

DELIBERATE
DEPOPULATION
OF
WHOLE AREAS:
A PROTEST



by Albert Solnit

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DELIBERATE
DEPOPULATION

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--PREAMBLE
SSOC Constitution

DELIBERATE DEPOPULATION OF WHOLE AREAS:

A Protest

by Albert Solnit

Hellier, Kentucky in the Cumberland Plateau Coalfield isn't on the way to anywhere. Literally and figuratively up a creek (Marrowbone), its future prospects for growth and prosperity seem to have dwindled away to hopeless traces just like the roads that lead beyond the town. Hellier is another one of America's has-been towns out of joint with our urban-technological times, but like our aged people unable to become productive again or conveniently die.

In the 1940's it was very much alive as the trading center of a string of coal camps, sprawling along the creek and its tributaries, whose combined population reached 30,000. Hellier was a thriving center then with a city hall, fire and police departments, a high school, movie theater, five and dime store, barber shops, pool rooms, and saloons all prospering off the coal miners' dollars.

Today the business center of Hellier is clustered around a rubbish-filled creek. It serves the 100 or so people who remain in town and 200 to 300 others from nearby camps like Alleghany, Henry Clay, and Lookout. It consists of a general store, occupying the former premises of a variety, dry goods and grocery store, and a Gulf service station whose proprietor also gives haircuts and sells cold cuts. Of the public facilities, only the high school survives, the city hall is only a blackened shell. The economic abandonment of the town was acidly described by Harry Caudill in Night Comes to the Cumberlands:

Without previous warning, the miners were suddenly informed that the mine was being permanently closed. They received their final wages and cut off slips. A few weeks later workmen arrived in the camp and began tearing down the tipple. They were employed by a company dealing in used mining equipment and machinery. They withdrew the machines and tracks from the mine, demolished the shops, the coke ovens and commissaries and hauled away virtually everything the company owned excepting only the veins of coal. Within a few weeks, a bustling community was reduced to a silent stunned ghost town.

Stranded Hellier, forlorn and hopeless, symbolizes the coalfield--indifferent and callous economic masters, helpless and despairing people, a narrow and twisting valley dependent entirely on a single industry which has withdrawn its benefits from the families so long dependent on it.

Hellier also symbolizes all the non-metropolitan small human settlements which have been characterized by population decline and drastically altered economic bases due to shut-downs, automation, fewer and larger production units, and market contractions.

The prescription of conventional wisdom offered in the form of technical assistance is usually analogous to the technique of Pre crustes, the mythical innkeeper who fitted his guests to his bedframes by amputation or stretching. This recipe for local regeneration is usually the same for all "depressed areas." It calls for industrialization, attraction of investment capital, more infrastructure like roads, sewers, and other public works, more growth of all sorts to expand the local market and tax base. Communities without the potential to adapt to the formula for stretching their economic base, often find amputation or abandonment of their most vital services recommended by the disseminators of the conventional wisdom.

A most illuminating example of this sort of thing recently took the form of a sharp disagreement between the co-chairmen of the Appalachian Regional Commission. John L. Sweeney led off by confiding to U.S. News and World Report that his views on Appalachian development could be summarized as follows:

1. "Ignore the pockets of poverty and unemployment scattered in inaccessible hollows all over the area..."
2. "Concentrate all the spending for economic development in places where the growth potential is greatest."
3. "Build a network of roads so that the poor and unemployed can get out of their inaccessible hollows and commute to new jobs in or near the cities."

In an address at Hazard, Kentucky, John L. Whisman, state co-chairman for Kentucky retorted--"The people in Washington take a look at Eastern Kentucky and then they go right across the whole business before they see anything that arouses their attention. ...a place that in their opinion has the capacity for growth...There is a general feeling in this country that this is going to be a great urban nation and that everybody is going to live in the cities and that the only place you can really help people is in the cities and that all the investments to make more jobs ought to be put in the cities and then you can move and go to the cities."

The Mountain Eagle of Whitesburg, Kentucky, which reported Whisman's speech concluded "Stated in its simplest terms, the dispute between Sweeney and Whisman involves the question of whether the money will go to the Pittsburghs and the Birminghams or whether an effort will be made to develop the Whitesburgs (pop. 1300) and the Hazards (pop. 6000) and other smaller population centers throughout the mountain chain."

Both sides of this dispute stem from different interpretations of the same gospel, rather than wholly separate approaches. Both propose policies dominated by economic objectives which may have little or no relevance in really aiding a great many of the people and places caught in the web of poverty.

In Eastern Kentucky as well as other depressed areas there are a number of factors which are particularly relevant to the development of guidelines for individual and community improvement when the usual economic goals are largely unobtainable.

