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Seeking Higher Ground:
Contemporary Back-to-the-Land Movements in Eastern Kentucky
by
Jason George Strange

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Geography
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Watts, Chair
Professor Michael Johns
Professor Michael Burawoy

Fall 2013

Seeking Higher Ground:
Contemporary Back-to-the-Land Movements in Eastern Kentucky

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Jason George Strange

Abstract

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Contemporary Back-to-the-Land Movements in Eastern Kentucky

By

Jason George Strange

Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Michael Watts, Chair

When I was growing up in the beautiful Red Lick Valley in eastern Kentucky, I saw many families practicing intensive subsistence production. They grew large gardens, raised chickens for eggs and meat, built their own homes, and fixed their own cars and trucks. On the Yurok Reservation, I again saw a profound and ongoing engagement with hunting, gathering, and crafting activities – and then encountered contemporary subsistence yet again when I visited my wife’s childhood home in rural Ireland. When I began my graduate studies, however, I could find little reflection of these activities in either the scholarly record or popular media. When they were noticed at all, they were often targeted for stereotyped ridicule: contemporary homesteaders in the US were either remnant hippies from the ‘60s, or quaint mountain folks lost in time. I already knew that these stereotypes were misleading and insufficient. However, they also highlighted the lack of understanding of a genuinely puzzling phenomenon: why, in the heart of an advanced industrial nation, are so many people still embracing what is, in essence, peasant production?

Using multiple research methods – including in-depth, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, surveys, and archival work – I have found that contemporary homesteading is not a window lingering open upon the past, but a thoughtful and serious attempt to respond to the present. It is best thought of as an unusual kind of social movement. Rather than attempting to foster change by modifying policy or reforming dominant institutions, homesteaders pursue change through a conscious reworking of the economic foundations of their lives. Barbara Epstein calls this a “prefigurative” strategy: it aims to directly manifest – to prefigure – ways of life and relationships that dissidents believe are more appropriate. Because they do not require the visible organizational armature and attention-grabbing strategies of more traditional social movements, prefigurative movements – like the back-to-the-land movement – have often been overlooked by researchers.

Contemporary homesteading is also an unusual social movement in that it attracts participants from widely different socioeconomic backgrounds. In eastern Kentucky there is an acute cultural distinction between two groups, known to each other, somewhat pejoratively, as *hicks* and *hippies*. I have found that neither group is accurately described by the dismissive stereotypes to which they are often subjected. There is indeed a countercultural back-to-the-land movement in the research area that emerged originally out of the radical leftist ferment of the 1960s. But rather than representing a dwindling cohort of aging hippie communards, this movement is comprised of people of all ages; my research suggests that there are more back-to-the-landers in the area now than there were forty years ago. Moreover, it is a movement comprised of a multi-stranded left, in which participants are as likely to have been radicalized through, say, the Quaker tradition or Catholic liberation theology as through the Grateful Dead or Timothy Leary. The stereotype of the “hick” homesteaders is no more accurate. They are not simply country folks carrying on Appalachian subsistence traditions despite the fact that those traditions have lost all practical relevance. Many of them have lived in cities and worked modern jobs, and consciously embrace homesteading in response to those experiences. They, too, are part of a back-to-the-land movement, in the sense of having chosen to live a certain way as a strategy of resistance.

The presence of two groups who embrace homesteading, and yet remain distinct and somewhat distanced from one another provides one of the most profound and difficult questions that my research confronts. While there are individuals who move freely between these two groups, in general they remain remarkably segregated – even when they live side by side along the same country road. What accounts for this cultural distance? Whatever the difference between “hick” and “hippie” homesteaders, it is not straightforward: nearly half of those who can clearly be identified as belonging to the group of “countercultural back-to-the-land homesteaders” are themselves from rural Appalachian families.

By far, the single most consistent difference between these two groups is that one group is not only college educated, but actively and independently literate; members of the other group, with few exceptions, have not attended college and seldom read. But this finding begs another question: why should a difference in the practice of literate intellectuality stand at the heart of profound cultural differences that encompass everything from diet and diction to religious belief and political orientation? The answer is complicated, but it emerges from the recognition that a modern capitalist society is one in which people have profoundly different experiences in all aspects of their lives, from cradle to grave, based on their socioeconomic position. As children, they attend radically different kinds of schools, or are slotted into separate tracks within a given school. After they leave school they have access to different kinds of jobs – shelving products at Wal-Mart, say, versus teaching in a college classroom. When people spend decades of their lives working such jobs, they end up with such divergent life experiences that they might as well be living in different societies. These divided institutional experiences are reinforced in turn by sharp segregation and by the

development of opposition to the culture of those in other socioeconomic positions. The command or lack of literate intellectuality plays multiple roles in shaping and sustaining these starkly distinct life experiences, perhaps most clearly by shaping how a particular individual moves through the positions provided by dominant institutions. Taken together, these dynamics culminate in a forceful process that I refer to as *capitalist ethnogenesis*: a process of cultural differentiation within a single society, rather than through geographic separation within separate, non-interacting or weakly interacting societies.

The homesteading movement contains two groups who turn to the rural landscape for answers to the problems of modern civilization – but how they perceive and interpret that civilization and its problems are markedly different. They are, in effect, responding to different modernities. They turn to homesteading as people indelibly marked by the system they dream of escaping.

To my parents, Jean Perry and George Strange, who built the foundation.
And to my son, Finn Rowan Strange, who gave it meaning.

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A note on primary sources:

All of the names of interviewees and survey respondents have been changed, with a couple a couple of exceptions (e.g., in the case of a public figure). Some interviewees prefer to remain anonymous, but there are also those who would prefer to have their words and stories attributed to them. To those interviewees, my apologies! It saved a lot of paperwork to do it this way.

People do not speak in written prose. They, you know, like start and stop sentences, and, um – you know, they're not sure where they're going when they first start a sentence, and stuff. Just for the sake of readability, I have done minor editing of quotes. I have also not included an apostrophe every time someone said "eatin" instead of "eating" or "cause" instead of "because." Otherwise, it just ends up looking like apostrophe soup.

Interviews are not cited in the text itself; they are cited in the bibliography by the last name of the interviewee.

Finally, unattributed photos were taken by me; many thanks to Jean Perry, Julya Westfall, and Tim Hensley for permission to use their photos.

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CHAPTER 1

WHY ARE THERE STILL ALL THESE HOMESTEADERS?



Figure 1.1. A homestead in the MERJ area, circa 2010.

1. The anomaly of contemporary homesteading

Here in the US, most of us live thoroughly modern lives, removed by countless revolutions from the world as it was mere centuries ago. We reside in gigantic cities, many of us doing work – programming computers, splicing DNA – that didn't even exist fifty years ago. We eat food grown elsewhere by people we will never meet, people whose labor has more in common with that of the computer programmer than that of the farmers of yesterday. The materials we rely upon are industrial, mass-produced, machined, churned out in torrents of identical units; our lives flow upon streams of silicon, rivers of petroleum, deltas of vinyl.

This restless modernity spawns contradicting visions of the future, united only by a certainty that it won't be like the present. In one prominent version, for sale on

magazine racks everywhere, we live in the opening years of the century of Buck Rogers. My ray gun hasn't arrived in the mail yet, but in many other ways, this future is, apparently, already here. I am typing these words on a supercomputer smaller than an apple pie, and I will back them up, in seconds, to a tiny spinning sheet of Mylar on the other end of the continent, sending them down wires spun out of glass that are more transparent than mountain air. Twenty-first century hybrid cars whisper along the street outside my window, supposedly a mere step on the way to vehicles that burn hydrogen without combustion and leave a wake of pure water. Behemoths of steel and carbon fiber chalk the sky miles overhead, as quotidian as clouds.

As I write, visions of unceasing technical progress are being tarnished by a truly global economic downturn, one whose end is not yet in sight. Even affluent professionals in Manhattan and Los Angeles pause over their iPhones, worried about basic questions they had not asked in a long time. Still, many Americans see the future as a more modern version of the present (albeit with an ironic proviso or two): if we don't blow ourselves up first or ruin the climate, our grandkids will attend kindergarten in virtual reality and live to be a hundred-and-fifty. They shall inherit, as the IBM commercials proclaim, a smarter planet.

So if this is the world we live in, and if the optimistic version of the future is a brighter, smarter, more advanced version of the same, why are there still all these people out in the woods acting like peasants? This doesn't look like a world in which peasants and subsistence production have a place. Yet here in one of the most technically-advanced nations on earth, in the heart of industrial capitalism, hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps millions, are devising their own shelter, eating food they grew in the sweat of their brows, and yearning for even more radical forms of subsistence – striving, it seems, to swim backwards against the currents of progress. When I was growing up in the beautiful Red Lick Valley in eastern Kentucky, I saw many families practicing intensive subsistence production. They grew large gardens, raised chickens for eggs and meat, built their own homes, and fixed their own cars and trucks. During my adolescent years, living on the Yurok Reservation in Northern California, I again saw a profound and ongoing engagement with hunting, gathering, and crafting activities. This continued pursuit of rural subsistence is a striking anomaly. Why do people do it? That is one of the main questions that this dissertation attempts to answer.

Contemporary homesteading is often dismissed by lay people and scholars alike – when it's noticed at all – with clichéd pictures and explanations. This dismissal has several components. First, unless you have first-hand experience, it is easy to think that only a dwindling handful of people are involved. Homesteading then appears to be a fringe movement, like the Moonies or base jumpers, and thus doesn't really *need* explaining. As a corollary, homesteading can appear to be a fringe movement geographically as well. In this view, it is only found in certain out-of-the-way places – a few old-timers in the remote hollers of Appalachia, some aging communards on the back roads of Humboldt County.

Second, according to the stereotypes of homesteading, only two kinds of people do it: “hicks” and “hippies.” This claim that there are two major groups of homesteaders actually does have merit. I have encountered the distinction all across the US, in every location in which there is any hint of ongoing homesteading, from Vermont to northern

California to the hill country of central Texas where, a friend told me with a chuckle, “You’re either buried with your crystals or your shotgun.” However, while there does appear to be, roughly speaking, two main groups of active homesteaders in the US, they are generally misunderstood, perceived through a fog of belittling stereotypes. One group is seen as quaint rural folks, clinging to the vestiges of a lifestyle that used to make sense but is now anachronistic. In the disparaging words of one group of left-wing economists, they are “oddball ‘mountain men’” who are “trying (mostly in vain) to live according to...antiquated precepts” (Bowles et al. 2005: 148). The other group, according to the stereotype, is comprised of hippies from the late sixties and early seventies, privileged rebels who dreamt naïvely of bucolic utopias. Here’s a typical – and typically cynical – belittling:

In the 1960s, when it was cool to own beads and sandals, but little else, an entire generation of hippies was spared a lifetime of hanging out in coffee houses when a gnarled finger poked out from a cloud of marijuana smoke (one can only guess) and pointed the way: “Hey man, back to the land.” (Lavinge 1984)

To begin to unravel the anomaly of modern homesteading, we must first raise it back to the level of anomaly, by overturning such hasty, dismissive conclusions. Like many clichés, these are not entirely incorrect. But they blunt our curiosity by replacing what ought to be an open question with stereotyped, presumptive answers.

2. The MERJ area



Figure 1.2. Wolf Gap holler, in southeastern Madison County, circa 1980. (Jean Perry)

There are many possible ways to investigate contemporary homesteading. One could, as Jeffrey Jacob did, gather addresses from a homesteading magazine's subscription list and send a written survey through the mail to several thousand back-to-the-landers all around the country (Jacob 1998). I have chosen to focus closely on the story of homesteading in a particular place: an area of eastern Kentucky comprised of the four neighboring counties of Madison, Estill, Rockcastle and Jackson. Some locals, for convenience, refer to this as the "MERJ area," and I will follow their example. Straddling the boundary between the Bluegrass and the Cumberland Plateau, the MERJ area presents an idyllic face. The northwestern corner, in Madison County, is a postcard of rolling grassland laced with country lanes and shaded creeks. In its southern and eastern reaches, the Appalachian Mountains begin, rising as a series of steep knobs and ridges, clothed in oak, poplar, and cedar. The valley floors are carved into a jumble of small tobacco and corn plots and cattle pastures, with gravel roads winding up to homes hidden in the narrow hollers.

Madison County, lying mostly outside of the Appalachian Mountains, serves as an economic hub for the MERJ area. It is the largest and most affluent of the four counties, with two large towns in Richmond and Berea and a population of 80,000 – five times larger than that of the other three counties, which average about 15,000 people each. These other three – Jackson, Rockcastle, and Estill – lie entirely within the Appalachian Mountains, and are predominantly rural. For a number of reasons – mountainous terrain, historic lack of wage labor, indigenous know-how, cheap land and low property taxes, absence of significant coal deposits – this part of Appalachian Kentucky has a long history of small-scale rural subsistence production, albeit entangled with market farming, petty commodity production, tenantry and sharecropping, and migrant wage labor (Allebaugh 1979; Ellis, Everman, and Sears 1985; Van Willigen and

Van Willigen 2006). Although still present, this historical peasant economy began to decline sharply with the economic boom and employment opportunities generated by World War II. Not long afterward, beginning in the late 1960s, the region also began to see an influx of back-to-the-landers, often buying mountain farms that had lain fallow for a decade or two. Much of this back-to-the-land activity was centered around the college town of Berea, which like many college towns is a center of youthful bohemia and literate liberalism (Gumprecht 2003). Because of this confluence of factors – the presence of a college with strong craft and folklife traditions, a history of subsistence production, rural independence, and cheap land – the area around Berea has a rich tradition of back-to-the-land activity.

Because the MERJ area is located within Appalachia, let me say something about that region as a whole. Mainly, it's vast. It is roughly defined by and contiguous with one of the oldest mountain ranges on the planet. At half a billion years old, the Appalachians have been worn down over time; the highest peaks are rounded with age and barely lift their heads more than a mile above sea level. Nonetheless, this is a region of steep mountainsides and deep valleys, visible from space as a series of green wrinkles flowing north to south across the eastern side of North America. It is also a region of striking natural beauty, and one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. Just to give one example, the Great Smoky Mountains, because of their astonishing diversity, have been designated an International Biosphere Reserve. "No other area of equal size in a temperate climate can match the park's amazing diversity of plants, animals, and invertebrates," writes the National Park Service. Over 17,000 species have been recorded there; but scientists believe there may be "an additional 30,000 to 80,000" as-yet undocumented species (National Park Service 2012).

The presence of the Appalachian Mountains is perhaps the only incontrovertible fact about the region. Over the past two hundred years, definitions of Appalachia – including the question of where to draw its borders – have continually shifted. Sometimes those definitions have included the northern sections of the mountains; sometimes they have not. Often those definitions have turned on cultural characteristics supposedly endemic to the region – but there was seldom agreement as to what these characteristics were, and careful researchers have always rejected such sweeping claims. In Richard Couto's pithy summary, "Appalachia denotes a distinct cultural region of contradictory and incorrect popular conceptions focusing on quilts, dulcimers, and images of universal poverty and hardship" (Couto 2002: 3).

Again, perhaps the only solid thing to say is that, in human terms, the region is vast. According to the current boundaries, drawn by the Appalachian Regional Commission (a partnership between the federal government and a number of state and county-level governments), Appalachia stretches across thirteen states, from New York to Alabama, and is home to over 23 million people. It includes Pittsburgh, which by 1900 was an industrial mecca, as well as Jackson County, Kentucky, which was dominated by peasant farming up until the eve of World War II. It includes Cherokee, North Carolina, home to the Eastern Band of that tribe, as well as the suburbs of the Sun Belt boomtown, Atlanta. In short, while it is possible to do an ethnographic study *in* Appalachia, it is not possible to do one *of* Appalachia. That would be akin to studying a particular neighborhood of Boston, and then writing a book about New England.



Figure 1.3. Appalachia. (Appalachian Regional Commission)

In recognition of this diversity, Appalachia is often broken down into three sub-regions, north, central and south. Eastern Kentucky lies wholly within the central region, which is distinguished, in part, by a unusual degree of rurality and by especially intense, long-standing poverty. “Not coincidentally,” Robert Baumann observes, “central Appalachia contains some of the roughest terrain of the Appalachian Mountains and is also where the majority of Appalachian coal is mined” (Baumann 2006). Eastern Kentucky is infamous for this coal industry, with its horrible history of violent labor practices and environmental recklessness. This industry continues to generate controversy because of its turn to “Mountaintop Removal Mining,” where instead of digging down to remove layers of coal from the heart of an intact mountain, the entire top of the mountain – everything above the coal layer – is simply demolished, and shoved into the neighboring creek valleys.

Yet again, there is diversity within this sub-region. For example, while severe rural poverty is common in the MERJ area, there is no history of large-scale coal extraction. In much of eastern Kentucky, a discussion of contemporary homesteading would have to focus on the history of the coal industry; in the MERJ area, that’s not the case. So while this study is located in Appalachia, there is no attempt to make general claims about Appalachian people, Appalachian culture, Appalachian politics, or dulcimers.

I am confident that the findings in this study apply to the MERJ area. Do they apply elsewhere? I suspect that to a surprising extent, they do – that they are just as likely to be relevant in, say, Humboldt County in northern California as they are in the

coalfields of Hazard County, just a few miles to the east. The social processes that I focus on in this dissertation – intense capitalist exploitation, cultural differentiation driven by the unfair distribution of resources, popular unease with technological modernity, attempts to resist exploitation by turning to subsistence production – are widespread phenomena, unfolding in particular combinations and permutations across the US, and indeed, around the world.

3. Two contemporary homesteaders

3.2. James Hamilton

Let's begin by visiting a couple of contemporary homesteaders.

At the steep end of a MERJ area holler, James Hamilton was born in a log cabin without electricity or running water.

I was born up there at Grandpa and Grandma's house, and then they stayed there I guess until I got healthy enough, strong enough to travel, and went home. But they did pack me home on a horse, right on a saddle, and it was the *awfulest* blizzard that you ever, I reckon that's *ever* been in this country, I mean zero and below zero temperatures, and a huge snow. I reckon it snowed every day for weeks.

