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Book Review: Worlds Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America

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Book Review

Worlds Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America (2nd ed.)

Cynthia M. Duncan

2014

New Haven: Yale University Press

304 pages

Paperback: \$49.95 US

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The first edition of *Worlds Apart* quickly became noted as a classic on rural poverty. Here it has been slightly updated for a new generation of readers. The original work, conducted by Duncan who is a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire, was based primarily on 350 qualitative interviews conducted over winter, spring, and summer breaks in the academic calendar from 1990 to 1995. These interviews generally last two hours. Triangulation of the patterns of meaning mined from the transcribed interviews was confirmed through careful readings of the local newspapers and discussions with key informants. Anonymity of locations and people were maintained by a variety of mechanisms, but the resulting story described 40 personal accounts in three different rural areas. This second edition adds nine anonymous stories for each of the three communities from interviews conducted over the winter break in 2013. By page count, less than 29% of the second edition contains new material; however, this is a book that needed to be recirculated. The story it has to tell is essential knowledge for the 21st century.

The three pseudonymous counties are Blackwell, Dahlia, and Gray Mountain. Blackwell was a high poverty county dependent on coal mining situated in Appalachia. Rigid class distinctions between miners and mine owners were exacerbated by the small middle and professional class dependent on the largess of the mine owners. The economic dominance of the few elite mine owners controlled access to jobs as well as local politics. The mine owners' willingness to exact economic penalties on those who were not compliant with their wishes meant that there was a huge gap between the haves and the have nots, and the historical roots of the divide included union busting and coal industry challenges. Investments in basic infrastructure, like school and recreation options for youth, were never developed except for the public school in the county seat that served the wealthy. The poor relied on public assistance and are highly stigmatized by the haves. Twenty years later little has improved. Individual change agents in education, healthcare, and politics remain compromised by the mine owners' interests. The poor are blamed for their lack of initiative and effort. Economic independence from the mine owners remains little more than a dream. Patronage is the norm in this one-industry region, and poverty common. Those who stay are "hunkering down with family" (p. 71) and hoping something changes.

Dahlia is in farm country in the Mississippi Delta with deep roots anchored in racial discrimination. Wealthy White farmers had the same conjoined economic and political power base as the coal miners in Blackwell, adding a racial element to the class distinctions. White farm owners are still called *boss-man* in Dahlia, and the boss-men were just as aggressive as the mine

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owners in imposing economic sanctions on those that dared displease them. Educational opportunity for the Black majority was quite limited in the deplorable public schools, but the private school for White children was well-managed and maintained. Black and White interaction was rare. Small business owners, bankers, farm managers, and locally elected public officials were coopted by the wealthy farmers, but tended to operate with some degree of autonomy as long as they maintained the rigid racial caste rules for behavior. Black teachers, preachers, and funeral home directors cooperated with the White power structure to survive. Twenty years later much had changed in Dahlia. A new casino has broken the conjoined economic-political control by the wealthy farmers. County revenues increased significantly which led to substantial infrastructure improvements for youth recreation and education. A growing Black professional and middle class now dominates local elections and the public school has a reform-minded Black principal; however, the private school for White children remains, and the separation of White and Black social lives has not remitted. Unemployment remains at 20%. The sustainability of recent political change may depend upon strong gambling revenues as the new Black leadership confronts budgetary challenges.

Gray Mountain is a White, remote, working class mill town in New England. Unlike Dahlia's farmers and Blackhill's mine owners, the mill owners in Gray Mountain never developed social separation from the rest of the county residents. Although there was a heritage of mill owner paternalistic benevolence toward the county, they lived in town and their children attended the public schools. Duncan was quite taken with the "equality and civic engagement" (p. 188) in Gray Mountain, and her tone does not have the same degree of critique as she had when describing Blackhill and Dahlia. Poverty was less of a problem in Gray Mountain, and the reader will hear less from them in this section of the book. Duncan was quite taken with the five women who have led social programs to address local problems, so the personal stories tend to reflect successes rather than frustrations and failure. Those who speak of two classes or to Protestant-Catholic divides in social status are mentioned, but in a muted way. Twenty years later, Gray Mountain's mills have closed, threatening the working class majority due to loss of jobs. An influx of recipients of housing vouchers due to the lower cost of living also threatens Gray Mountain's identity. Community elites attempted to redefine the community as a recreational alternative for urban vacationers and second homes, but the workers rallied and hope the new state and federal prisons along with a new biomass plant on the old mill site will enable them to retain their working class egalitarianism.

In the closing chapter, Duncan argued that equality was essential for democracy to thrive, the primacy of horizontal relationships over class distinctions, and the role of the federal government in making investments in public goods like education. She was convinced that outside intervention was necessary to break the economic-political stranglehold on remote rural places like Blackwell and Dahlia in order for the persistence of poverty to be reversed. She adds to these arguments in this second edition by focusing on the new neurological research on early child development that calls for public investments in early childhood intervention.

Duncan is an amazing storyteller. The interwoven pseudonymous accounts and historical material form a compelling mosaic for the reader. This book is a welcome addition to rural studies, of course, but worthy of a much larger audience because the meanings that it suggests need much thought and attention. Americans at this moment in history, and perhaps always, have favored local and state over federal interventions. Although Duncan does not emphasize this point, her

stories illustrate how easily economic/political dominance morphs into systems of corrupt patronage. Poverty is not a natural human condition; it is created by classism and sustained by powerful elites. Power corrupts. It always has and it always will. These stories show us the dangers from the combination of remoteness and single-industry dominance, and the impotence of local, state, and federal political action to counterbalance this evil union. The American people need to understand this danger and work to overcome it. We can do better; we must do better.