1. The U.S. has an economy of considerable abundance. Therefore it should not be necessary to subordinate social and humanitarian benefits in favor of economic returns when extending help to the less fortunate members of the nation. Nor should welfare merely prevent intolerable living levels while reducing the recipients to a common denominator of hopeless dependency in the name of economy and efficiency. The effect of public housing project income ceilings, aid to "deserted" mothers and other welfare shares on family life and individual initiative are too well known to need repeating here. Uprooting people and concentrating them in welfare ghettos for the purpose of achieving economics of scale in dealing out welfare services is just as detrimental a process. Perhaps our social services need re-orienting so that they will work effectively to further human development rather than just placating misery cheaply and efficiently.
2. Nevertheless, a good deal of the population in the smaller communities would be economically marginal wherever they lived. For a number of reasons (family, roots morale, cost of living differential, etc.) they may very well be better off in

their tiny home town, than in a furnished room in the city somewhat closer to their case worker. Blackey, Kentucky, for example, has received about \$100,000 under the Economic Opportunity Act for pilot projects such as the renovation and operation of a community center, special health and education assistance, etc. The community was described by Larry Caudill, resident by choice:

We have at Blackey, a compact community of 403 persons--who virtually have been by-passed by the stream of progress and history.

In our population two groups predominate--the very old and the very young. We do not have a problem on unemployment--it is, rather a problem of the unemployable. Less than ten per cent of our population is normally employable. More than 90 per cent of our population is on the draw--from Social Security, pensions or welfare in one form or another. Thus our chief resource is the human resource.

3. Out migration has been offset by high reproduction rates, so that there has been and will be a continual stream of teenagers entering the labor market from these by-passed communities. The high school at Hellier has seen almost all of its graduates leave the valley for several years, yet there were 150 freshmen entering the school this past fall. Obviously all the Helliers are educating their young for the benefit or detriment of areas with more apparent opportunity. The shortcomings of these impoverished schools will be visited on the cities that receive their human output.
4. Neither the church or local government has acted as an effective social agency in Eastern Kentucky. The first has either no following or no social mission, while the latter has been notoriously fragmented into important and patronage ridden units. Thus family ties are usually considered about the only significant social connection.
5. The wish to live in a small face to face community with people like oneself is not an idiosyncrasy of the Kentucky mountaineers, but is an inherent trait of the American middle-class suburbanite as every urban sociologist and city planner knows.

A good community is therefore one people like to live in--one where the people feel pleased with their neighbors and pleased with the recurring satisfactions obtained from their environment. While there may be dissatisfactions arising from a lack of physical facilities, meeting the need for material improvements like clean tap water indoors will not provide these recurring satisfactions. We should have learned this lesson from the general failure of public housing where the wretched social qualities of the project areas have more than offset the improved physical conditions.

6. The concept of a community as a closely circumscribed and self-contained area inhabited by cultural isolates no longer has any validity. Almost all but the most informed travel over a wide area for shopping, schooling, and services. Saturdays in any county seat in the Cumberlands, one sees dozens of inhabitants from outlying communities driving away from the food stores with the weekly load of food stamp commodities. Even Hellier has a public bus service to larger towns. The mountain population no longer fits the "Snuffy Smith" stereotype, for even the smallest hamlets have their TV antennae and a surprising proportion of people who have tried living in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, or Cincinnati.

The pattern for many mountain migrants has always been to return to the hills of home whenever they come up against hard times in the city. For instance, during the 1958 recession, out of state unemployment claims increased as much as 48% in some labor market areas of Eastern Kentucky and more than doubled in number over the previous year in every labor market area of the region. Some districts reported over forty of such claims per thousand people (1950 census) that year.

One must conclude from this that the concept of community must be expanded in several of its dimensions. Thus a number of small settlements could supplement each other in providing services and support to local enterprise in much the same manner that school consolidation has been achieved. The fact that certain functions depend on the size of the population for their survival, rather than its density is as yet not understood by most people planning for the smaller localities.

7. If the people who do not have the cultural and educational aptitudes for improving their family and community life are left to their own devices to prepare programs to improve their lives, very little improvement will occur. There seems to always be some program that is almost completely dependent on grass roots initiative for its development and operation. This confusion between unassisted self-help and cooperative participation was pointed out when Eastern Kentucky found that all of its self-prepared poverty program applications were rejected because they were not filled out correctly.
8. The Area Development Council method of local improvement attempts is going to be a failure as long as it consists of an endless round of meetings where the governmental representatives wind up talking only to each other about bureaucratic methodology and boring everyone else with the whole idea of participating in any kind of a program. Tom Gish, editor of the Mountain Eagle, summed it up neatly on the occasion of his 300th meeting on economic development in five years. He wrote, "With few exceptions, local civic leaders and local political leaders are declining to participate in the Area Council approach to solving our problems.