He was raised deep in the country in Kentucky and western Tennessee. His parents were also from the country, but early in their marriage had moved away, like so many Appalachian families, to find wage labor – or, as they call it in the mountains, “public work.” After several years, they decided it was better to live in the older ways, and moved back to the country, bought land, and took up a life of homesteading, living cheaply and producing most of what they needed. James grew up working on the farm, feeding the animals, helping his father craft handmade rocking chairs for sale, and gathering ginseng, goldenseal, and Mayapple. But mostly, he said, he ran wild in the woods. By ten years old, he was spending days alone in the forest, coon hunting with his walker hounds and his pony. He never set foot in a schoolhouse. He has never been to a doctor. He has no social security card, driver's license, or formal institutional existence whatsoever.



Figure 1.4. A homesteader getting ready to log with a team.

This sounds like a story from long ago. But James was born in the blizzard of 1978. He is 34 years old, strong and energetic but no longer lean, a handsome man with dark hair and a ready laugh. He has a thick country accent that, unlike the television stereotype, strikes a mainstream American ear – like many British accents – as dignified. He is one of the sharpest people I have ever known, and often unleashes better sentences on the fly, verbally, than I can build painstakingly on paper. His diction is his own, full of words like “dramastically,” a melding of dramatic and drastic, which you won’t hear anywhere else.

When he turned fourteen, he says, “I went after the money just as hard as I could go,” turning his practical skills and hardiness into a paycheck. He began cutting tobacco, which is backbreaking work. You bend low to cut the tobacco plants – which are as tall as a grown man – at the base, then skewer each plant by its stalk onto a long tobacco stick; the sticks allow the plants to be hung in a barn to cure. It’s piece work, “Paid by the stick. You put six stalks, per stick, that paid ten cents per stick.” The faster you work, the more you get paid. “The best I could ever do, I could make a hundred bucks a day. I’d have to lay down a thousand sticks. I was pretty dadgone tough but that would wear me out. It’d take pretty hard hours.”

When he was eighteen, he bought a portable sawmill and tractor and began to cut lumber for a living. One of his first jobs was “sawin out daddy’s house.” Along with his father, uncles, and cousins, he cut a house out of pines that had fallen in a heavy winter snow, and within a few weeks they had built a lovely two-story house nearly from scratch. His parents still live in this house, at the end of a mile-long drive through a creek, far from the blacktop, the grid, the phone lines, and fast living. Since then, James has worked off-and-on in carpentry and milling, taking time to travel around the US. In New York City, he saw “that big statue thing” in the harbor, and concluded that the city was “a great big square box of rats – you can keep it!”

Six or seven years ago, he married a young woman from Tennessee, and they bought a few acres out near his parents. You stop on a gravel lane, open a cattle gate, leave the power and phone lines behind, drive through a creek – a different creek than the one on the way to James’ parents – open another cattle gate, and drive across a quarter mile of flat pasture and vegetable garden to the house. Thick woods slope up to either side of the long, narrow field. James’ portable sawmill is parked by the barn in a mound of sawdust. The yard is mowed right down to the creek, where they get their drinking water. The house is three stories, with a full basement, a railed porch that wraps around all four sides, huge exposed beams on the inside, and a stunning stone chimney and fireplace. James built most of it by himself, from the foundation to the ridge cap, along with some help from his family. He laid the block, milled out the lumber, framed it, and finished it – in far less time than it took me to write this dissertation.

As I write, James and his wife are selling their property. It was such a beautiful home, I couldn’t figure out why they would sell it. Turns out, there wasn’t enough acreage for them to really be independent – to raise some beef every year and keep a milk cow, to have a big farm pond, to grow hay and corn. With what they make from selling this house, they’ll be able to buy the property they want – and James will craft another homestead in the time it takes most of us to flop out of bed and crawl to the coffeemaker on a hard Monday morning.

3.3. Margaret Bingham

Margaret Bingham and her husband Joshua Spearman live on eighty acres way up in the hills of Jackson County, nearly a forty-minute drive from Berea. Margaret is a thoughtful, attractive middle-aged woman, an avid folk musician and dancer. She recently finished her doctoral degree and teaches at one of the local colleges, while Joshua splits his time between skilled manual labor for pay – like building dry stone rock walls – with intensive homesteading on their property. Being busy with her professional job, Margaret participates as she is able on the evenings and weekends. Nonetheless, they are both serious homesteaders.

They bought their land in 2000, an abandoned farmstead complete with a collapsing “shack,” which “was being used to strip tobacco.” Originally, it was just a simple, one-room farmhouse, “a board-and-batten, no-insulation house.” Margaret laughed ruefully as she recalled their original plans: “I had this idea that we would, you know, just make do in the house, and build another one, and we’d have a new house in five years or so.” A decade later, and the rescued and revived shack is still their home. Joshua jacked it up and erected new piers underneath, laid new water lines from the spring, ran plumbing, and added a couple of chimneys. They bartered with a neighbor to rewire the house. They built a log addition, a single “great room” big enough for live music and dancing.

In addition to rebuilding the house, Margaret and Joshua tackle kinds of subsistence production, like animal husbandry, that many back-to-the-landers shy away from.

We’ve got horses, and chickens, sheep, rabbits, pigeon, which we eat – the squab. We had quail, somebody gave us some quail, and we kept them for

a while and we got eggs, and then we finally put them in the freezer once they stopped laying. Those are amazing little creatures. Those little things can lay a lot of eggs. They laid over three hundred eggs a piece without quittin. Josh butchers [our livestock and poultry] himself, and I help some, but he does most of the killing, and we send off the hides, and get them tanned, and then we use those as gifts or ourselves, use the skins. He shears our sheep. And we spin our own wool and I knit with it, or weave; we have a loom and so we're making rugs right now.

To an outsider, Margaret and Josh would be easy to mistake for native country folks, given their remarkable skill with rural subsistence. But neither one is from the country. Margaret was born in 1958 in Washington, DC and lived in a number of different cities in the northeast – New York, Arlington, Baltimore – during her childhood. She had professional, well-educated, politically engaged parents. Her mother worked as a secretary and teacher. Her father was an electrical engineer and minister, often working in racially integrated churches and supporting the early Civil Rights movement. “He would work as engineer for a while, and then he'd take a church, and then...something would happen, or he would decide to go back to the government work, and then he'd get the interest again. He wanted to do something that would help sort of change the world.”

Even though she grew up mostly in cities, Margaret was interested in country living from a young age. As a child, she got a taste of it on her grandparent's farm.

My grandmother and aunt and uncle lived in North Dakota, on the family farm. And my grandmother was in a nursing home by the time I really remember her. But we would go out a few times. I remember about three different trips where we drove cross country and stayed in the family farm, and I loved that – the feeling of knowing my family roots was really always very important to me, and when I was there I always wanted to do the farm work. I wanted to be part of farm life.

When she graduated from high school, she recalled, “I looked for a college that was in a more rural area; I wanted to be in more country.” As a student at Hampshire College, in Massachusetts, she was part of the sixties counterculture in terms making dissenting lifestyle choices, such as deciding to be a vegetarian for a time, but was not excited about the drugs and partying that some college students pursued. She was especially active in outdoor activities, such as learning to kayak and rock climb – but was also seriously committed to environmental activism, cutting her teeth as an activist even before college.

But because I was interested in environmental chemistry or forestry at that time I was involved in high school with the hikology club. Where we would do recycling things – this is in the mid-seventies – we would do other projects related to trying to eliminate pollution or whatever, and then when I went to Hampshire I was very involved in the anti-nuclear protests. There was a nuclear power plant that was to be built up in New

Hampshire, called Seabrook. And so I went on a couple of those protests, and all that. Joined the Clamshell Alliance.

Margaret's activism was fueled by her educated awareness of the seriousness of environmental issues – by “Silent Spring and all those things that started coming out then.” But another set of texts that informed her dissent was the folk music of the sixties.

The music sparked something. Those are my texts, really. Because I learned guitar when I was twelve. That was really what it was. I mean, it was listening to Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul, and Mary – and Pete Seeger especially and Arlo Guthrie were my heroes, and John Denver and Cat Stevens. That was a lot of the text, actually.

In the early 1980s, Margaret applied for a semester-long program in Boone, North Carolina, “studying Appalachian culture – and it was about music and quilting, strip mine protests and all these things that were so important to me.” She got into the program, and has lived in Appalachia ever since. All of the different strands of her life came together in the Blue Ridge mountains in a way they never had before: her desire to live in the country and be part of farm life, her commitment to environmental activism, and her love of folk music, among others. “I started driving up that mountain,” she recalled, “it was like I was coming home. I still get emotional about it.”

It was a way of bringing everything together. Academic interests, stuff that feeds you spiritually, living in the country, being with other people, community, religion's in there. All those things, and it was just great. I never looked back.



Figure 1.5. One homesteader's outdoor kitchen; this was also her home while she built a more solid house.

4. How would we know homesteading if we saw it?

James and Margaret offer us an initial taste of contemporary homesteading. But do they offer a definition of it? What is homesteading? How would we know it if we saw it? This is the first and most basic question we must answer, before we can answer any other questions, such as how many homesteaders there are or where they're at or what kind of people they are. It is also a question that is much more difficult than it may seem at first glance.

For example, it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that growing a good portion of the food you eat is a necessary part of homesteading. If you don't have a big garden and laying hens and a milk cow, can you really qualify as a homesteader? But measured in dollar bills, producing your own shelter can easily be more important in the contemporary US than growing your own food; it takes an awful lot of tomatoes to add up to a mortgage, even if they're Brandywines. I have met many individuals and families that have built their own homes, but don't bother with producing food, or only produce trivial amounts. It appears, based on their experience, that it's possible to be a serious contemporary homesteader, using intensive subsistence production to radically change your lifestyle, without ever gardening.

Or consider a family that has changed their lifestyle not so much by producing things for themselves, but by reducing their consumption. One middle-aged couple, Ben Carvajal and Gwendolyn Pine, live in a teepee in the woods on someone else's property.



Figure 1.6. Cheap living quarters.

They gather firewood, haul water, and compost their excrement, but otherwise they aren't really engaged in subsistence production any more than an average couple in the US. Their frugality, however, is not passive. It is an active and conscious strategy which in the modern US represents a difficult accomplishment – one that supports a kind of life radically different than the mainstream. Moreover, the same strategy of limited consumption was as crucial to the success of historical homesteaders as their skill in gardening or silviculture or animal husbandry. So perhaps we should define homesteaders as much by what they don't do as by what they do.

On the other hand, James Hamilton's house will probably sell for several hundred thousand dollars, even in today's collapsing real estate markets. Although it draws water from a cistern and electricity from the sun, the Hamiltons live in modern comfort in this home, without a whole lot of frugality – but it sure seems to me like they should count as homesteaders.

Another thing we should do here is distinguish homesteading from other economic categories that are related to but don't quite map onto homesteading – categories that can easily slide in and confuse us if we're not careful. One of these categories is the "informal economy." Informal economic activities are simply those that don't generate any kind of official paper trail. Because there is so much focus on the formal economy – just look at the economic content of the evening news or the business section of the newspaper – this is another kind of economic activity that, like homesteading, ends up being overlooked, which is why economic scholars found it necessary to invent a specific term to describe it. But the category of the informal

economy ends up holding all sorts of dissimilar endeavors. Canning your own salsa is part of the informal economy, but so is getting paid under the table to be a Long Island nanny, giving your old Honda Civic to your sister, or smuggling go-fast boats full of cocaine into the Everglades. It would be easy to say that homesteading is one part of a much larger informal economy, but while many homesteading activities are informal, not all of them are. Some homesteaders, for example, build homes that are funded through a mortgage, fully permitted, and insured.

A category that is even more closely related to homesteading is variously referred to as “subsistence” or “domestic” or “household” production. This refers to all the labor that the members of a family do, typically in the home, to help meet their needs – everything from changing diapers to putting the groceries in the fridge to cleaning the maple leaves out of the gutters. Giving this kind of work its own explicit category has been one of the most useful and politically important accomplishments of the social sciences in the past few decades. Without such a label, it is difficult to *not* think of “the economy” as something like “all that stuff that corporations do,” or “where money flows” or “the Dow Jones.” For a long time, the dominant definitions and measures of economic activity completely overlooked domestic production: if it didn’t make dollars flow, it wasn’t important. Because women tend to do more domestic labor, this way of seeing economics was – and is – inherently patriarchal. And because domestic labor is such a crucial part of our wellbeing, this way of seeing is, like many patriarchal perceptions, pathetically wrong. We could live comfortably and indefinitely without any number of the major corporations that get all the press – Disney, Microsoft, the Corporation-Formerly-Known-As-Blackwater – but we wouldn’t last long if no one cared for newborns or prepared meals, or live in comfort if no one washed clothes or cleaned the kitchen.

As with the category of the informal economy, household subsistence production is a large category that contains many different things, including most of the activities that make-up homesteading. But subsistence production and homesteading are not identical categories, and it is important to distinguish between them. Every household – even an apartment full of twenty-year-old bachelor gaming nerds – engages in domestic labor. In a home with children (or standards) this labor demands substantial amounts of time and energy – not uncommonly, on a par with the effort given to paid labor (Ironmonger 1996; Madrick 1997). Here we’ve encountered yet another example of the difficulty of defining homesteading. If homesteading involves subsistence production – producing the things you or your family need, rather than getting them from someone else – then aren’t we all homesteaders? To some extent, the answer is yes. Put another way, the takeover of subsistence production by the expansion of capitalism and industry and consumerism has not proceeded nearly as far as economists lead us to believe. Even if we don’t build a cabin in the woods, we live in a mixed economy in which subsistence production continues to play a major role, both for specific families and in the economy as a whole.

Maybe we’ve cleared away enough brush to try for a clear, straightforward definition. You count as a homesteader in the contemporary US, let’s say, *when you engage in kinds and/or degrees of household subsistence production above and beyond the norm*. This is a fuzzy definition. It does not unambiguously distinguish, in all cases,

homesteaders from non-homesteaders. It does not inscribe a sharp line between the two. Because we are talking about a complex continuum of lifestyles, and not things that are inherently discrete, like isotopes or number sets, this is the kind of definition we *ought* to aim for. When my wife sews a pair of pants for our son, are we thereby engaged in homesteading? By this definition we are – but only a tiny bit. If that was all we did, I wouldn't bother interviewing us for this dissertation. However, because homesteading is consciously pursued, you often find that a given household doesn't embrace just one or two homesteading tasks. They build their house *and* grow vegetables *and* fix their cars *and* self-medicate *and* home-school their kids. This makes the above definition less fuzzy in practice than it sounds on paper: we're not just talking about households that happen to lie at the tail end of an essentially random bell-curve of domestic labor effort.

Note that according to this definition, an individual or family does not have to produce everything they consume in order to count as homesteaders. Sometimes people I consider serious homesteaders subscribe to this heroic definition. "Oh," they'll say, as we sit in the house they built drinking tea from the pottery mugs they threw, "I'm not a homesteader, I have a job in town and I don't grow all my own food." This absolutist definition has major problems. Throughout human history, few families have ever relied on absolute, pure subsistence production. Most have been involved in many different kinds of economic exchanges outside of the household (Kearney 1996; Wolf 1966). It does not make sense to therefore conclude that household subsistence production has not been important. A similar argument applies to contemporary homesteading in the developed world. Very few if any families achieve pure subsistence, but many families take subsistence seriously and have radically transformed their lives by pursuing it.

This definition helps us decide who counts as a homesteader and who doesn't. It allows us to distinguish different degrees or intensities of homesteading, but it does not by itself let us discern different *kinds* of homesteaders. Do they homestead in the city or the country? What kind of work do they do to earn cash? Did they grow up homesteading? Are they skilled at it? How frugal are they? Deciding who the homesteaders are is just the first step in understanding why people choose to homestead here in the heart of capitalist modernity. And, as we shall see, the differences among homesteaders are crucial to answering the question of why they homestead.

4.1. How many homesteaders are there?

Now that we've got a fuzzy definition of homesteading, we can ask other basic questions. Perhaps the second most basic question is how many homesteaders are there in the US today? The commonly assumed answer – not many – is a crucial factor supporting the common view that homesteading is an unimportant phenomenon in the contemporary US. The correct answer is simple: nobody knows. There is little relevant data. There is no census that tracks the activities that typically comprise homesteading. Aside from a question now and then on gardening as a leisure activity, the General Social Survey doesn't ask about it. State-level economic censuses don't cover it. With a single exception, no scholar has done a nationwide survey of homesteaders, and that survey only looked at several thousand subscribers to a counterculture homesteading magazine (Jacob 1997); as valuable as that survey is, it was not designed to answer the question, how many homesteaders are there? This lack of data is itself partly a product of the

assumption that homesteading is pursued by an insignificant number of people; the two reinforce each other. But, as the saying goes, lack of evidence is not evidence of lack. If no one knows how many homesteaders there are, then it doesn't make sense to assume that there aren't many.

Because this dissertation is based on research in one location, I can't answer the question either. But can we come up with any estimates? Very roughly, the cliché is correct: most contemporary Americans are not serious homesteaders. Of course, if homesteading is defined as subsistence production above and beyond the norm, it is true by definition that most Americans are not homesteaders. A less circular way of saying the same thing, then, is that while most Americans do engage in substantial household production like cooking and childcare, only a minority tackle a suite of additional, non-trivial subsistence tasks like building their own home, growing a lot of their food, or homeschooling their children. Serious homesteading is something pursued by a minority, and probably a small minority. But in a nation of three hundred million, a small minority may comprise millions of people. Moreover, a particular experience or perspective cannot be assessed on the grounds of frequency alone. In the case of contemporary homesteading, we are dealing with a particular strategy of social critique. Is it trenchant? Is it effective? What does it tell us about modern civilization? These questions cannot be answered merely by noting that most people are not homesteaders. In conclusion, while serious homesteading is a minority affair, there is little ground for presuming that it is restricted only to a tiny minority, or that it is, because of its frequency, unimportant.

