assimilated Life Style

Above Nettie Lee Roth High School on Hoover Avenue in Dayton, Ohio are two housing developments, namely Townview and the newer, brick subdivision of Western Hills. There, beginning in the 1960s, one will find recently arrived groups of blacks, enjoying their first taste of lower middle class suburban living. But for the most part the majority of residents in these two developments are blue-collar whites and many of them are ultimately from rural Appalachia. A great many of them have spent their apprenticeships in Dayton's port of entry, have successfully found jobs, acquired increases in job skills and salary levels and bought their first homes. I lived in the Western Hills subdivision for two years and observed many of these people at first hand. The style of life of the assimilated mountaineer differs substantially from that of the southern mountain migrant in either the port of entry or in low cost public housing projects. The assimilated mountaineer is drawn more directly into the middle class mainstream of urban life than is true of the other two groups. Housekeeping standards, on the average, are higher than is generally observed in the decaying tenements of the port of entry. There is less juvenile delinquency and very little of the regimentation and hopelessness encountered so often in low cost housing projects. Except for the soft, slurred accents of the southern mountains, the preference for Protestant fundamentalism and country music, the assimilated mountaineer has lost much of his distinctive culture. As long as his job lasts, the assimilated mountaineer will probably never again take up permanent residence in rural Appalachia, although on long weekends, he is likely to return to Eastern Kentucky to visit his kin and friends.

In summary, I have argued that few anthropologists have taken the trouble to work in urban environments and even fewer yet are inclined to study the southern mountaineer, either in rural Appalachia or as a migrant to our industrial centers. To what extent the southern mountain white tends to fall into three life styles in other cities can only be confirmed by further observation. I foresee a real and continuing need for the skills of anthropologists in meeting our urban problems. Does anyone agree?