
A COSMOPOLITAN REGIONALISM

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Since the 1930s, when leading magazines and journals discussed regionalism in its many manifestations, regional approaches to American experience have typically been considered outmoded. In the early 1970s an influential literary critic declared that there were no longer any regions in America (Hoagland 17).

The conventional wisdom came to be that improved means of travel and communication would eradicate any remaining regional differences. Yet in the last years of the twentieth century we have less and less reason to consider regions and regional variations to be isolated, archaic survivals in a standardizing country. For not only in America, but all over the world, people are rediscovering their regions and provinces. Renewed interest in regions has been characterized as world-wide "local centripetalism" (Troike 2). Throughout the 1970s, Joel Garreau discovered, new realities of power and people were making the North American continent into nine different "nations."

According to Harold Isaacs (1), new realities of power and people are causing us to experience "on a massively universal scale a convulsive ingathering of people in their numberless groupings in kinds -- tribal, racial, linguistic, religious, national." Isaacs finds that the relative positions of the individual and the group have shifted in contemporary society, a fact which "touches the bedrock of the whole American system..." While our system is based on the rights of the individual, individuals are coming to new perceptions of themselves as members of groups and claiming rights, not as individuals, but as members of groups. This new relationship of the one to the many has implications of regional perspectives (212-13).

According to Rene Dubos, "we are beginning to witness a revival of regionalism that will complement the global point of view" (10). The world of forty or fifty years from now, Dubos believes, will be One World, but it will include many local worlds within it. We need these local worlds because "human beings require more than health and emotional security." Human life is also made up of "emotional and spiritual satisfactions that have their origins in our contacts with our physical world and social surroundings."

These local worlds are the immediate communities in which we live. They are made necessary, paradoxically, because nation-states, and the industrialized world everywhere, do not provide a sufficient sense of community. E. D. Hirsch stresses this point in *Cultural Literacy* when he writes, "Localism is constantly being reinvented all over the world, since the large, modern national state does not and cannot lend enough social glue or emotional meaning to satisfy the human desire for community" (96).

Our communities are already, and in the future will increasingly be what *Habits of the Heart* refers to as "communities of memory," places whose people are bound together by an understanding of a common past, a

shared history and heritage. The markers for such communities will continue to be, to varying degrees, linguistic distinctiveness -- regional speech and dialectical usage. For just as distinctive speech patterns constitute a boundary that excludes some people, the same boundary includes others and identifies them as members of a speech community. In the tenth canto of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, escorted through a region of hell by Virgil, is overheard speaking in his Tuscan dialect by one of the souls enduring torture there, who calls out to Dante: "O Tuscan! thou, who through the city of fire/ Alive art passing, so discreet of speech: / Here, please thee, stay awhile. Thy utterance/ Declares the place of thy nativity." The condemned soul is so charmed by the sound of his native speech that, for a while at least, he is able to forget the tortures of hell as he converses with Dante. Language, to a significant degree, defines, creates, and maintains a sense of community, as the unknown author of these doggerel lines on the expression "you-all" suggests:

You-all means a race or section,
Family, party, tribe, or clan;
You-all means the whole connection
Of the individual man. (Bartlett 922)

Often we are strangely comforted and reassured by the familiar way a person speaks, even if we disagree with what is said. "Home in the twentieth century," the journalist Dave Hickey observes, "is less where your heart is, than where you understand the sons-of-bitches" (Garreau vi).

There are encouraging signs that American educators are more favorably inclined to give serious attention to regional and local perspectives than they have been within the past half century. In an essay entitled "To Rootless Professors," Eric Zencey, a professor of history and philosophy at Goddard College, signals a changed attitude. For too long, Zencey writes, American college and university professors have fancied themselves "citizens of some mythic 'world city' or *cosmopolis*." As a result, many professors may be "systematically blind to some of the crucial elements of an integrated life -- the life that is one of the primary goals of a liberal arts education -- and to the values of connectedness to place." College and university professors have typically asked their students to "renounce citizenship in the political and biotic communities of their homes and to embrace citizenship in the world city of ideas and culture that their education offers them," without realizing that they are asking students to give up "real and immediate connections in favor of abstraction." Zencey challenges professors to overcome their "prejudice against the local and provincial"; to "take the trouble to include local content in courses"; to "take more seriously the regional branches of professional organizations in our various disciplines"; and to acquire "dual citizenship -- in the world of ideas and also in the very real counties, states, regions and ecosystems in which we find ourselves." Zencey calls for cosmopolitan educators who exemplify "...a successful resolution of the tension between the local and the universal" (72).