4.2. *Where are they?*

Another basic part of the dismissive cliché is that homesteaders are only located in a few places, places which are, like peasants themselves, often seen as inherently backward – like the supposedly isolated hollers of Appalachia. Again, this claim has a certain verisimilitude: in many parts of the US, particularly in the cities, there doesn't appear to be much homesteading going on. (This is a contrast to many parts of Europe – the backyards of suburban Prague, for example, are filled with gardens and fruit trees.) But this is a set of open questions buried beneath a hasty answer. One of these open questions is, what does homesteading look like? What would you look for? Log cabins? A man in homespun plowing a field behind a mule team? Laura Ingalls' white bonnet bobbing in the vegetable patch? If there isn't much homesteading to be seen, maybe the problem is with the seeing.

Based on the definition offered above, homesteading does not have any one particular look. It could be a log cabin in the woods with deer pelts hanging from the porch beams, but it could also be an affluent suburban home that turns out to have been built by the family that lives in it. It is easy to think of homesteading as something that ought to be visible, and that we can therefore locate based on how certain landscapes *appear*. In practice, it is difficult to say where homesteading is and where it isn't, just by looking. In particular, it is often not entirely absent even in places where there is no visible evidence of it – no gardens, no cords of firewood, no chicken runs, no bonnets.

Here's an example of misleading appearances. If you get off the freeway and drive the old highways through almost any part of the rural US, you will see what looks like poverty – a parade of picturesque rural dilapidation, such as a run-down trailer with a

half-finished frame addition jutting off one end, surrounded by a half-dozen busted cars jammed in the yard. As the joke says, you know you're in Kentucky – or Georgia, or Montana – when the houses are on wheels and the cars are on blocks. I once drove across the US with a friend from Estonia, who kept pulling over on the side of the road to snap pictures of “good shacks,” to prove to his friends in Europe that there was serious poverty in the US. From Missouri to Kansas to Idaho to Oregon, there was no shortage of good shacks. But what were we seeing? Abject deprivation? Or intentional frugality and subsistence production? Perhaps some mix of the two? You can't say based on appearance alone.



Figure 1.7. Homesteading? Or poverty? Or both? (Top: Jean Perry; bottom: Jason Strange)

These observations are intended to forestall the hasty answer that homesteading is not widespread. But such observations don't in themselves answer the question of how homesteading is distributed across the landscape. As with the question of how many homesteaders there are, the basic answer is that no one really knows, and this study won't provide any definitive answers to that question. Nonetheless, I have observed and heard about substantial rural homesteading in many different regions of the US – not only in Appalachia, but in the Ozarks, in the Pacific northwest, in the Texas Hill Country, in many parts of the Rockies, in New England, and clustered around college towns throughout the US. To hazard a speculative generalization, rural homesteading seems to be common on land that has certain characteristics. Some factors have a dampening effect on homesteading, such as land that's suitable for industrial agriculture, as in Iowa; land that has become exorbitantly expensive, as in Sonoma County; land that is too remote from population centers, as in much of Nevada; and land that is too arid, as in Love County, Texas. Hotspots of contemporary rural homesteading tend to occur where these factors do not combine: ideally, on land that is hilly but not too arid, and relatively cheap but not too far from a town.

5. But haven't scholars already explained why people do it?

In short, no. This is a bit surprising, given that there is no shortage of research on homesteading in other places and times. For example, there is a library's worth of books on peasants in historical Europe. When most people are peasants, you get certain kinds of society, such as the feudal societies of pre-industrial Europe, in which the basis of elite power is control of land and exploitation of peasant labor. Figuring out the rise of modern economies and governments in Western Europe requires, among other things, figuring out what happened to the peasants, and so for many decades scholars have actively studied and debated theories about the peasantry in historical Europe (e.g. Anderson 1979; Aston 1985; Dobb 1963).

There is also a substantial literature on homesteading as a historical phenomenon in the US and Appalachia. In Appalachia, as in Europe, this ends up being a necessary step in interpreting the basic history of the region. Was there some golden age of yeoman farmers, which was wrecked in the early 1900s when big capital realized there was coal and timber and cheap labor to be had? Or was Appalachia always commercially minded and riven by class? These debates are carried out by another group of scholars concerned with peasants (e.g. Brown 1988; Dunaway 1996; Pudup et al. 1985).

There is a third body of academic work on agrarian subsistence production, focusing on peasants in the recent and contemporary third world. This is a particularly large and active body of work, growing by hundreds, if not thousands, of articles and books per year (e.g. Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Peet and Watts 1996; Peluso 1992; Scott 2009). The geography department at UC Berkeley where I am a graduate student, which is not a large department, by itself produces one or two doctoral dissertations every year in this genre (e.g. Carney 2001; Lewis 1992; Neumann 1998).

Thus, there is a substantial scholarly literature on homesteading pretty much everywhere and everywhen except in the contemporary developed world. Here we have a mere handful of scholarly studies, which I'll examine in a moment. First, however, note that while there is not much in the way of academic work, there is a large body of

popular writings on contemporary homesteading, much of it written by homesteaders, and almost all of that written by participants in the “hippie” back-to-the-land movement. As Rebecca Gould noted, referring to the counterculture back-to-the-land movement, “homesteaders tend to produce as many texts as they do vegetables” (Gould 2005: 25).

These texts fall into two main categories. The first is autobiographical work, such as Peter Coyote’s *Sleeping Where I Fell*, Raymond Mungo’s *Total Loss Farm*, and Roberta Price’s *Huerfano: A Memoir of Life in the Counterculture*, and at least a dozen others (Coyote 1998; Mungo 1970; Price 2004). The second category is how-to books and magazines, of which there are hundreds of titles. If you live in the modern US and you have an interest in homesteading and you have a reading habit, these are the works that you have seen in bookstores and on the shelves of your local library. These are the works you’ve got on your own shelves: Wendell Berry and Gene Logsdon and John Jeavons and a dozen books from Rodale Press on organic gardening. If you live in a hip locale, the local food coop stocks the back-to-the-land ‘zines in the checkout aisle where Angelina and Brad usually live.

There is some sort of inverse relationship here, and I am not sure what to make of it. The less that subsistence producers write about what they do, it seems, the more that academics think it’s worth writing about. And the more homesteaders themselves write, the less academics take note. Perhaps the counterculture back-to-the-landers, as educated, white, post-sixties leftists, are drawn from the same base population as many US academics, and therefore do not appear sufficiently exotic to merit research.

There are a handful of works by academics on contemporary homesteading in the US.¹ Unless you are also an academic, you probably have not seen these. Without the Internet, I probably wouldn’t have found them myself. It’s a scattered tribe of books, which, unlike other subfields of peasant studies, is too small to form a coherent body of work or sustain a conversation. It is therefore diverse, with each author more or less taking their own approach and coming up with unique and interesting insights. Despite their idiosyncrasies, these studies all share one big mistake: they study hicks *or* hippies, but not hicks *and* hippies. This is not a function of the location of the study; as I mentioned above, the hick-hippie distinction appears to be as widespread as homesteading itself. It is only through comparing these two groups that the distinct character of each one becomes visible. Without this comparison, in other words, it is pretty much impossible to figure out what’s really going on. Let me give a couple of examples.

On hippie homesteaders, two of the most prominent voices are Jeffrey Jacob and Rebecca Gould. Jacob used the subscription list of a counterculture homesteading magazine to survey more than a thousand homesteaders all over the country. He is the only researcher I know of to attempt a large-scale study of contemporary American homesteading of any kind. He is able to show that, as of the mid-1990s, the back-to-the-land movement was alive and well, and that homesteading was a deeply meaningful and

¹ Because of the geographic focus, I have skipped over some interesting populations of subsistence producers and studies thereof: especially Native Americans (e.g. Anderson 2005, Nabhan 1982), the Amish and Mennonites (e.g. Kraybill 1994), and urban homesteading (e.g. Lawson 2005).

satisfying pursuit for most practitioners. From Jacob's surveys and interviews, the back-to-the-land movement appears to be, above all, a search for environmental sustainability, as he indicates with the title of his book, *New Pioneers: the Back-to-the-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future*. However, any homesteaders who do not subscribe to a counterculture back-to-the-land magazine, or socialize with those who do, are missing from Jacob's study. What does this larger population of homesteaders look like? Is environmental sustainability high on the list of concerns for all of them? Are the countercultural back-to-the-landers typical homesteaders? Exceptional? One group among many? There is no way to tell.

Rebecca Gould recently wrote a lovely history of the back-to-the-land movement in New England, sparked in part by her friendship with Helen Nearing at the end of Helen's life (Gould 2005). She traces the movement into the past, far beyond its stereotypical beginnings in the turbulent 1960s, along the way recovering the lives of people like John Burroughs. In 1872, Burroughs turned his back on a comfortable professional life in Washington, DC, and "returned to his homeland to begin a life of farming and writing, particularly writing about life in and around his farm" (ibid: 109). For Gould, the unifying theme of this long-running back-to-the-land movement is a search for a more grounded and authentic spiritual practice. Again, the title is clear: *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America*. And again, any other homesteaders who are not part of this particular movement are missing. Gould correctly portrays the counterculture back-to-the-lander as engaged in a sort of literary movement, an attempt to realize lyrically transcendent experiences through immersion in nature and the labor of living in nature. What she misses is how unusual this degree of literacy is, whether in the contemporary or historical United States, and the degree to which it sets this particular group of back-to-the-landers apart from the rural neighbors who were no doubt living all around them – but scribed no memoirs.

On hick homesteaders, a well-known study is Rhoda Halperin's groundbreaking ethnography, *The Livelihood of Kin: Making Ends Meet "The Kentucky Way,"* set in the Bluegrass region of northern Kentucky (Halperin 1990). Halperin focuses on the disadvantaged rural working class, showing how they use intense subsistence production as one component of a complex mix of "multiple livelihood strategies." For this group, homesteading is primarily about achieving a measure of security and independence from a treacherous, low-paying labor market. But again, the question of whether there are other homesteaders in the same area, pursuing homesteading for different reasons, is not addressed. Although Halperin is focusing on an economically disadvantaged group and on homesteading as a strategy of economic resistance, she doesn't have any well-developed analysis of the larger political-economic context – an oversight that would be much harder to commit in a comparative study.

The question that puzzled me the most when I was growing up around the back-to-the-land movement in Appalachia and northern California, and the one that as an adult I have found the hardest to answer, is one that no one seems to be asking. Why do homesteaders come in two main types? This dissertation addresses two major questions: the first, mentioned above, is why do people still embrace homesteading? The second is the one we just encountered: What are hicks and hippies?

The two questions are organically related. You cannot understand why people homestead without also solving the riddle of why they come in two versions. And it's not an easy riddle to solve. Even after I thought I understood it, I found it hard to write about without uncovering some additional aspect that I had not yet considered and could not describe without making basic mistakes. To answer this question, we have to wrestle in a fundamental way with the character of the modern US. We have to integrate research from a wide range of fields, from education to media studies to political economy. We have to reckon with the overwhelming role of capitalism in creating the basic social conditions out of which people continue to turn to homesteading today. It turns out that contemporary homesteading is not – as it is imagined to be – a window lingering open upon the past. Rather, to understand it we must undertake a detailed and pointed accounting of the present.

6. Preliminaries

6.1. A note on audience

The default audience for a dissertation is other scholars in the fields or subfields the dissertation addresses. However, for some dissertations, that specialized audience may be quite broad. This dissertation draws upon and speaks to research and theory in a broad range of social scientific fields. In addition, in many academic settings, such as geography departments and liberal arts colleges, one's closet professional and intellectual colleagues are often quite diverse in their own fields of expertise. For these reasons, it is necessary to write clearly and with a minimum of jargon, and to take time to carefully define any specialized term as it is introduced.

There is also a responsibility on the part of scholars, as much as possible, to render their theories and findings in language that is not only accessible but inviting to the broader reading public, a responsibility that too often goes unmet. I have tried to write this dissertation with this broader audience in mind – to take care of potential readers such as my undergraduate students, MERJ area homesteaders and back-to-the-landers, my family and friends, and other interested non-academics. I try not to assume prior knowledge of social theories and terms. Perhaps most importantly, I use a more causal style than is typical in contemporary social scientific writing. As the physicist Erwin Schrödinger remarked, in a statement that applies even more to social scholarship than physics, “If you cannot – in the long run – tell everyone what you have been doing, your doing has been worthless.”

6.2. A note on methods

Although I draw on many different kinds of evidence, this dissertation is at heart ethnographic. Ethnography, which literally means “writing culture,” is the name given to research methods that involve direct, close, and often sustained contact with the people who are being researched. It was pioneered in anthropology in the early 1900s, where a researcher would typically spend at least a year living with, and writing copious notes about, a particular cultural group, who were almost always non-western and non-modern. Although it was never abandoned by anthropology, perhaps because there is no other practical way to study the most non-western and non-modern people, by the middle of the

twentieth century, ethnographic methods had fallen out of favor in other disciplines such as human geography and sociology.

Because it involves working closely with people, ethnography also means working with relatively small numbers of people. And this is what led to all the fuss. Many social scholars in mid-century sought to study society scientifically, and decided that this meant that only certain kind of methods could be used (Peet 1998). The best methods were those that were objective, meaning that they produced data that was not shaped by or filtered through the perspective or feelings of the researcher. The best methods also used statistically significant samples, which meant large numbers of people and/or randomly selected subjects. Accordingly, large-scale surveys and experiments were legitimate sources of data. Hanging out with people was not. Ethnography could produce only speculation; it could not support the broad generalizations – the laws – that were seen to be the core stuff of science.

In some ways, this critique of ethnography was correct: working closely with a small set of non-random research subjects produces explanations and data that are often subjective and that are unavoidably speculative. A single ethnographic project cannot, by itself, support general claims. On the other hand, this rejection of ethnography was based on a narrow and idealized picture of what should count as science, drawn more from experimental and quantitative sciences like physics and less from messy historical sciences like evolutionary biology. Ethnography, it turned out, has unique virtues as a means of understanding people and societies – virtues that were crucial to its resurgence as a legitimate research technique over the past thirty years or so (Burawoy 1991).

First, ethnographic techniques, such as participant-observation or in-depth interviews, can serve as a test of existing general theories. If there is a theory that makes a general claim, for example, about Appalachian culture, I can put that theory to a test by working with a small set of Appalachians. If the theory doesn't hold up for this small group, it suggests – but does not prove – that the theory is incorrect; at the very least, it is too sweeping.

Second, it is only by working very closely with individuals that the researcher can gain a detailed understanding of the subjective experience of those individuals. Ethnographic techniques provide access to the perceptions, thoughts, and emotions of people, in real-world situations, in ways that no other social research methods can. This access is limited and imperfect, to be sure – but it is much better than trying to understand the actions of human beings without any access to their inner, mental lives.

Third, in part because of this access, ethnographic methods are crucial for generating new theories. One aspect of science that is particularly hard to formalize – that is difficult to turn into a kind of standard recipe – is the generation of novel explanations. Because it is hard to formalize, it often goes missing in narrow definitions of science, like the one that motivated the rejection of ethnography. In the physical sciences, there is a long history of treating the generation of new theories as something mysterious, a kind of transcendent flame that only kindles in the crucible of otherworldly genius. But really, the basic ingredients are pretty straightforward, even if the cognitive mechanisms are not: insight is generated through long-term immersion in a particular problem. That's how the German chemist Friedrich Kekulé ends up dreaming benzene rings, and how Charles Darwin ends up seeing adaptation emerging like sculpture from the hand of death. They

worried about it. A lot. That's what "otherworldly genius" is: sustained obsession with a particular object of inquiry.

Ethnography, in this light, is an essential method for generating new social theories. It is, above all, sustained close contact with the object of inquiry, in this case, people and their behaviors and the meanings that shape those behaviors. These theories are unavoidably speculative, but so what? As long as this speculative character is noted, there is nothing wrong with it. Indeed, such theories are also likely to be more plausible from the get-go than theories about human life generated at a distance, in the absence of any kind of close contact.

In part because of these virtues, which were championed by dedicated and persuasive scholars, by the time I entered graduate school in 2000, ethnographic methods had become well established. They had also been recognized as important tools for studying *any* population – including ethnographers – not just those exotic folks way over there in the jungle. As a result, there are now conventional ways to talk about ethnographic methods. So, for example, in describing this dissertation in a formal setting such as a research grant or an academic journal article, I would draw upon a kind of boilerplate. Thus: This dissertation is based on several years of fieldwork in a four-county area of eastern Kentucky, using multiple research methods including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and archival work. I have recorded and transcribed nearly sixty hours of open-ended life-history interviews with thirty-five subjects, using a balloon sample technique. I also draw upon a dozen in-depth interviews with rural elders generated by a field course I taught at Berea College, as well as nineteen interviews with that same population, conducted by Berea College student Terry Allebaugh in the late 1970s, and archived in Berea College's Special Collections. I have been a participant-observer at work-parties, potlucks, and other social events among both major communities under study here (namely, the "hicks" and "hippies"). I have observed church services at different local churches, including services at a nearby Mennonite community. I have done archival work in Berea College's Special Collections and using the extensive historical materials of the Census Bureau available online.

The formal fieldwork summarized above was a necessary part of developing this dissertation. But an honest description of the research methods involved here looks quite different than the boilerplate. The biggest difference is that formal fieldwork, while crucial, forms only a small part of a larger body of informal fieldwork that is the actual ethnographic grounding of the dissertation. There are reasons why this is particularly true in the present case, but I suspect that the situation is common. To strip this informal material out would be to place propriety above veracity, and give a misleading picture of how scholarship – for this scholar, and probably for many others – actually works.

This dissertation is about a phenomenon, contemporary homesteading in the US, which has generally been overlooked by scholars and the mass media. If I had not experienced it firsthand, I probably would never have noticed as something worth studying. I would probably have picked, say, Oaxaca over Appalachia as a research site because Oaxaca is full of exotic Indians, who, if I got to know them well, would lend me tremendous cachet in academia, whereas Appalachia is full of racist, bible-thumping, George Bush-lovin' hillbillies – just about the only ethnic group that I can get away with making fun of in a professional intellectual setting.