This has two results: It places development responsibilities almost totally with state and federal employees in the area (they're the only people who attend council meetings), who through timidity, failure to recognize problems, and a strong sense of self-preservation in the bureaucratic jungle, fail miserably and it isolates local office holders and local citizens from state and federal programs and from the responsibility to see that those programs are effectively operated. The end result is a kind of no-man's land in the field of development, with no real channels for responsibility, for accountability or for action.

Recognition of these realities dictates another approach to aiding the small community with limited or no growth potential. It calls for planning directed toward greater habitability rather than economic return. This means concentrating on the enhancement of the environment and the full development of individuals rather than preparing for the big industrial or tourist development that will instantly solve all of the community's problems.

Virtually every time a truly representative spokesman of a depressed locality has spoken out on what their needs are, the list has been pretty much the same--schools that prepare their children to take a useful place anywhere, more medical care within the

reach of modest income levels, a chance to have better housing within their own range of choice, and opportunities to indulge in activities that give vitality and interest to life in the community.

In essence what is needed is a clear decision by the people and the assistance agencies as to what life in these communities should really be in the absence of a quick and easy economic solution. There must be a joint effort to improve and enrich that life without getting bogged down in the conventional cost-benefit criteria that have transformed TVA into just another profitable public utility. In bettering the environment, new kinds of job opportunities can be created in the kind of things a "Great Society" needs. Surely it's self-evident by now that people respond to visible job opportunities more than to retraining programs.

For example, Eastern Kentucky badly needs reforestation, soil and stream rehabilitation and other long term efforts to reconstruct a maimed countryside. If cost-benefit criteria dictated by the current price for timber can be discarded then such a program in addition to providing new jobs could restore to the nation clean and beautiful open spaces within a day's drive of the megopolitan complexes along the Great Lakes and the Eastern Seaboard. There is in addition, a certain moral imperative to the eradication of the spoilation of the countryside by an industry that evaded any payment for the high social cost of leaving the worked-over hills in a mess while the rest of the nation received cheaper coal as a result.

In addition, while the tangible benefits derived from an increase in tourism may not provide the solution to Eastern Kentucky's income gap, it could provide a basis for badly needed social change by giving the region a population transfusion. In today's mobile society, a large part of the population has graduated from the getting of goods to a search for the surroundings in which they can be enjoyed. Areas which have attracted tourists in previous decades are now becoming centers for immigration. An economic study of the Upper Midwest at the University of Minnesota found a strong pattern of urban dispersal into the distant countryside. It concluded that...urban dispersal is a natural part of the phenomenon of urbanization in the automobile era. It is physically and economically feasible and meets a demand--for the amenities of open space and scenery which the older city has not been able to meet. Land for dispersed urban development--both seasonal and year-around--may be one of the major resources of the Upper Midwest." Richard Mier found "Areas which have amenities that successfully lure tourists have also the capacity to convert some of them into sojourners--persons who stay awhile, entering marginally into the local production system. The sojourners may very well bring enough new enterprise and capital with them to produce full time employment." (An example of this can be found in Raton, N.M., where the owner of an electronics firm moved his business there from Chicago after visiting the town several times on vacations.)

In Eastern Kentucky with its growing proportion of marginal and dependent people, the creation of the social and environmental conditions to attract a healthy influx of sojourners and new residents could provide the leadership and political strength to break the entrenched courthouse-welfare-patronage web that has stifled real improvement there.

In the meantime, the real problem is one of individuals, not economic sectors. In drawing up aid programs for these people, perhaps it's time to start respecting their strong preference to keep their roots in the home community. While relocation to a more accessible location may be desirable, now that no one is dependent on creek bottom corn any more, the deliberate depopulation of whole sections of the countryside

is too inhumane, no matter what physical advantages are held out as a lure. If human capital is properly developed the population distribution problem could be remedied in a few decades. Meanwhile the challenge to create an environment that has grace, vitality, and meaning in our static and shrinking communities remains. We must shed our fixation on seeing all gains as coming from growth and more money. We need to develop a set of ideals with muscles that can grapple with the unoptimistic truths effectively and consistently.

In Hellier, there is a little frame church beside the railroad tracks, which bears a sign whose message is probably the best advice these remnants of an industrial peonage system ever got. It says, "Ye must be born again."

Editor's note: Albert Solnit is an assistant professor of architecture and community planning at the University of Cincinnati. He has traveled extensively in Eastern Kentucky and has accompanied several groups of his students on field trips to the area. He lives in Cincinnati in a neighborhood of Appalachian migrants.

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