Zencey's views parallel those of the poet Gary Snyder, whose recommendations for effective citizenship begin with a consideration of community as a physical place. It is not possible, Snyder writes, to make things better "without our feet on the ground. Stewardship means, for most of us, find your place on the planet, dig in and take responsibility from there." Snyder's conception of citizenship assumes work at the community level -- the

tangible work of school boards, county supervisors, local foresters, local politics. Even while holding in mind the largest scale of potential change. Get a sense of a workable territory, learn about it, and start acting point by point. (101)

The Appalachian region of America is a workable territory: it is a definable place on the planet where citizens can

dig in and take responsibility, where work at the level of local community is compatible with national and international perspectives. The Appalachian region is one of those potential "communities of memory and hope" considered so important by Robert Bellah and the other authors of *Habits of the Heart*. This is especially true because Appalachian America, according to the historian Carl Degler, has an interesting and complex triple history. The region has the double history shared by all Southerners -- a history as Southerners and as Americans. Additionally, southern Appalachia has a history of its own, as neither North nor South, as a borderland America, a place between places.

In southern Appalachia, America's first frontier, many different groups came together: the English and Scotch-Irish, the Swiss, the German, the French, together with Native Americans and Blacks. In southern Appalachia two different economies and cultures mingled: the planter economy and culture of the lowland South, and the economy and culture of the small, independent farmer. This mingling of economies and cultures, nationalities and ethnic groups, made the region, according to the historian T.J. Wertenbaker, "a test laboratory of American civilization" (219).

Southern Appalachia was and still is a test laboratory for American life. In the nineteenth century Cassius Clay considered the people of the mountain South supporters of freedom because they owned land but few slaves (Peck 4, 64). And today one of the things being tested is whether or not -- as Robert Coles suspects -- there is something redemptive for all America in the experiences, the values, the culture, the "community of memory" known as southern Appalachia.

In years past many young college- and university- trained people from southern Appalachia have had to go outside their region to find opportunities in professions. Regrettably, higher education has often effectively cut these persons off from their communities and people. A mother from Blackey, Kentucky, expressed what many parents have felt over the years when she said, commenting on the exodus of young people: "We lose our purpose when we lose our children... they...become citizens of nowhere" (Reck 24).

In recent years, it has been increasingly possible for college- and university-trained people from the regions to find opportunities within southern Appalachia. This may become increasingly the case, for southern Appalachia has many needs -- health care professionals, teachers, nurses, trained professionals in local government, community workers of all kinds. The efforts of humanities educators in the southern Appalachian region can contribute to a "community of memory and hope." As teachers of history, literature, economics, political science, and other disciplines associated with the humanities, the region's educators can help replace "citizens of nowhere" with citizens of somewhere -- citizens of communities constituted by both space and time, and by a sense of history and collective experience, ultimately creating an understanding that individual good and the welfare of the total community are inseparable.

Our writers contribute significantly to our awareness of ourselves as people of a region and of a particular community. For in contemporary America, just as they have done in all times and places, writers function as creators and sustainers of communities of memory. Writers, John Updike has pointed out recently, instruct the community in matters of tribal identity: "Who we are, who our heroic fathers were, how we got where we are, why we believe what we believe and act the way we do -- these are all questions the writer deals with, whether in poems, songs, or stories that serve as memory banks" (23).

A recent collection of stories by Wendell Berry provides a contemporary example of this ancient function of the writer as creator and sustainer of the community. Berry's collection, *The Wild Birds*, bears the sub-title, "Six stories

of the Port William Membership," an allusion to the collection's theme of interdependence, the notion that the people of Berry's fictional Port William are all responsible to and for one another, and to their place. In these stories, not only those who happen to be living at the moment have a say in things, but also the dead and the yet unborn. They are all -- the living, the dead, and the yet to be born of that place -- part of a membership. As a character, Burly Coulter, observes in the title story, "We are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't" (136-37). It is from such communities of memory as those found in the writing of Berry and other American writers with a strong sense of their place and their connection to it that we are most likely to recover and carry forward our sense of community.

These writers may hasten the collective realization that our regions are as much a part of our present -- and future -- as they are of our past. Our regions may yet come to be seen, as Donald Davidson saw them, "as a process of differentiation within geographic limits...predestined in the settlement of our continental area" (243). Both writers and humanities scholars can contribute to a cosmopolitan regionalism whose outlines we are beginning to see -- a regionalism combining real and immediate connections with globally applicable ideas, a regionalism which requires of each of us a dual citizenship in the world of ideas and in our communities, localities, states, regions, and countries.

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