More importantly, in order to understanding contemporary homesteading, we have to understand the character of contemporary capitalism, in particular the way that capitalist exploitation creates different classes of people with widely different experiences in all facets of their lives. We have to look at different kinds of schooling, and understand how this schooling feels to those who go through it. We have to look at the radically different kinds of jobs created by the predominantly capitalist economy, and we have to understand how these divergent experiences affect people's worldviews and their access to knowledge. This is too much for one researcher to tackle using ethnographic methods. So what do I draw upon? Anything that helps. I draw upon other people's ethnographies. I draw upon surveys and censuses. I draw upon newspaper articles and popular books. But I also draw explicitly upon my own experiences and my interactions with people outside of the formal fieldwork. I draw upon memories and stories and characters from all the chapters of my life. I have kept extensive written journals since I was seventeen, long before I had heard the word *ethnography*, and I draw upon those.

Did I, as part of my formal research, spend weeks observing different classrooms? Nope. Did I interview children? Nope. It was not practically possible: it would have required enough Institutional Review Board red tape to gift-wrap the moon. But I did observe different classrooms – hundreds of them, for years – as a child and adolescent. I have also – again, not as part of my research – taught in institutions as different as UC Berkeley, Eastern Kentucky University, and Philips Exeter Academy. These experiences are crucial for my understanding of different kinds of schooling that coexist in the US today. We also need a well-grounded sense of what contemporary jobs are like. Did I work as a carpenter or a corn-detasseler or a fast-food shrimp breeder as part of my formal ethnography? No. I worked those jobs for the same reason most people do: because I needed the money. But without those experiences, I would have had only a vague idea of what the majority of working people's daily lives are like. Did I compare working class and middle-class families in eastern Kentucky to see if they have different parenting styles as part of the formal fieldwork? Only somewhat. But I have lived in poor working-class communities in eastern Kentucky and on the Yurok Reservation in northern California, and affluent middle-class communities in Lexington and Berkeley – and they are shockingly different, in ways that my formal fieldwork would have only hinted at.

I am not sure what to call this method. Auto-ethnography? Informal ethnography? Found ethnography? Whatever we call it, such informal ethnographic experiences are a crucial resource for generating the explanations that I propose. Used in this way, they have the same virtues and the same major drawback as ethnography conventionally defined. They provide one test of existing general theories, they are born of long-term close contact and engagement, they provide a means of access to people's subjective experience – and they are unavoidably speculative. The claims here, in other words, have not been subject to verification in a systematic way against comprehensive, non-local data. But that is not my intent. The fundamental aim here is to propose realistic explanations for puzzling and important social phenomena.

I include broader autobiographical material here for another reason as well: the middle chapters of this dissertation are an attempt to explain social processes that effect

anyone living in the contemporary US. Which means that the explanations should apply to – should help explain the life of – not only, say, an Appalachian factory worker, but a Berkeley graduate student. They should apply to me as much as to anyone else. This is particularly important when I use a proposed explanation – a theory – developed by someone else. When Annette Lareau, for example, talks about the different kinds of parenting style associated with different classes, it should apply to me, and not just my working-class neighbors.

Neglecting to include ourselves in our theories is a major failure of contemporary social scholarship. For example, Pierre Bourdieu describes very convincingly how people are subtly boxed in, through culture, to certain socio-economic positions. He does not leave much room for people to change their position, particularly not through conscious intervention. Which begs the question, why was he able to move successfully from humble beginnings to the pinnacle of French intellectual stardom? In what I've read, he doesn't say (see also Sayer 1999). Are we supposed to infer that these social mechanisms only apply to those who aren't as smart as Bourdieu? What about Michel Foucault? Do his theories explain him? Or are we supposed to think that he's like the joker, looking in and laughing from outside the deck of cards? In addition to being more honest about where the theories contained herein come from, drawing on a wide range of autobiographical material also prevents me from pretending to stand outside of the processes I am describing.

And also, hopefully, it makes the telling more lively.

6.3. A little map of what's to come

In chapter two, we take a look at the history of the MERJ area. Up until about sixty years ago, subsistence farming was the basic way that most people in the area made a living. Beginning with World War II, that began to change, and people shifted toward wage labor and industry. Why did this shift take place? What's the relationship between contemporary homesteading and the homesteading that came before it – does the former just represent some kind of continuation of the latter, or is it a different thing? This chapter also helps us understand the current political economy of the MERJ area, which is crucial to understanding the continued relevance of subsistence production.

In chapter three, I take a look at the hippie back-to-the-land movement in the MERJ area. While contemporary homesteading in general has often been either ignored or belittled, the counterculture back-to-the-land movement in particular has been – when it is noticed – subject to harsh caricature. The basic task of the chapter is to unearth the basic contours of the back-to-the-land movement in the MERJ area. It also helps to flesh out the question that is central to this study: what's the difference between hicks and hippies? The difference, I argue, is that one group is relatively literate and bookishly intellectual, and the other is not. The question then becomes, how can differences in literacy and intellectuality have such a big impact on other cultural attributes, such as political attitudes, religious belief, childrearing practices, and so on? A related question is, where do these differences in literacy and intellectuality come from?

In order to answer these questions, we have to develop a down-to-earth understanding of class differences in the contemporary US and in the MERJ area – what they are like, why they exist. Developing this understanding requires a journey through

some of our most dominant institutions, including schools, families, and workplaces. This is the task of chapters four, five, and six.

In chapter four, I examine the different kinds of schooling and parenting associated with different classes, and how this shapes the distribution of literate intellectuality.

Because we are talking about capitalist class, in chapter five I present some basic definitions of *capitalism*, *class*, and other relevant concepts like *exploitation*. In the second half of chapter five, I follow up this general discussion of capitalism with a concrete tour of the radically different kinds of jobs that people of different classes work in the MERJ area, based partly on my own experiences laboring in positions of widely different status and character. One of my basic arguments is that these different jobs tend to amplify the effects of early schooling and parenting: if you were not literate when you came out of high school, the jobs available to you will make it hard for you to change that. In addition, the low-quality, oppressive jobs available to many working-class people are more-or-less intentionally created by capitalist elites in order to maximize exploitation and prevent labor activism. In other words, these jobs are in no way *practically* necessary. There are straightforward, realistic alternatives.

In chapter six, I sum up all this up with the concept of capitalist ethnogenesis: the generation of profound cultural difference not through long-term geographic separation, but through the processes of capitalist class within a single place.

In chapter seven, we return to contemporary homesteading, hopefully well-prepared to understand why there are two groups of homesteaders instead of one, or many. This also sets the stage for understanding why both groups continue to turn to subsistence production, when its time is supposedly past.

CHAPTER 2

FROM SURVIVAL TO RESISTANCE

1. Initial Euro-African settlement

1.1. Shrouded in mist

Contemporary homesteading is inherently hard to see: it's small-scale, distributed across the landscape – often on secluded rural properties – and comes in different forms. An occasional back-to-the-lander memoir notwithstanding, it doesn't leave much of a paper trail.

For similar reasons, the same theme of invisibility holds for most of the human history of the MERJ area. It is particularly striking in the case of the Native Americans who lived in the area up until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When Columbus made his first voyage in 1492, what would become the MERJ area was thickly settled. Madison County in particular was heavily populated by indigenous agriculturalists, containing a hundred-acre Indian cemetery and at least two-dozen burial mounds, some the size of barns. The largest, the Moberly Mound, was ninety feet across and still twelve feet high after decades of being plowed and planted (Webb and Funkhouser 1928). Buried within were the remains of six people, including a man who would have stood seven feet tall (Ellis et al. 1985: 2). Three miles east of Berea, at what is now known as Indian Fort Mountain, the locals built massive stone walls around the edges of a flat ridge top, the largest of which ran for a thousand feet and can still be seen today.

But when immigrants from Europe and Africa began to settle the MERJ area, in 1775, the land was largely empty. In much of what would become the southeastern US, Old World plagues ran ahead of conquest, in many places leaving behind a landscape of ghosts, of feral peach orchards and villages rotted back into the earth (Mann 2005). To this day, little is known about the people who settled Kentucky thousands of years before Daniel Boone. Maps of pre-conquest America show a jigsaw puzzle of different peoples, except for the area of Kentucky, which is often labeled “poorly known tribes” (Axtell 1981; Ulack et al. 1998). Why did people build giant walls on Indian Fort Mountain? Were they a military defense? Did they demarcate a religious site? We have only guesses.

This near-invisibility characterizes post-conquest society as well. The historical record of the MERJ area after 1775 is sharply uneven: the towns of Richmond and Berea, with their colleges, commerce, newspapers, and politicians, have generated substantial

archives. Northern Madison County, which lies in the Bluegrass region, and was home to large plantations and a land-owning aristocracy, likewise left behind substantial records: letters, ledgers, memoirs, deeds, census reports, even – in the case of prominent citizens like Henry Clay – biographies. The rest of the area, in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains, was characterized until recently by smaller-scale farming – peasant farming, essentially – and its history has been largely lost to us. The hills truly were hard to travel in and thus, in effect, remote. Rural residents left very little writing of their own, and more formal records are limited as well. The Rockcastle County Courthouse burned down in 1873, taking many records with it; the “old deeds got burnt up in the courthouse years ago,” according to one resident (Allebaugh 1979). Property deeds were notoriously messy anyway, overlapping and contradicting and often failing to match what was on the ground. Jackson County doesn’t show up in the decadal census until 1860; before then it was not incorporated as a county. In a painstakingly researched four-hundred page history of Madison County, the southeastern, Appalachian corner only garners a handful of mentions; Red Lick Valley, which occupies much of that corner, is mentioned once, as a place notorious for moonshining (Ellis et al. 1985: 349).

Even though the early, post-Indian history of the MERJ area is hard to come by, it is crucial for understanding both the region and the continued relevance of subsistence production in the region. In this chapter, we will do our best to answer some of the most pressing political-economic questions regarding that history: Was the pre-industrial MERJ area a land of independent yeoman farmers, or were class relationships – where some people labor for others – prominent? When industry came to the region, after World War II, what form did it take? Were people forced to leave farming for wage labor – perhaps by some kind of enclosure – or did they choose to do so?

These are crucial questions for understanding the course of history not just in Appalachia, but around the world. One of the fundamental transitions in the rise of global modernity is the switch from an economy based on peasant farming to one based on industrial production. This transition has occurred – and continues to occur – throughout the world, with profound effects upon both humans and the ecosystems with which they are entangled. Scholars studying this transition, in its manifold varieties, have generated a number of important insights and debates along the way. One enduring theme in these debates centers on a simple question: from the perspective of working families, was peasant farming preferable to industrial wage labor?

Among scholars critical of capitalism, there is a tendency to paint its origins as a necessarily bloody and immoral business. In order to become capitalists, early industrialists and merchants had to have relatively unfettered access to essential resources, like labor, land, and raw materials such as wool or coal; ideally, from the perspective of investors, this access was cheap or free. One of the difficulties with this pre-condition of capitalism was that such resources were already being used for other ends. They could become available to capitalists only by being uprooted from their social and economic context, a process known as “primitive accumulation,” which destroyed what had been in place and replaced it with something new (Harvey 2003). This applies particularly to labor. As Karl Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*, to be available for wage labor, the worker must not command her own productive resources – in particular, land.

For the conversion of his money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour-power. (Marx 1976: 272)

In many historical cases, primitive accumulation was, unquestionably, vicious and unjust. This sense of violent appropriation has become an essential connotation of the term “primitive accumulation.” It’s like that skit in Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life*, where organ collectors knock on Mr. Brown’s door.

Collector: Hello. Uhh, can we have your liver?

Brown: What?

Collector: Your liver. It’s a large, ehh, glandular organ in your abdomen....

Brown: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know what it is, but...I’m using it.

The organ collectors proceed to remove his liver anyway. (Gilliam and Jones 1983)

The concept of primitive accumulation is often bolstered by a vivid illustrating metaphor, drawn from the history of Britain. In the early 1700s, British land was tied up in intricate systems of ownership and access. The landed gentry owned estates, but peasant farmers had rights of access to those estates, as well as to lands held in common for collective grazing. Seeing an opportunity for profit in the production of wool, landlords began in the mid-1700s to violate these traditional rights, kicking farming families off the land in favor of sheep – in other words, “enclosing” land that had been somewhat open (Thompson 1963). I refer to enclosure as a metaphor, because the term is widely used by geographers, anthropologists, and other researchers to refer to the expansion of capitalism into new areas or new forms of production: for example, traditional water rights can undergo “enclosure” when they are captured by a private utility (e.g. Heynen et al. 2007).

Among certain groups of scholars, it’s taken for granted that without enclosure, capitalist industry cannot arise. Although it is often implicit, this stance entails the assumption that peasant farming was preferable to industrial wage labor. The concepts of primitive accumulation and enclosure thus incorporate a belief that, given the choice, peasant families would have continued to farm rather than leave the land to become capitalist wage laborers. Like Mr. Brown – so the idea goes – they aren’t going to just hand over their livers.

1.2. Three phases of scholarship

Let’s begin tackling these questions by looking at scholarship on central Appalachia as a whole. Scholars of the mountain south have long wrestled with the

difficulties of doing historical research in a place with such limited archives; one effect of this has been that historians have had relatively free reign to indulge their own prejudices, only weakly constrained by evidence. As a result, basic interpretations of the social, political, and economic processes that shaped southern Appalachia have gone through major revisions more than once in the past fifty years.

From the time of the Civil War – when Appalachia first began to be thought of as a particular region – up until the 1960s, both contemporary outside observers and historians saw rural Appalachia through the lenses of cultural and environmental determinism. The most striking aspects of life in the mountains to early authors were its supposed isolation, timelessness, and material poverty. Travel writers, journalists, novelists, and scholars together erected a largely mythical picture of a homogenous “Appalachia,” a caricature that reflected a “complex intertextual reality” more than the reality of life in the actual place (Billings et al. 2000: 4). Writing in 1965, sociologist Rupert Vance succinctly captured the core ideas of this myth:

Thus mountain isolation, which began as a 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. (Quoted in Billings et al. 2000: 5)

At about the same time that the sixties’ counterculture began questioning nuclear families and nuclear bombs, researchers began to question this view of Appalachia as topographically benighted. Scholars such as Helen Lewis, Harry Caudill, and Ronald Eller developed an “internal colonialism” theory of Appalachian poverty. They documented the prevalence of absentee land ownership in the area, and the rise of the industrial extraction of coal and timber, driven in part by outside capitalists. Wealthy speculators bought vast tracts of land (or the subsurface mineral rights to that land), punched railroads into the coalfields and into stands of virgin timber, built industrial camps and boomtown cities, and sucked the fat out of the mountains. Ronald Eller summed up this view eloquently in the conclusion to his classic study, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*:

For William Wirt and millions of other mountaineers, modernization had come like a storm over the ridges, tossing and uprooting the very structure of mountain life. When the storm had passed, what was left was only a shell of what had been before. Suspended halfway between the old society and the new, the mountaineers had lost the independence and self-determination of their ancestors, without becoming full participants in the benefits of the modern world. The vast natural wealth of the region had been swept out of the mountains – into the pockets of outland capitalists and into the expansion of the larger industrial order itself. In return, a deep and lasting depression had settled over the coves. (242)

The view described by Eller and others in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, was of a yeoman peasantry destroyed by industrial capitalism. In important ways, this scholarship represented a tremendous step forward, recognizing basic aspects of the class-laden political economy of the region that had been ignored or soft-pedaled in earlier accounts. In short, they got the post-1880s industrial capitalism aspect mostly right, and they often worked to overturn the picture of Appalachian culture as backward and ignorant. But the idea that pre-industrial Appalachia was full of independent freeholders, prospering in a “Jeffersonian dream” outside the grasp of class and exploitation, has undergone major revision (Eller 1982: 5) – including in Eller’s more recent work, which stresses the difficulty of subsistence-oriented farming in the mountain South (Eller 2008).

A key scholar pushing this revision has been Wilma Dunaway. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, it is difficult – in some cases impossible – to reconstruct what happened in rural Appalachia during the first century or more of Euro-African settlement. One of the most striking things about Dunaway’s work is the sheer amount of archival research that it required to paint a more complete image of patterns of landholding, labor, and production in the southern Appalachians before the Civil War. In her magisterial study, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia*, Dunaway showed that from the beginning of settlement, land and people in southern Appalachia were connected to larger systems of class and exploitation. There may have been plenty of subsistence-oriented farming, and there may have been plenty of independent smallholders, but on the whole it was never a society of yeoman. Elites along the eastern seaboard and in Western Europe made sure of that. Many of the first European settlers were not so much yeomen farmers as elite speculators in land or their agents. These immigrants carried not only seeds, tools, and frontier skills into the mountains, but specific systems of class relations: they represented the first, grasping appendage of an expanding, class-based national and global economic order. Throughout Southern Appalachia, absentee landholders managed to grab vast estates; in Virginia and West Virginia, for example, Dunaway found that “by 1800, absentee landholders owned three-quarters of the total acreage,” leaving “little land” for actual residents (56). Partly as a result of such uneven land holding, Dunaway argued that pure subsistence was rare. “Fewer than one of every fifty [antebellum] farm owners,” she wrote, “was a subsistent producer who held few resources beyond survival needs and who had no access to any other source of livelihood” (125). Larger landowners participated in markets by hiring labor and producing commodities, while land poor families sold their labor and anything else they could to try to make ends meet. Nearly half of that small group that Dunaway counts as truly subsistent did not produce enough food to feed themselves; they were “*semiproletarians* who combined irregular wage income with limited farming” (127).

1.3. Dunaway and the MERJ area

The state of Kentucky was no exception to these patterns. “By the end of the 1700s,” Dunaway shows, “one-quarter of the entire area of Kentucky had been claimed by twenty-one land barons” (66). The total percentage of lands in eastern Kentucky held by absentee owners circa 1800 was at least 56 percent, and probably much higher. As

Dwight Billings and Katherine Blee conclude in their study of Clay County, which abuts Jackson County to the south, “the political and economic structures of world capitalism...cradled the Kentucky frontier from its birth” (Billings and Blee 2000: 34).

The available evidence suggests that the MERJ area followed suit. Daniel Boone, who spearheaded settlement in the area by building the Wilderness Road through Madison County in 1774, was a professional land agent, hired by a speculator in North Carolina, Judge Richard Henderson, on behalf of Henderson’s Transylvania Company. As H. E. Everman notes, “The most important economic goal of early pioneers [in Madison County] was acquiring land.” They did this in much the way that Dunaway describes: aggressive exploitation of both privileged social position and “ambiguous or insufficient land laws.” Within thirty years, much of the land of the county – and all of the prime farmland – was owned by a local oligarchy. One man, Green Clay (father of politician and abolitionist Henry Clay), held over 40,000 acres – nearly 15 percent of the county. Another landowner, a “Revolutionary War veteran, member of the early court, and Kentucky legislator” named Samuel Estill, had “twenty tenant families on his estate.” The combination of large-scale land ownership and political office was characteristic: in early Madison County, land was the lever of political power. We can see this in the example of William Irvine, county clerk, who in the 1790s “was the only political figure with less than 500 acres, and he soon acquired 1,950 acres through treasury warrants” (Ellis et al. 1985: 43).

These men used their landholdings as a base upon which to form a local aristocracy – also referred to as a “slaveocracy,” because of the reliance upon slave labor. By 1850, this slaveocracy owned not only the land, but also one third of Madison County’s human population (Ellis et al. 1985: 85). Land engrossment affected lower-status whites as well, pushing many locals into various forms of tenantry or sharecropping. Using other people’s labor, these elites produced cash crops such as grain and livestock for sale on regional and national markets. They owned the ferries, the early warehouses and industries, and personally comprised the rotating magistracy of the county government.

Northwest Madison County was not a society of egalitarian, independent yeoman farmers, even from the first day of settlement. But what about the Appalachian portion of the county? What about the rest of the MERJ area, the narrow hollers and steep mountainsides where plantation agriculture didn’t make sense? They were definitely more egalitarian in one important sense: they were never hotbeds of slavery. In 1860, when Madison County contained 6,034 slaves – 35 percent of the population – Jackson County had just seven, equivalent to one enslaved individual out of every five hundred residents (Historical Census Browser 2004). However, because of the dearth of reliable evidence about landholding patterns, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to answer broader questions about local economic justice, at least for the first several decades of settlement. From about 1890 onward, however, more evidence is available, and – as we shall see in the next section – this evidence suggests that these places were considerably more egalitarian than the Bluegrass. At the same time, the image of economically independent smallholding families drawn by Eller is incomplete.

2. A peasant society until the post-WWII boom

2.1. Failure to industrialize

From the time of settlement by old world immigrants in 1775, up until the eve of US involvement in World War II in 1940, the MERJ area remained essentially agrarian, a land of subsistence-oriented farming, small-scale production of rural goods for market, and various forms of tenantry.

This is not to say that no change took place across those decades. In many ways, change was relentless. In 1855, Berea College was founded, an institution that would anchor the town of Berea and play an important role in the culture of the immediate area. In the late 1850s, the L&N railroad was completed, running through Madison and Rockcastle Counties and providing a more efficient linkage to the outside world. During the Civil War, armies marched back and forth across the region, joining in battle south of Richmond. In the 1880s, commercial tobacco production became important for the first time in the area; it would soon become the major cash crop, particularly in the mountains, where it allowed families to eke out a living on smaller plots of land than would be required by most other market crops. This was important, because another change – one of the most striking – was population growth. From 1860 to 1930, Jackson County's population tripled, from 3,087 to 10,467. Mirroring the growth in population, the number of farms grew over the same time period, from 306 to 1,865 – a six-fold increase. But at the same time, the total acreage in farms decreased. Inevitably, farm size dropped dramatically, a fundamental change in a society in which most people make their living directly from the land (Historical Census Browser 2004).

But none of these changes overturned the basic lineaments of life in the MERJ area: it was a class-bound peasant society, overwhelmingly rural, in which subsistence production was a necessity for most families. As of 1940, industrialization had not taken place, and modernization – in the form of paved roads, bridges, electricity, phone lines, accessible schools, medical care, and so on – was limited. In 1850, “only 133 people were employed in manufacturing of any sort” in Madison County – and many of these were cottage industrialists who produced goods out of their homes (Ellis et al. 1985: 235). Fifty years later, in 1900, there were 233 “wage earners in manufacturing” in Madison County (United States Bureau of the Census 1900). This represents some growth, especially considering that this second statistic includes only wageworkers. But Madison County, lying half in the Bluegrass, had by far the most industrial labor: the corresponding figures for Jackson and Rockcastle, in 1900, were 11 and 46 industrial wage earners, respectively. By 1940, the number of manufacturing wage earners in Madison County had dropped to 207 – out of a population of almost 29,000 (Historical Census Browser 2004). Thus, according to the census, Madison County had *less* manufacturing in 1940 than it had four decades before. (For some reason, the same statistic is not available for the other counties for 1940.)

The failure to industrialize was not for lack of trying. In the aftermath of the Civil War, elites in the defeated South (including the formally pro-Union Kentucky) began an aggressive drive to attract northern industry in a bid to shed their dependence upon agriculture, and to increase their own wealth and power vis-à-vis elites in the north. In this drive, we can see that the initial forms of inequality in southern Appalachia – the

ones described by Dunaway, based largely in unequal ownership of land and exploitation of landless or land-poor agricultural labor – would be crucial to the subsequent trajectory of social change throughout the region. In trying to attract industry, elites and policymakers throughout the southeast pioneered many of the state-led economic “development” strategies familiar today. They offered grants, guaranteed loans, tax exemptions, free land, state-funded infrastructure, and, decisively, a pliant, non-union labor force and early versions of so-called “right-to-work” laws to ensure that it stayed pliant (Cobb 1993). This was one of the first regions in which US industrial elites used the relative mobility of their capital – the “runaway shop” – to play local governments and workforces off of one another, engineering what has since become known as a “race to the bottom” (Cobb 1993; Weinbaum 2004). These efforts leveraged public resources in an attempt to create or attract capitalist industries, efforts in which the dominant goal was to bolster and entrench the privilege and power of local elites. In pursuing this kind of economic growth, designed to render benefits primarily to themselves, elites foreclosed the possibility of more fair and egalitarian forms of development.

Many of these practices were developed by states in the deep South, like Alabama and Mississippi – but the Appalachian south was determined not to be left out. According to Ronald Eller, Appalachian states “followed the pattern established by West Virginia,” where “the entire machinery of the State government has been used to attract capital to the state to develop its railroads, its coal, and its timber interests” (Eller 1982: 47). Kentucky was no exception: as early as 1869, Governor Stevenson “called for the establishment of aggressive policies to recruit foreign labor and capital” (ibid: 47). Newspapers like the Louisville *Courier-Journal* boosted the area to a wide readership. Individual speculators moved back and forth between the Appalachian hinterlands and the cities of the northeast, trying to leverage their own stake by drumming up outside investments (ibid).

This history recommends a different way of thinking about neoliberalism, one of the topics of most concern at present among critical social scholars. Neoliberalism is a global escalation and hardening among policymakers of a free-capital, fettered-labor economic doctrine, which has had tremendous influence throughout the world over the past three decades (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Harvey 2005). The term *neoliberalism* can be confusing; it refers not to social liberalism but to *economic* liberalism, which more or less comes down to support for free markets. In practice, however, the commitment to free markets among politicians and officials is intensely selective, and thus appears to be more of a rhetorical stance than a genuine intellectual commitment (Harvey 2005). We can see here that many of the strategies of neoliberal development are old news in the US South. This suggests that, to some extent, neoliberalism consists of techniques pioneered in the periphery and then imported to the core (e.g. into what is now the Rust Belt), rather than the other way around. To understand where the US economy was heading, we should have been looking, ironically, at the “backward” South.

Certain parts of the South were rapidly transformed by these post-Civil War efforts. Birmingham, Alabama, the booming “Pittsburg of the South,” was created de novo in 1871 as an industrial center. Textile factories clustered in the piedmont of North Carolina (Miller 1980). But in most of southern Appalachia, these efforts did not bear

much fruit for nearly a century after the Civil War. There were, however, two important exceptions to this general failure to develop industry, both based on the extraction of natural resources: the rise of coal and timber industries. In some parts of rural Appalachia and eastern Kentucky, capitalist industry arrived around the turn of the last century in the form of coal mining, deeply marking the people and the land and giving occasion over the years to much of the scholarly work on Appalachia (Billings and Blee 2000; Eller 1982). Even more widespread, geographically speaking, was the commercial harvesting of old-growth timber, which cut out all but the most inaccessible stands (Davis 2000).

In the MERJ area, this history matters for many reasons. For example, as an area without substantial coal, the first wave of industrial production, in the early 1900s, centered on logging, which had major impacts on soil fertility, creek flows, and species composition. The impact of logging on the land is an interesting story that unfortunately lies outside the scope of this dissertation. More importantly for present purposes, this history matters because these same industrial development strategies are still the only game in town. In the decades after the Civil War, as we saw above, elites did not succeed in attracting industry to the MERJ area – even to Madison County, with its railroad connection, relatively flat land, and quasi-aristocracy. But when the area did begin to industrialize, after 1940, it was through the same sorts of “neoliberal” development strategies outlined above.

In sum, the mountain portion of Madison County and the MERJ area, like much of eastern Kentucky, had neither Birmingham nor coal. In these hollers, lost from outside view between the ranches of the Bluegrass and the turmoil of coal country, smallholder farming continued, well into the 20th century, in much the same way and for much the same reasons as it had since the beginning of European settlement (Allebaugh 1979; Billings and Blee 2000; Brown 1988; Ellis et al. 1985). In the absence of widespread wage labor and social welfare, most rural families faced a choice between moving north in search of jobs, which many families did, or continuing with diversified, small-scale farming, including a major commitment to subsistence production (Berry 2000). In the 1930s, before the boom of World War II brought modernity flooding into the MERJ area, people in the mountains lived in much the same way as they had a hundred years before. Many of the foundational technologies and techniques of 20th century modernity – from paved roads, electricity, and telephones, to industrial wage labor and the vast bureaucracy of the federal welfare state – had only a limited presence.

1.2. Rural economy to the 1940s

In the previous section, I focused on limited industrialization in the MERJ area. In this section, I’ll take a closer look at what this weakly-industrialized economy was actually like, tracing a few key themes. People made their living from the land; it was, indeed, a thoroughly agrarian society. They worked hard and with tremendous skill, but even so life was harsh. Virtually every family in the mountains was engaged in subsistence production, because they had to be; given the available technology and the character of local roads and labor markets, most people had no alternative. According to interviewees, *everyone* looked for ways to supplement subsistence by selling their labor or agrarian products for cash. Subsistence was necessary, but it wasn’t enough. As a

result, the typical mountain family, like today's homesteaders, mixed together a number of different livelihood strategies. Even before the beginnings of serious industrialization, the actions of farm families indicate that while subsistence was necessary, it wasn't sufficient.

As I noted above, there is little detailed evidence about the character of life in the Appalachian portions of the MERJ area up until the late 1800s. But at that point, the archive begins to improve. In the late 1970s, a non-traditional student at Berea College, Terry Allebaugh, conducted nineteen in-depth interviews with older residents of the Disputanta area, a rural hamlet in Rockcastle County (Allebaugh 1979; also see individual interview citations in the bibliography). The oldest interviewees were born in the 1880s, and were adults during the Great Depression. Moreover, because of the lack of industrialization and modernization in the MERJ area until the 1940s, people who were born even in the 1920s and 30s grew up in conditions quite similar to that of their parents and their grandparents, as they are apt to tell you. Additionally, in May of 2011, I taught an ethnography course at Berea College, in which we tried to capture more of these stories before they passed from living memory. The students conducted life history interviews with a dozen rural elders, all of whom had grown up before the transition away from peasant agriculture. The two sets of interviews – Allebaugh's in 1978 and ours in 2011 – are separated by thirty years and comprised of samples that are random with respect to one another, but are nonetheless remarkably consistent.

Class continued to be less extreme in the mountains than in the nearby Bluegrass, but – consistent with Dunaway's findings – it was present: many families were tenants or rural laborers, and these families were less secure than those who owned substantial amounts of land. Class made life harder for many, and easier for a few; but it is abundantly clear that life would have been hard anyway: with steep hills and poor soils, these are hard places to make a living from the land. If everyone had owned a hundred-acre farm, getting by still would have been tough; with class exploitation layered over the inherent challenges of the landscape, material poverty was intense.

In most of the MERJ area travel was difficult. The region was by no means completely disconnected from the rest of the nation and world, and there is no reason to think that isolation reduced anyone's intelligence or stunted their culture – but the fact remains that travel was hard and slow. Rural roads were made of dirt, not gravel, and during wet spells became impassable. "This road would get where you couldn't get through it cause it would be so muddy and everything," recalled Brad Sutherland, who grew up in Jackson County in the 1930s. Local residents had to maintain the roads themselves. "The way we done it we got these rocks and we'd pile 'em up in the road and beat 'em up with a sledge hammer to where we could get over it... That's the way the road was kept. The state didn't do it." Bridges over creeks were built and repaired by the people who lived near them – and were regularly washed away in summer storms. Partly as a result of relative isolation, almost everyone who lived in the area was from the area; people knew each other or knew of each other, and outsiders were uncommon. Taylor Shearer, born in 1911 or '12, talked about young boys who, at the sight of a stranger, and worried about catching diseases, would "take to the woods just like a gray fox."

In his classic 1940s ethnography of rural life in Clay County, which borders Jackson County to the south, James Brown found a similar kind of seclusion:

Trips to the outside were infrequent and difficult. Many people born in this area never set foot out of the mountain region. Schools, which met only two or three months a year, were taught by local people, many just beyond the illiterate stage and none well educated. Churches likewise were led by self-taught, local preachers whose main occupation was farming and who preached “on the side.” (4)

The material harshness of rural life is a major theme that runs through interviews with those who lived in the mountains before the post-war boom. Many families struggled to make ends meet, like that of Harm Smallwood. His dad was a coal miner who drove a school bus a couple of hours every day to the mines, picking up other miners along the way until the bus was full. His mom was in charge of the farming and childrearing.

I was born in Jackson County, a place up there called Morrill. My dad was a coal miner. My mom she was just a house wife. My mom run it all, you know. She milked the cow. My dad went to work ‘fore dark, and he got in from work after dark. ‘Course we didn’t have no plumbin, we didn’t have no modern accessories, nothin. We had what they called old slab houses, you know. We didn’t have nothin. We just lived day to day and week to week. And that’s the way we was raised, of course – and they was nine of us. Nine kids. My mother n’ dad made eleven of us. We had it pretty hard.

If you had enough to eat, you were considered well off. Born in the mountains in 1891, Morgan Abney remembered a time when the only way to can food was to use as a “little stone jar” and seal the lid with wax. “There was always something to fill [your belly] on,” he said, “but sometimes it was pretty rough. Naturally, many a meal was eat with one thing on the table, which good livers in that day and time, they’d have different things to eat.” Vernon Muldrow was born thirty-four years later, in 1925, in a relatively well-to-do family in Jackson County. Interviewed in 2011, he said much the same thing as Abney, even using the same phrase:

We lived good. We had a nice hillside farm, we raised plenty to eat – that was the main thing back then, they didn’t worry about a car back then they worried about something to eat, people who had plenty to eat during the winter were good livers.

Anything that had to be bought was scarce. Interviewees remembered how, during their childhoods, they would take their shoes off in March, when the weather began to warm, and not put them back on again until the autumn. They told stories about teenagers who could not attend high school, because they couldn’t afford a “decent suit” of clothes.

Constance Sinclair, born in 1920 in southern Madison County, remembered growing up in a roughly-built house with gaping cracks between the siding:

Well, in the wintertime, we slept upstairs and that house was so old. And the wind would blow in and it would snow. And we could tell that it was snow because it was snow on our bed and coming down the steps, and we had to walk down the steps in the snow.

This deprivation had real consequences. Many families lost infants and children. Edna Alexander, born in the 1920s, spoke of this matter-of-factly: “I had eight children. Two of them deceased when they was little.” Another interviewee, Evelyn Allen, talked about losing mothers as well as infants, during home births in remote homes: “Sometime the baby couldn’t be born and they’d lost the mother and baby.” Children suffered from lack of medical care and, all too often, malnutrition. A 1925 report found that out of 600 schoolchildren, in relatively prosperous Madison County, ninety percent “had one or more ailments or deformities.” Another report found that ten percent were undernourished (Ellis et al. 1985: 308). This was *before* the Great Depression pushed living standards even lower. A survey of schoolchildren in Madison County in 1933 – once the Depression was in full swing – found that “3,798 out 4,980 had health-related problems” (Ellis et al. 1985: 323). As Henry Chasteen put it, “Oh yeah, it was *rough* that year, buddy.” “We had enough,” said Verda Shearer about the Depression years, “but Lord, the people around us was hard for things. You couldn’t hardly sit down and eat a good meal in comfort they’s so hungry, people’s so hungry.”

It was, as Stanley Ruppert summed it up, “A ‘poverished area.”

The subsistence provision of food, water, housing, heating, transportation, and health care – including taking care of the deceased – was ubiquitous. With the exception of a single interviewee, who was a preacher from outside the area, every single family in both sets of interviews raised their own food. It was common for women to handle farm chores while men went away to work. In Harm Smallwood’s family, while his dad was away all day at the mines, his mother produced and processed the food.

Mom had two Jersey cows, ‘course she milked them in the morning, milked ‘em in the evenin. Nobody else milked them but her. And I was glad of that [laughs]. We canned everything we raised, canned everything we’d go out ‘n pick, wild strawberries and wild blackberries, and dewberries, and raspberries, we’d can it for the winter. We had more cans stuck up under our beds – had eleven people livin in a four-room house. And all that canned stuff had to be in there where it was warm. We’d put our apples up on the floor. Used to have what was called winter apples, you never see ‘em no more. They didn’t get ripe till the first frost, and we’d go pick them, put ‘em in boxes, stick ‘em way back under the beds. In Christmas, we’d start taking ‘em out. Mom used to make them stack cakes out of ‘em. Oh boy that was good.

With doctors scarce, far away, and expensive, people also had to provide their own health care. Folk remedies and faith healing were standard. Evelyn Allen described some common techniques:

People were more or less isolated. You take bad weather, it'd be hard to get in and out. It'd be better to take an herb and try it and use it. When kids got colds back then a mother put a flannel rag on their chests with coal oil. Coal oil and grease was the best thing they had, the grease kept the coal oil from burning the skin and coal oil has medicinal properties to it. You can cut yourself and put coal oil. Doesn't get sore. And you can have a "Charley horse" in your leg and rub it with kerosene.

But pure subsistence was not enough. Mountain families sought out any way they could of generating cash. One of the most common strategies was to sell or saw lumber. Another common way to earn cash was by raising tobacco – one of the few cash crops that could be grown competitively in the mountains, thanks to government price supports. Here's Morgan Abney:

The only cash crop? Yeah, that was the only cash crop that us mountain people had. You see, they couldn't raise enough grain. They didn't have grass enough to handle livestock, hogs and cattle to make anything out of. Tobacco was the only cash crop that we had.

Market-oriented farm production was mixed freely with subsistence farming. Elva Northern remembered growing up on a farm – run by her mother – with the kind of diverse production that was typical of the area:

But [my daddy] didn't farm too much cause he worked on the railroad. And mother and us kids raised the cane in the garden and the tobacco and stuff. We usually have one piece of corn somewhere, it all full of beans, and we had a big orchard. That whole farm there, around a hundred acres of it, was all full of apple trees.

Families sold any kind of produce they could find a market for, whether it was eggs, blackberries, or butter. "My mom did the milking and what they called churning the butter," recalled Brad Sutherland.

And she would take this butter and walk over two miles to Sand Gap and sell the butter for fifty cent a pound. And she used that to buy the cornmeal and stuff that we had to have. That's how we was raise...raise poorer than dirt.

Stanley Ruppert spoke about how his parents in southern Madison County searched for ways to generate cash from the farm:

Tobacco, corn, cattle, hogs, anything, anything, they could to you know make money. I can remember when mom would sell cream. You know they would milk the cows and we had an old mechanical cream separator. You'd pour your milk in and uh, let me see how that worked, you'd pour your milk in and all the cream comes to the top. Then you'd drain the milk out and then your left with the cream, and she would sell three or four gallons of cream. I have no idea what she was [charging for it]. But I do remember coming to the old country store bringing eggs to sell. For twelve, fifteen cents a dozen.

Many families stripped chestnut oak bark for the “tanbark,” used in tanning hides. They made staves for liquor barrels. They drove flocks of geese to Richmond. Encouraged by the regional extension agent, they tried strawberry farming (Spence 1956). “As late as 1941,” wrote William Ellis, “many Madison County farm families depended on picking blackberries to supplement their income, making Madison County the leading blackberry county in the state” (Ellis et al. 1985: 327). Eunice Allen picked grapes and shelled walnuts and walked twelve miles to sell them in Berea. In the early 1930's, Taylor Shearer distilled moonshine and sold it by the gallon from his car – one of the few activities on this list that continues to this day.

In addition to selling products, people found ways to sell their labor. Men worked on the railroads, or on blasting roadbeds through the mountains – “driving steel,” as Henry Chasteen put it. They worked as farmhands for those who owned more land; Morgan Abney worked eighteen years for Ott Finnell, earning two dollars a day for running Finnell's sawmill and a dollar-fifty for working his tobacco. Womenfolk sewed dresses, or took in washing from town. Elva Northern cleaned houses in Berea for fifty cents an hour.

As well as hiring farmhands, land-owning families received money rent from tenant farmers or half of the harvest from sharecroppers. In the bluegrass section of Madison County, with its history of massive estates, tenantry and sharecropping became more common after the abolition of slavery; throughout the south, various forms of debt peonage served as a substitute for slavery. The rise of commercial tobacco production at the turn of the 18th century gave further motivation to land owners to look for cheap agricultural labor. By 1900, the proportion of owner-operated farms in Madison County had dropped, and “over 25 percent of Madison farmers were tenants or ‘croppers’” (Ellis et al. 1985: 262). Thirty years later, in 1929, 44 percent of Madison County farmers were tenants, and “nearly 90 percent of that number were sharecroppers” (ibid: 311). Landless families worked hard for little pay; according to William Ellis, “Their earnings were far below the sum considered necessary for an adequate standard of living for a family at the turn-of-the-century” (263). In 1940, Henry Chasteen moved from Rockcastle to Madison County in 1940 to take up sharecropping. After seven years of it, he said, “I got tired of giving the other feller half, sold my farm, tools, and team, had me an auction sell.”

Jackson and Rockcastle Counties were more egalitarian than Madison County, but many families were still landless or land-poor, and had to turn to tenant farming or

agricultural wage labor. In 1910, 31 percent of the farms in Rockcastle County and 26 percent in Jackson County were operated by tenants. This is less than the 38 percent in Madison County – but that’s still a considerable number of families dependent on access to another family’s land (Historical Census Browser 2004). Moreover, there were few, if any, alternatives in the mountains for landless families: they could endure the insecurity and chronic poverty of tenantry, or try their luck finding wage labor far away – a course which many families decided to pursue, especially during boom times such as the “Roaring Twenties” (Berry 2000).

The situation in the mountain portions of the MERJ area was like that found by James Brown, Dwight Billings and Katherine Blee in neighboring Clay County: there were class differences, based mostly on differential land ownership, but these were not vast differences like in Madison County (Brown 1988; Billings and Blee 2000). There is little evidence of a leisure class, a quasi-aristocracy, or large-scale absentee land ownership. As Stanley Ruppert said, “That just didn’t happen here.” The larger landowners held several hundred acres – but even though they were able to hire a few workers, establish tenants, or set up a sawmill, they still had to farm and work with their own hands. In Russia, they would have been known as “kulaks,” rich peasants, where being rich meant having plenty to eat or owning Sunday clothes – not lounging at soirées on the country estate. At the other end of the spectrum, something like a quarter of residents were landless or land-poor, and thus reliant on wages or tenantry.

So who was right? Does Ronald Eller’s vision of a Jeffersonian yeomanry fit the MERJ area, or Wilma Dunaway’s picture of land grabbing and exploitation by elites? In crucial ways, Dunaway was correct, as long as we keep in mind that, in this case, most of the “elites” who used unequal land distribution to exploit the landless were relatively local and small-scale. At the same time, it seems that the majority of families struggled more with the land itself than with each other. In other words, poverty may have been more a product of the limitations of the land, given a certain population size, than of class exploitation. In a sense this fits with Eller’s picture of a place where class was limited – but it does not support the romantic, Jeffersonian ideal of flourishing agrarianism.

One final point, before we move on to the years after 1940. Contemporary homesteaders, as I mentioned in chapter one, mix heightened subsistence production with other livelihood strategies, such as wage labor or petty commodity production. They are not, often to their chagrin, entirely self-reliant. This chagrin is generated by the idea that, in the past, people could easily do without cash income; that the contemporary need for cash draws a sharp line between the present and the past. But it doesn’t. Whatever the differences between homesteading now and then, it has always been, in the MERJ area, pursued as one strand in a bundle of livelihood strategies.

3. Modernization and dislocation (1940 to the present)

3.1. Local industrial development

When the US entered World War II, massive government spending drove up both employment and wages, and finally broke the lingering doldrums of the Great Depression. High employment, coupled with historically high union membership and redistributive New Deal policies, spread the benefits of economic growth widely across

the population and fueled an unprecedented economic boom that lasted until the early 1970s. This boom transformed the economy of the MERJ area; people's lives changed more in these thirty years than they had in the previous century-and-a-half.

As soon as wage labor became readily available, rural Appalachians pursued it. One of the most dramatic effects of the boom was that a river of people flowed out of central and southern Appalachia, searching for wage labor in industrial cities in Ohio, Indiana, and other nearby states. "In some counties," notes Ronald Eller, "the movement off the land in the 1950s was so profound that it almost eliminated farming altogether. Forty counties in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia lost more than 70 percent of their farm population" (Eller 2008: 29). From 1940 to 1950, a period when the population of the US as a whole increased by twenty percent, the population of Rockcastle County dropped from 17,165 to 13,925 – a nineteen percent drop. From 1950 to 1960, the population dropped another eleven percent, to 12,334 (Historical Census Browser 2004). This massive outmigration is another theme that unites interviews with local elders. Hollers that used to have several large families living in them became empty. In his interview with Allebaugh, Henry Chasteen listed all the families that used to live in a valley where only one family remains. Brad Sutherland had nine siblings; except for him, *all* of them moved away in search of work. Elva Northern moved back and forth from Ohio several times, from farm to factory and back. Verda Shearer, who was born in 1899, moved to Dayton in 1943 and worked in factories making war materiel. "Half of Kentucky was right there," she said. After the war, she stayed in Dayton, and worked in a factory dismantling that same materiel, pulling apart radios and other products. When counterculture back-to-the-landers (who we will look at in the next chapter) began to move into the countryside in the early 1970s, they often moved into abandoned farmhouses and gardened in abandoned fields.

Leaving in search of work elsewhere was particularly attractive to the poorest families, as can be seen in the historical course of tenant farming. In 1930, when there was little work to be found elsewhere, the proportion of farms operated by tenants was 23 percent in Jackson County, 29 percent in Rockcastle, and a whopping 44 percent in Madison County, with its history of plantation agriculture, relatively good soils, and focus on tobacco production. But in 1950, when work was available if you were willing to move, tenant farms in Jackson County had dropped to 8 percent of the total, and to 15 percent in Rockcastle County. In Madison County, by contrast, agricultural production began to modernize, tenant farming remained viable, and 35 percent of farms were still worked by tenant labor (Historical Census Browser 2004).

As of the 2010 census, the population in all three mountain counties, Estill, Jackson, and Rockcastle, had still not recovered to pre-war levels. Jackson County peaked at 16,399 people in 1940, at the tail end of the Depression. As of 2000, the population was 13,495 – and ten years later, in 2010, it had dropped by a single person, to 13,494 (United States Bureau of the Census 2000).

The other major economic change was that during and after the war, growing numbers of wage-labor jobs became available inside the MERJ area. Most of these jobs were located in Madison County, with its flatter land and proximity to rail and roadways. Nonetheless, these nearby jobs had a huge impact on those who remained in Red Lick

Valley, or Disputanta, or up Big Hill in Jackson County: for the first time, there was the option of moving or commuting to Berea or Richmond, instead of tearing yourself up by the roots and heading for Dayton. Among interviewees who did not leave the area, all of them sought local wage-labor; many of them left the country and moved to Berea or Richmond to make this more practical.

The single largest change came in 1942, when construction began on a military base, the 15,000 acre Blue Grass Ordnance Depot, which generated 6,500 jobs at its peak and drew thousands of young families out of the nearby mountains. The Depot, said Daisy Flaherty, “sucked up all the men here.” Workers built two hundred miles of roads and railroads on the site, and hundreds of munitions storage igloos and other buildings. This massive project pumped nearly \$20 million dollars into the local economy during the war years alone (Ellis et al. 1985: 331).

During the forties, fifties, and sixties, key infrastructures such as highways, dams, and power plants were built throughout the South, laying a foundation upon which the capital-friendly policies of the southern states could finally produce a wholesale economic transformation (Cobb 1993; Kirby 1987; Whisnant 1980). These trends were reflected in the MERJ area. Rural roads were paved or graveled; permanent bridges were built over creeks. In 1947, a gigantic bridge was completed across the Kentucky River in northern Madison County, replacing the narrow steel bridge that dated from 1871 (Ellis et al. 1985: 342). As of 1950, rural electricity and phone service was limited; Rockcastle County, with a population of almost 14,000 people, had about a hundred phones, all of them in town (Spence 1956). But this began to change rapidly. Several interviewees, living in different parts of the area, spoke about getting electric service in the mid-1950s. Clarence Daughtry’s family got electricity in 1954. “We got electricity in ‘54,” he said, “and we had one plug in every room and a pull-chain light fixture. We was in seventh heaven.” Harm Smallwood was about fifteen years old when his home was electrified:

Played the radio on Saturday nights. Break up beans and listen to the Grand Ole Opry. Might be lucky enough to have a neighbor over – break them beans, listen to the Grand Ole. It watn’t long before we got ‘frigerator and telephone, TV. We thought things was comin alive. Especially when you could turn that porch light on and play out in the yard at night.

Infrastructure continued to change rapidly into the 1960s. In 1966, Interstate 75 bisected Madison and Rockcastle counties. According to James Causey, that was a pivotal moment: “The big change in this part of the country came when I-75 came through.” I-75 served, in effect, as an inducement to outside capital, and gave yet another push to the re-orientation away from diversified farming and toward wage labor. Two years after the freeway was completed passenger service ceased on the local L&N railroad (Ellis et al 1985: 354).

Throughout this post-war period, the combination of infrastructure, cheap and pliant labor, and hungry local governments began to draw industry from the north. Several factories opened in Richmond, including a Westinghouse light bulb plant in 1947

that hired several hundred workers. Industrialization was even more marked in Berea – perched on the very edge of the mountain reservoir of cheap labor. “Industrial growth in Berea,” writes William Ellis, “became the major cause for the growth of that town in the sixties and seventies.”

In 1951, the Parker-Seal Company, a plant making rubber O-rings, began to change the economic base of the area. The Berea city government and chamber of commerce aggressively pursued industry. Berea College industries, dating back to 1859 [and employing almost exclusively students], and Churchill Weavers, founded in 1922, were joined by Dresser Industries (1961), Gibson Greeting Card Company (1967), Goodyear Aerospace (1972), and Hyster Company (1973). (Ellis et al. 1985: 357)

All of this industry was located in Madison County, near the railroad and, eventually, the freeway. But it was aimed at potential workers in the hills. Many older interviewees worked in these places, laying block for the buildings, running the electric cables, or working on the line once the factory was built. They either moved out of the mountains to Berea or Richmond, or drove down to work every morning.

The same pattern continues today. In Berea and Richmond, nearly 5,000 industrial workers build forklifts, insulated cables, “lead-acid industrial batteries,” automotive struts and suspensions, transmission gears, windshields, candles, “rubber syringe stoppers,” and so on and on (Curry 2010). Every day, people wake before dawn and drive down out of the mountains to keep the assembly lines humming: 1,200 workers commute from Estill County, 700 from Jackson, and almost 2,000 from Rockcastle, which is more than 10 percent of its entire population (ibid).

During WWII and the thirty years after, production was industrialized in other areas as well. From 1940 to 1945, the number of farm trucks and tractors in Madison County nearly doubled (Ellis et al. 1985: 335); from ‘45 to ‘50, the number doubled again – a *quadrupling* in a decade (ibid: 344). In 1978, McDonald’s opened its first store in Berea; I only know the date because my mother started working there in the first wave of hiring. This was a harbinger of a different kind of industrialization, in the form of what is now aptly referred to as the *service industry*, and which, alongside industry, provides the bulk of non-professional jobs in the area.

The population doubled, and doubled again – even as most of the black families in Madison County left for greener pastures in the north (Lemann 1991; Marionneaux 1999). The farm fences fell, and exurban ranch homes sprang up where cattle had grazed. In 1970, the population in Madison County became majority urban for the first time (Curry 2010). In the early 1990s, barely thirty years after the coming of the interstate, earnings from manufacture in Madison County surpassed those of agriculture (Marionneaux 1999).

3.2. Class-driven development

During a thirty-year period, from the early '40s to the early '70s, the economy of the MERJ area was utterly transformed. In the span of a young adult's life, the foundations of economic life, established for a century-and-a-half, were uprooted, demolished, and replaced with something else. This something else was, in short, industrial capitalism cradled by a welfare state. As we have seen, there is little evidence that local individuals were forced out of peasant farming – landed or not, local families voluntarily sought wage labor when it was available. Nonetheless, even as it provided a boost in material incomes, this was a destructive process. Critiques of capitalism that point to its exploitative character hold up in the MERJ area: this was a class system, in which those at the bottom produced more than they received. In this transformation, the neoliberal-style development strategies that southern elites had been pushing since the end of the Civil War finally bore fruit in the MERJ area. And neoliberal-style development it was: local and state elites spent taxpayer money to subsidize outside investment that was explicitly searching for cheap, vulnerable, non-union labor. In *The Selling of the South*, historian James Cobb carefully documented how such development practices continued throughout the south from the 1860s up until the present. One popular strategy was exempting new industries from taxes.

By the mid-1960s five of the seven most active exponents of taxes were in the south. Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana led the way by offering ten-year exemptions on both state and local taxes. South Carolina and Kentucky followed with five-year moratoriums. Between 1958 and 1961 these states granted industry valued at \$1,472,800,000 exemptions worth \$143,840,000. (Cobb 1993: 48)

Another common strategy was to provide taxpayer-funded infrastructure specifically for a particular corporate suitor:

Toyota's 1985 decision to open an assembly plant in Georgetown, Kentucky, was tied to an incentive package including site, site preparation, highway construction, worker training, and tax concessions estimated in the \$350-to-400 million range (ibid: 269).

These kinds of "development" strategies are not only used at the state level, but are wielded by counties and municipalities in competition with one another (Weinbaum 2004). In the MERJ area, the cities of Richmond and Berea both funded infrastructure to suit potential employers. For example, "in 1963 the city of Richmond sold \$2 million in bonds to pay for construction of the brake-lining plant," H. K. Porter (Ellis et al. 1985: 356). This cozy relationship between the state and private interests crops up even in places where you don't expect it. The single largest project in the history of the area, the Bluegrass Depot, would appear at first glance to represent an example of state socialism, of government production with little role for private profit. But in 1943, a year after the project began, Firestone Tire and Rubber took over management of the Depot from the

federal government (Ellis et al. 1985: 332). It is here, in tax and other policies – not in the prying of labor off of the land – that we see primitive accumulation at work.

In addition, these capitalist firms were interested in paying the lowest possible wages. Even though Kentucky, in part because of the history of mineworker unionization, is the only southeastern state that does not have anti-union “right-to-work” laws on the books, industrial employment in the MERJ area has been largely non-union (Ellis et al. 1985: 355). Businesses prefer to keep it that way. H. K. Porter, the brake-lining plant subsidized by the city of Richmond, left in 1975 after a strike (ibid: 356). Dresser Industries, a major employer in Berea for forty years, suddenly pulled up stakes in 2003, heading for even cheaper labor in Mexico and leaving behind 240 laid-off workers and a legacy of industrial poisoning (Gustin 2003; Barringer 2009). Wal-Mart, another big employer, is well known for its aggressive anti-union policies (e.g. Olsson 2003).

I am writing as if this form of so-called economic development is a bad idea. A fair question, then, and one faced by local policymakers every day, is *what, if anything, is the alternative?* Am I implying that it would have been better for the MERJ area to not industrialize? Am I arguing for centralized, Soviet-style state socialism? Is there any realistic way to radically increase the efficiency of labor except for giving industry owners what they want? These questions are too complicated to address in detail here (we will return to them in chapter five), but let me make two quick points. First, even if we take this model – where different regions try to attract private, profit-driven investment – as a given, cutthroat competition among states and counties and municipalities to attract this outside investment is a bad idea. Southern policymakers, as James Cobb points out, “persisted in this practice in the face of overwhelming opposition from economists, financiers, and industrial location experts,” who argued that since every state was doing it, no one gained an advantage, and that the result was just to rob the poorest communities of needed tax revenue (Cobb 1993: 48).

Second, there are realistic non-capitalist forms of economic and industrial development. Examples of them are common in the MERJ area. Harm Smallwood’s home was electrified by a rural electric cooperative. These were member-owned non-profit corporations that brought electric service into low-density rural areas where capitalist firms did not expect to make a profit. Some of the first industries in the area were developed as part of Berea College’s crafts program – a not-for-profit corporation of a different sort. Most of the funding for basic infrastructure, like I-75, came from tax revenue; one of the biggest long-term employers in the area is the state-funded Eastern Kentucky University. EKV is not industry, per se; but it is a major economic institution in the area, and it is not a capitalist corporation. Other forms of state socialism are crucial: the creation of various social security programs, for example, helped make industry in the area possible, by keeping demand for industrial goods from collapsing. Most directly relevant here – because it is an example of large-scale industry – is Okonite Cable Company, one of many factories in the area, which produces huge spools of industrial cabling. Okonite competes in the marketplace like any other privately owned firm, but it is not capitalist: it is a worker-owned cooperative, and is well-known in the area for paying substantially higher wages than the other local, capitalist factories.

There were, and are, alternative ways to go about economic development. Thus, the path that was actually taken in the MERJ area, and throughout the south, was politically, not practically, determined. It could have been different. In that sense, capitalist development was something *done to* local people, an immoral set of relationships imposed from outside.

One final point in this section. In looking at this kind of economic strategy, where industry is “brought in,” from somewhere else, it is easy to slip into phrasing that implies just that – some other set of people brought industry to the poor farmers of Jackson County and Red Lick Valley. That is incorrect. Local people did almost all of the work of building the factories and the roads and running the electric lines and keeping the factories churning once they were built. All that came from outside was the *initial* funding, and, in the form of engineers and technical specialists, very specific elements of *initial* expertise. It would make more sense to say that, using funds generated by the labor of workers elsewhere, and paid less than they should have been, people in the MERJ area turned their back on peasant farming, and industrialized themselves.

3.3. Dislocation

As a result of the industrialization of the MERJ area, people are better off materially than they were before. In 1959 – even after twenty years of rapid economic growth – per capita income in Jackson County was \$2,492. The national average in that year, at \$7,259, was three times as much. Rockcastle County was only slightly better off, with an income of \$2,602 per person, while people in Madison County survived on about two-thirds the national average, at \$4,654. Over the next forty years, income in the MERJ area rose quickly – in historical terms, unprecedentedly so. In 1969, Jackson Countians’ income jumped to \$3,726; ten years later, it had risen to \$5,965; and ten years after that, in 1989, it stood at \$7,097. (These amounts have been adjusted for inflation and converted into 1989 dollars.) In forty years, cash income tripled. To be sure, at the end of this rise, in 1989, Jackson County still lagged far behind the national average, which was \$14,420 (all statistics from US Bureau of the Census 2000). It was still a relatively low-income place. Nonetheless, it had gained ground on the rest of the nation, rising from one third of the national per capita income to one half. Perhaps more importantly, local people had their level of material affluence increase dramatically, and do so quickly enough that individuals could see it happen.

Interviewees who lived through this transition are consistent in applauding certain aspects of it: specifically, better jobs, better education, and social security. “If you got a job with income and a little social security and insurance,” said Clarence Daughtry bluntly, “it beats [small-scale] farming.” Stanley Ruppert felt the same way, arguing that mountain farming was a harsh life, and that the New Deal and local industrialization together had helped combat rural poverty. The main social change over this period was that people are “just better educated, [have] better jobs.” He singled out social security for praise:

Before Franklin Roosevelt you didn’t have social security. Your old people, even if they lived to be a hundred years old, they still had to work.

They had to eke out a living some way whether it's just a home garden, they had to keep working. So, you know, what would you do right now if they eliminated social security? We would have revolutions. No other way to see it but that.

In his interview with Henry Chasteen, Terry Allebaugh asked directly, "Do you think the way of life improved when these public works jobs came in?" ("Public work" or "public jobs" was how residents of the mountains described any kind of wage labor.)

Chasteen: Well, yeah.

Allebaugh: Think they were happier?

Chasteen: Yeah. If there wadn't no jobs now, it'd been a pitiful fix as many people as they is in the world.

Allebaugh, with a folklorist's concern for traditional ways, wonders if maybe the changes were ambiguous, asking "I just wondered if you think anything was lost when public works jobs came on, do you think it was good progress?" But Chasteen isn't having any of it: "If they hadn't got these jobs, why it would have been worse than what it is. Don't you look at it that a-way?"

Let's be clear: the economic changes in the MERJ area represent a tremendous accomplishment, created by decades of hard work that harnessed technology to make labor many times more productive than it had been in the past.

At the same time, however, those accomplishments have a bitter edge, for two main, overlapping reasons. First – as Allebaugh was suggesting – it's impossible to change a society so much without losing things of value. Even if the changes, because they alleviated severe poverty, were mostly welcomed by those who lived through them, they were too sweeping to be entirely beneficent. A second, less innocent reason, is that the specific kind of capitalist, profit-driven development involved has a heavier-than-necessary cost. Many of the jobs that were created are low-quality jobs – lower quality than they need to be. People work longer hours for lower pay than they ought to, given the productivity of their labor. Even though residents of the MERJ area are materially better off than they used to be, they are not as materially well-off as they *should* be, given the labor they have done – a topic we'll return to in chapter five.

They went, in short, from being a peasantry to being a vulnerable proletariat.

With the exception of a few workers who earn a high income through skilled work or executive position, most residents of the Appalachian parts of the MERJ area are now members of a lower-status working class. As people who have decided to remain in a relatively poor rural area, they are, moreover, part of a particularly vulnerable working-class group. Within the span of a generation, established ways of life which people took pride in have been demolished by a modernity which offers, for most people, increased material consumption, but often at the price of submitting to low-quality, exploitative wage labor. They have limited access to high-quality literate educations, which leaves them bereft of tools that are necessary to re-locate themselves within the new order – an issue that we will examine more closely in later chapters. In exchange for more stuff –

much of which is genuinely needed – people have found themselves utterly dislocated. They have been displaced without moving.

One problem is that the heavily capitalist economic growth in the area distributed its material benefits unevenly. There was increasing affluence, but it didn't reach everyone. Many families continued to struggle with destitution. Elva Northern told a story about hiking out into the woods in the snow with a handsaw, sometime in the 1950s or '60s, to try to cut timber to pay her daughter's medical bills. Naomi Hayward, who was born in 1964 in Jackson County, grew up in the same kind of poverty that characterized the pre-WWII era.

I was raised up in a little two-room house. Biggest room was the size of this one, then a little small kitchen, 'n then we had no electricity, no indoor plumbin, runnin water. Coil lamps, was our electric. And my grandma had what they called a laundry stove. It was jus' a little four cap cast iron stove she cooked on. That's how I was raised. I didn't know what a TV was till I was six years old when I came to my mom and step-dad to go to school. I seen a TV and I thought, what's that, you know [laughs].

During one particularly hard time, in the winter of 1969, they nearly ran out of food.

I remember one time I was about five years old. It want't quite spring but winter was kind of going out and I remember we got down to where we didn't even have a bite in the house. 'N my grandma she never asked nobody for nothin – forget it, that women would starve. And I had this little chicken, and she had maybe a cup of flour. She told me, she said, baby, she said, "Mamaw's going to have to kill your chicken now so we can have somethin to eat." And I said ok. And she said, "I'll get you another one when spring time comes." You know I'm a kid, I don't know where chickens come from. She killed my chicken that night, boiled it, made a little gravy to go with it, and that was our supper. I can remember that's the poorest I've ever been. I mean it down to *nothin* to eat.

Neither of the two main choices faced by most mountain residents – work long hours at a low-quality job, either in the area or somewhere else, or face material deprivation – are conducive to a flourishing life. Working-class people in the contemporary MERJ area struggle and suffer in new ways. A friend who has worked for many years as an occupational therapist in rural eastern Kentucky describes it as a "devastated society." As a health care worker, she sees some of the worst impacts of the hard living that results from this particular kind of capitalist modernity: Thirty-year-olds burnt hollow on methamphetamines. A young boy who shot his father dead to stop a vicious beating of his mom. Developmentally-disabled children who spent much of their lives in a shed in the backyard.

A family of homesteaders who reluctantly sold their Jackson County farm in 2005 and moved to Berea echoed this theme. They were both from rural Appalachian families

themselves, but with college educations and professional jobs they stood somewhat apart from working-class life. The woman, Tina Fielder, was especially disturbed by the social dysfunction she witnessed, and its impact on women. We moved to town, she said, mainly

because of serious problems in our rural home with methamphetamine and prescription pill addiction. In all honesty, had the community been healthier in terms of its psyche, I could have handled the commute. There was some seriously negative energy in our beautiful spot. As hippie as that sounds, it is very true. Violence, theft, and lots of accepted domestic abuse. I could not live with all that around me, especially after my son was born.

Drug addiction, and prescription drug abuse in particular, has become such a scourge in the mountains that it has spawned its own slang terms, like “pillbillies,” and “hillbilly heroin.” One friend describes his county as “so overrun with prescription drugs it is basically an open-air drug market.” In 2002, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* reported that “a quarter of the overdose deaths in the nation linked to OxyContin were in eastern Kentucky...Nearly every family in eastern Kentucky has been touched by prescription-drug addiction and death” (Estep et al. 2011). A report by the Appalachian Regional Commission found that prescription painkiller abuse was twice the national average in the economically distressed counties of Appalachia. The report linked this abuse, and other public health issues like mental health, directly to economic conditions:

The picture of substance use and mental health concerns among Appalachian adolescents becomes even clearer when analyses are conducted by county economic status level, suggesting that economic status plays a key role in mental health and substance abuse issues. Findings demonstrate that adolescents in distressed and at-risk Appalachian counties, compared to adolescents in other Appalachian counties, have the highest rate of non-medical use of psychotherapeutics. Cigarette and alcohol use are also key concerns for adolescents in Appalachia. Proportionately more adolescents reported heavy alcohol use inside Appalachia than outside of Appalachia. Similarly, proportionately more adolescents used cigarettes in Appalachia than outside of Appalachia. (Zhang et al. 2008)

This begins to sound like a tour of Appalachian stereotypes, of Hollywood clichés of picturesque trailer-park dysfunction. But there is nothing inherently Appalachian about any of this: it is not the expression of some region-wide Appalachian culture or back-of-the-holler ignorance. Similar stories are generated wherever unfettered capitalism pulls a new population into its ambit, either as vulnerable workers without traditions of labor organizing, or as displaced producers whose traditional economic activities have been rendered superfluous, or – in many cases – both. I have seen strikingly similar troubles on

the Yurok Reservation in Northern California, where I spent my late teens – a place that shares little with the MERJ area except persistent economic vulnerability, dislocation, and exploitation by outside elites.

4. An invisible back-to-the-land movement

As Madison County and the MERJ area industrialized, subsistence production underwent a largely uncharted transition. Although it did not disappear, there was a decline in the percentage of residents who seriously pursued it and in the degree to which families were dependent upon it. For the first hundred-and-fifty years of European-driven settlement, people engaged in peasant production because they had little choice; barring outmigration, they were relatively disconnected from the growing industrial economy centered in other parts of the US, and from the kinds of jobs and lifestyles this economy made possible. Put simply, residents homesteaded in the past because they were not sufficiently linked to high-productivity industrial production.

Today, however, there is no straightforward explanation for the persistence of subsistence production. Why does James Hamilton live the way he does? Why do so many of his rural neighbors continue to provide directly for themselves, building houses, growing gardens, gathering eggs, and crapping in outhouses? For the most part, people today do not pursue homesteading because there is simply no other way to make a living. Very few families grow a garden so that they won't starve, or build their own house so that they will avoid utter homelessness. A social practice that was once relatively easy to explain is now difficult. What appear superficially to be the same tasks – planting potatoes, canning beans, splitting firewood – are now pursued for different reasons than they once were, and must therefore be understood as a fundamentally different set of social phenomena. It is therefore somewhat misleading to say that old-fashioned homesteading *persists* or *continues*; rather, there is something that looks like historical homesteading, but is not the same thing.

As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the dominant stereotypes of contemporary “hick” homesteaders is that they are simply continuing to live how they were raised, in a sort of cultural inertia. This is inaccurate. For contemporary country homesteaders, there is a strong degree of continuity and connection to what came before. What does not exist is *inertia*. In certain ways, they may be carrying on traditional forms of production, but they do so as a matter of conscious choice. One simple way to see this is in the willingness to abandon traditional subsistence practices for updated ones. Without any exceptions that I am aware of in the MERJ area, everyone uses chainsaws and pickup trucks. Families who live in log cabins in remote hollers travel the trails on four-wheelers, and keep in touch – when they can get a signal – via cell phone. If they're doing carpentry off the grid, they use power tools and a generator. When people embrace subsistence production, they are pretty serious about the production part: this is not about striking a pose or reliving the past.

The exercise of choice is present even in families that, at first glance, appear to be simply following an unbroken line of rural Appalachian tradition. James Hamilton's parents, William and Ethel Hamilton, who live in a hand-built house without modern amenities like electricity or heated water, dress in Amish-style homemade clothes, and

farm with horses and old-time tools, appear to be living in the way they have known all their lives. But this is not the case. Like many Appalachian families, they moved to a city in Ohio early in their marriage, in search of wage labor. It was in response to that experience that they chose homesteading. As James explained, “They was already leaning to the edge of that [city] life, had a good take-off in it. They’d bought a house trailer, a brand new vehicle and everything, and they decided to pay off what they had borrowed and go live the way they do.” To succeed at meeting most of their needs through their own labor, they had a lot to learn, especially Ethel: “She was raised pretty normal, not as old-fashioned as daddy. She was raised, you know, with ‘lectric. Now she’s right in there just like him.”

In a real sense, William and Ethel are back-to-the-landers. They are part of an invisible “hick” back-to-the-land movement, one parallel to the other, more visible “hippie” back-to-the-land movement, which we’ll examine in the next chapter.

Subsistence production is no longer the single foundational economic activity, particularly in the so-called developed world. However, in terms of its contribution to overall production, as we saw in chapter one, it remains substantial – particularly in the form of the domestic labors of child-care, food preparation, and so on. But it is no longer the basic mode of production upon which all others ride piggyback. It interacts with a number of other kinds of political-economic activity, from petty commodity production (e.g., the sandwich from the local shop which I’m eating) to state production (the public university at which I am writing this dissertation), to capitalism (the MacBook which I’m typing it on), and so on, which together comprise the incredibly complex mixed economies which characterize most nations today. To understand peasant production today, one must look at how it articulates with this larger set of extra-local political and economic relationships – and in particular, at the peculiarly imperial and increasingly dominant set of relationships called *capitalism*.

Contemporary homesteading in eastern Kentucky is neither reducible to capitalism nor some automatic outgrowth of it. Nonetheless, capitalism is the context from which that homesteading draws its logic. The fundamental claim of this study is precisely this: contemporary homesteading can be understood only in the light of capitalism. Sometimes this claim can be applied rather directly, as when people turn to homesteading in an attempt to distance themselves from the poor-quality, low-paying, and mostly capitalist wage jobs available to them. In other ways, as we shall see, capitalism exerts an indirect but no less powerful shaping.

CHAPTER 3

UNEARTHING THE BACK-TO-THE-LAND MOVEMENT



Figure 3.1. Tailgate literature.

1. Dismissing the Sixties

Beginning in the late 1960s, a different kind of back-to-the-land movement burgeoned in the MERJ area, growing up alongside the existing movement created by local country folks. As with the country back-to-the-landers, this newer “hippie” back-to-the-land movement has been mainly ignored by mainstream society, and misunderstood when it was not. But it has also been subject to a surprising degree of ridicule and even vilification. Before we can begin to understand this second movement – or even ask intelligent questions about it – we must engage in some serious myth busting. That’s the task of this chapter.

For convenience, in this chapter I will generally refer to the “hippie” back-to-the-land movement simply as the “back-to-the-land movement,” except when I need to distinguish it from the “hick” back-to-the-land movements that co-exists, somewhat

uneasily, alongside it. When it is not clear which group I am referring to, I'll lean toward the adjective "bohemian," a term that is more inclusive and less pejorative than "hippie." For hicks, I'll use "country" homesteaders, because it is less pejorative.

1.1. The counterculture according to the death narrative

In November 2004, UC Berkeley hosted a conference on the communes that flourished around the Bay Area beginning in the late 1960s. In attendance were professors, students, and former communards. The crowd was just small enough to stuff itself into one large classroom. One dominant theme that emerged from the presentations and conversations was the idea that the hip counterculture had passed away. One after another, the speakers – who had helped create some of the iconic events of the sixties, from the Trips Festival to Morning Star Ranch – bemoaned the dying of that counterculture. They felt they had participated in something profound, a crucial if flawed critique of mainstream society. But the communes collapsed or were crushed by the law, the urban scene soured, and later generations of young people were seduced by consumerist versions of bohemia even as they nourished mainstream careers and narrowed lives. Aside from some of the younger students, those present seemed to agree with this assessment.

The sounding of this theme was no accident, as evidenced by a convergence on the same conclusions at another conference of former communards in Vermont. After a "brief heyday" in the late sixties, the rural communes died, "impaled on their own excesses." One participant, close to tears, said, "'There was a brief, shining moment when we knew it could work. We knew it could work, but we blew it'" (Johnson 1998).

In one iteration or another, such claims supply what is arguably the dominant framing of leftist sixties radicalism in all its forms. Older conference attendees were participating in what has been aptly described as a "death narrative," in which the political and cultural dissent of the sixties is seen as having flourished for a moment and then passed away, leaving society only weakly and vaguely influenced by the actions of dissidents (Watts 2001). This overarching claim is supported by subsidiary interpretations: sixties dissent was fundamentally naïve and misguided, an indulgent revolt of affluent and coddled children. It passed away as the kids grew up, showered, and found more sober pursuits. The specific claims vary, depending on the particular strand of dissent in question, but the overall thesis – a momentary efflorescence followed by a rapid decline and a return to business as usual – is consistent. The major exception comes, ironically, from hard-right commentators who posit another death narrative, in which sixties leftist radicalism failed not through a lack of influence, but because its influence was widespread – and pernicious.

In his article "1968 and all that," Michael Watts documents an overwhelming trend in accounts of the 1960s published during the last two decades of the past century. With few exceptions – "the contraflow is no more than a trickle" – scholars and pundits from across the political spectrum concluded that the legacy of the sixties is null or negative (Watts 2001: 165). This revisionist history "produced what Julie Stephens calls 'the death narrative': a revolutionary and emancipatory project dashed on the shoals of political immaturity and idealism" (Watts 2001: 161; quoting Stephens 1998). Timothy

Miller, a leading scholar of the sixties counterculture in the United States, agrees: “The wave of sixties-nostalgia literature which mushroomed in the late 1980s generally regarded it as all over... The era of the hippies and the New Left was a colorful and chaotic one, but in the long run it hasn’t made much of an impact on the larger society: such is the conventional wisdom” (Miller 1991: 133). Watts shows that this “bleak and pessimistic” assessment is applied not just to certain elements or forms of leftist sixties radicalism, but globally in all senses of the word: to the overtly political New Left as well as to the cultural activism of the hippies; to unrest in Britain as well as to revolt in Mexico. “Whether the voices emanate from London or Paris or New York or Mexico City, the death narrative reigns supreme” (Watts 2001: 166). Note that Watts and Miller are looking at how the sixties have been framed *by scholars*. Within more popular forms of mass media, as we shall see, the tendency to belittle and dismiss is even less restrained, the death narrative rampant and virtually unchallenged.

Within the overarching, global death narrative of the sixties left, I am concerned here primarily with a subgenre concerning the counterculture in the United States and Canada.² According to this stereotype, hippies were white college-age kids from middle-class backgrounds, who gathered in a handful of hip urban neighborhoods in the late sixties to rebel against the staid culture of their parents. This version of the death narrative often wields a sharp-edged ridicule: the counterculture was sloppy and naïve, characterized by promiscuous sex, unrestrained indulgence in illegal drugs, shabby dress and poor hygiene, and general indolence and dissolution. There is a focus on extremes, on excess, on depravity. The tone runs from avuncular amusement – “their favorite dessert was hash brownies, washed down with electric Kool-Aid” (Kates 1985) – to stern judgment, where the Haight Ashbury of “moon-faced narcissists and dropouts” was “idyllic for about five minutes” before descending into an acid-fueled nightmare of rape and murder (Hitchens 2004).

Since the counterculture was just a bunch of spoiled kids acting out, it follows that it was a short-lived movement, lasting only as long as it took this cohort to mature. Thus, little over a decade later, in the early 1980s, “the ‘60s counterculture had been completely commodified,” and today “any large-scale youth ‘community’ would be virtual, on Facebook and Twitter, and so might some of the sex. Only pot remains eternal” (Rich 2009). “San Francisco’s Flower Power era is history,” another journalist concludes, “when you find the Gap at the corner of Haight and Ashbury” (Bula 2000). A key element in this trope of decline is the image of hippies who grew up, “cut off their ponytails, disposed of their Ho posters and made for Wall Street” (Watts 2001: 182). Juvenile dalliance behind them, they returned to the fold of mainstream affluence; as one title proclaims, “Yesteryear’s Hippie Is Today’s Capitalist” (Nunes 1982). Instead of “hash brownies and LSD drinks,” today “it’s chocolate truffles and *Chateaufort-du-Pape*” (Kates 1985). These tales of consumerist recidivism are presented as a sort of empirical coup de grâce, irrefutable evidence of the soundness of the death narrative.

² Although the term *counterculture* fits many groups in the United States, I will use it here as a shorthand to refer specifically to the sixties “hippie” or bohemian counterculture, and its descendants, broadly construed.

Part of the persuasiveness of such stories is that they are not pure fantasy. They are built through a certain argumentative logic, a kind of history-by-synecdoche, where a handful of exemplar events and celebrity personalities stand in for – and tell us all we need to know about – the experience of millions. The counterculture rose through Woodstock and the Trips Festival; it was embodied in the swashbuckling personality of Ken Kesey; it died in the stabbings at Altamont and the “sadistic fiesta” of the Manson Family (Hitchens 2004). And, as everyone knows, when the party was over, the ex-hippies went to Wall Street – one need look no further than Jerry Rubin. These same bits of evidence are recycled until they become the only evidence one needs to tell the story.

Not all print media treatments of the counterculture participate in these generalizations.³ Coverage falls largely into two categories, roughly equivalent in frequency. One category is composed of portrayals consistent with the death narrative. The other is comprised of articles whose topic is not the counterculture *in general*, but a particular person, business, or place with strong ties to the counterculture. Confronted with actual people, the authors of such articles often move beyond dismissive assumptions and write nuanced and appreciative accounts. Even here, however, dominant assumptions survive; such stories are often presented, explicitly, as exceptions.

Michael Niman found this same pattern in the media coverage of the Rainbow Family. The Rainbow Family of Living Light held its first gathering in 1972 in Colorado, a four-day event which drew 20,000 people, the purpose of which was to “further the cause of world peace by prayer and to create a peaceful and non-hierarchical society that can serve as a model for reforming ‘Babylon,’ the industrialized world” (Niman 1997: 32). The Rainbows afford particular insight into the workings of the death narrative because the gatherings (both regional and national) are as well attended, energetic, and visually flamboyant as ever, and as such generate a steady stream of human-interest news coverage.

This media coverage, particularly at the national level, indulges the death narrative almost without exception. According to national newspapers and magazines, the Rainbows are “leftover hippies” and “holdouts” who “romp” and “laze” in an “annual celebration of woody-headed idealism.” Amid “overflowing latrines” these “Hare Krishnas and assorted flower children” “rant about peace and rights” – but they’re really there to smoke pot, trade needles, and exchange casual sex in the boogie meadow (quotes from Niman 1997: 148 and *passim*). It is not only the shallow ridicule that survives in journalistic accounts of Rainbow gatherings, but, ironically, the thesis of a failed legacy. Confronted with a vibrant gathering of 20,000 Rainbows, journalists somehow still manage to cling to the conclusion that what they are witnessing is purely anachronistic. One article from the mid-1990s describes the Rainbows as “fading freaks” and “leftover hippies,” even while complaining that “there seem to be fewer legitimate hippies” since “the bulk of this year’s crew at the Rainbow gathering is between 17 and 25 years old” (Campbell and Murphy 1995, quoted in Niman 1997: 154).

³ I focus on print media simply because there is no accessible archive of television and radio programming. The claims in this and following passages are based on a survey of nearly three hundred newspaper and magazine articles.

Niman also finds a similar pattern of exceptions to this coverage. The main source of more responsible treatment is, ironically, local media based in small-town and rural communities near where a gathering occurs. For these local media, a gathering is big news, and it is not uncommon for reporters to make a more serious effort, visiting a gathering for an extended period, rather than parachuting in for a hit-and-run news-of-the-weird piece, like the Newsweek reporter who spent only four hours at a gathering and did not quote a single participant in her story (ibid: 153). “The tenor of the press coverage,” Niman concludes, “is directly related to the amount of contact reporters and editors have with Rainbow Family members” (ibid: 159).

It is hard to avoid the logic of the death narrative. Certain personalities, events, and locations have received the lion’s share of attention. These are, in most cases, drawn from the extreme and outlandish end of a whole range of counterculture activities. It is easy – as I found when I taught an undergraduate seminar on the counterculture – to learn about the Merry Pranksters or Woodstock, about which there are novels, interviews, scholarly assessments, albums, memoirs, coffee table books, documentaries, websites, and Hollywood films. The death narrative, as pat history, is compact and convenient; it fits readily inside newspaper columns and deadlines. It is at least partly reinforced by prevailing interpretations within the academy. By contrast, one has to read against the current to discover the more prosaic, diverse, and profound stories that are the actual content – in statistical terms – of the counterculture experience.

Compared with hedonistic party-hippies, this quotidian counterculture makes weaker copy but better social critique. Whereas the death narrative focuses on wild promiscuity, a more common and defining counterculture sexual experience would have been a young woman, freshly arrived at college, spending a quiet afternoon reading a near-samizdat copy of *Our Bodies Ourselves* (Boston Women’s Health Collective 1976). Where the death narrative tells us, again and again, about the casual consumption of LSD, it fails to reckon with a more down-to-earth countercultural technique of consciousness-alteration: living without a television in one’s home. It would be hard to find another act of social dissent so simple, yet so unheralded and effective in changing one’s daily experience. It is in the silencing of such useful critiques that the death narrative moves beyond mere lazy historiography and becomes an act of repression.

1.2. The back-to-the-land movement is Morning Star Ranch

When the US back-to-the-land movement is noticed at all by mass media, it is usually framed as an extension of stereotyped counterculture activity into the country. To wit, the hippie stumbles onto a farm. Here is a typical framing, from Newsweek:

The back-to-the-land movement of the late 1960s prompted many a city dweller to absurd displays of agricultural bumbling. A lot of hippies dropped out, threw some seeds on the ground, got high on drugs, and talked philosophy while they waited for food to grow. It didn’t work. More serious settlers, however, realized that many of the failures were due to a lack of training in the techniques and rigors of the bucolic life. (Francke and Sullivan 1975)

Nearly forty years later, the picture hasn't changed:

The hippie life may have been all about love and beauty, but when you got down in the muck and mire, little was lovely or beautiful about it. This condition, along with the solidly comfortable backgrounds of commune habitués, was enough to send the back-to-the-land movement crashing back to the suburban patio some 30 years ago. Forget those spirited harbingers of a life freed from material desire and other Western hang-ups. The earth-worshipping quotations from Thoreau, the mysticism of the Beatles-friendly guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the prankish allure of Ken Kesey's bus – these all started to look more like empty hallucinations sometime between the Summer of Love and the advent of disco-driven hedonism. (Washington Post 2003)



Figure 3.2. Lazy hippies? (Julya Westfall)

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary take on the back-to-the-land movement, T. C. Boyle's well-received novel *Drop City*, makes full use of this storyline (Boyle 2003). Full of brilliant prose, *Drop City* reads as a thick description of life on a hippie commune in Sonoma County, California, in the late sixties. Vivid detail lends it a persuasive verisimilitude. Despite these qualities, it is a portrait almost completely in line with the dismissive stereotypes of the death narrative. The commune of the title seethes with violence, abuse, and incompetence under the fragile surface of a rhetoric of love and transcendence. The women – “chicks” – do all the house chores and are expected to submit to male sexual demands. A fourteen-year-old runaway is gang-raped. The communards play at farming while the once-productive land overflows with trash, feces,

and hepatitis. A haggard mother doses her young children with LSD, one of whom then drowns in the stagnant, festering swimming pool.

Is all of this tragedy and farce just Boyle's fevered invention, dressed up as a historical novel? Not at all. Boyle gives us a composite, factually-accurate portrait of two famous hippie communes, Morning Star Ranch and Wheeler Ranch. Violence, rape, disease, irresponsible drug use, hypocritical patriarchy, overweening self-righteousness, thievery, perilous incompetence – you can read it all in the oral history chronicle *Home Free Home*, composed by Morning Star's co-founder, Ramon Sender Barayón (Barayón 2008; see also Read 2008). The two accounts diverge sharply, however, on interpretation. In the accounts of participants, the negative aspects of their experience are typically blended into a larger whole that is overall more meaningful and positive than Boyle allows with his selective, cynical focus on the mean and nasty elements of Morning Star.

The generative logic of Boyle's portrait of the back-to-the-land movement is characteristic of the subgenre as a whole: the stereotyped hippie-in-the-woods, like the hippie-on-Haight from which she is supposedly derived, is constructed by selective appropriation and sweeping generalization from a handful of famous and flamboyant instances of back-to-the-land activity. The bulk of media attention is placed upon the same meager collection of supposed exemplars: Morning Star Ranch, Wheeler Ranch, the Farm in Tennessee, or the real, eponymous Drop City in Colorado. These particular instances garnered initial media attention because they were in one way or another extreme. Morning Star Ranch, near San Francisco, was particularly chaotic and controversial, leading almost immediately to repeated arrests and court dramas (Barayón 2008). The Farm began with a gigantic, trans-continental, guru-led bus pilgrimage to middle Tennessee. Once these communes received media coverage, their incipient fame fed upon itself, drawing further attention to the same places. This logic is overriding; when other examples of the back-to-the-land movement are discovered, they are often interpreted through the frame established by generalizing from these avatars.

There are exceptions to this kind of treatment. As I mentioned in chapter one, a handful of scholarly monographs have been written on the back-to-the-land movement. A fairly exhaustive list includes, in addition to Rebecca Gould (2005) and Jeffrey Jacob (1997), work by Bennet Berger (1981), Jentri Anders (1990), and Timothy Miller (1999), as well as an unpublished dissertation by Terry Simmons (1979). None of these works are easy to find or obtain, nor – by contrast with Boyle's bestselling novel – have they been widely read. As with the counterculture generally, there is responsible print news coverage when a journalist focuses on some specific instance (e.g., Haslett-Cuff 1981; Weiss 1995; Achenbach 2006; Blumenthal and Mosteller 2008). Often the journalist seems surprised, as if they've unearthed an exception, as in an obituary for a woman named Terry Silber, who “was the rarest of individuals: A member of the counterculture's back-to-the-earth movement who actually had the grit to make a living off the land” (Long 2003).

2. The back-to-the-land movement in Eastern Kentucky

According to the death narrative, the hippie back-to-the-land movement has certain common, defining features. Can we see these features in the back-to-the-land

movement in the MERJ area? In this section, I will examine each of the major elements of the stereotyped back-to-the-land movement against what I have found in eastern Kentucky. As we shall see, the back-to-the-land movement in the MERJ area is not well described by the death narrative's stereotypes, which suggests, at a minimum, that the death narrative as a universal description of the back-to-the-land movement is invalid; it is, in Michael Burawoy's terms, a theory in need of ethnographically-grounded reconstruction (Burawoy 1991).

2.1. The back-to-the-land movement took off in the late sixties and early seventies, then rapidly faded

One of most basic questions to ask about the back-to-the-land movement is how many people have participated in it over time? Has it shrunk since the early seventies? Grown? Waxed and waned in cycles? Burgeoned in some places even as it declined in others? Given the dearth of systematic research on the back-to-the-land movement, the answers to such basic questions are, as I mentioned above, that no one knows. Terry Simmons estimated that at the end of 1970, "there were over one million back-to-the-landers in rural north America" – but this rough number, a snapshot of a single point in time, is the only estimate available (Simmons 1979; cited in Jacob 1997: 3). The death narrative thus offers an invented answer that closes what ought to be an open question.

Does this storyline of sudden efflorescence followed by rapid decline hold in eastern Kentucky?

Before we address this question, however, we must confront several difficulties of both definition and evidence. The fundamental problem of definition is deciding who counts as a back-to-the-lander. In chapter one, I gave a definition of homesteading that helps us decide who counts as a homesteader in the contemporary US: it's anyone who engages in subsistence production substantially above the norm. But this definition doesn't help us distinguish between different *kinds* of homesteaders, which is part of the problem we're facing here.

The first and most difficult challenge is key: as we have seen, the so-called hippie back-to-the-landers are not the only people pursuing rural subsistence in the MERJ area. So far, I have treated "hicks" and "hippies," as if they were readily distinguishable. This is because, in many ways, they are. The two groups are culturally distinct and tend not to congregate together. At the same time, the boundary between these groups is fuzzy. One readily apparent dimension of fuzziness is the presence of a minority of individuals who do not place themselves clearly in one group or the other, in terms of their beliefs or politics or diet or who they hang out with.



Figure 3.3. A true border crosser, preparing to officiate at a counterculture wedding. Circa 1990. (Julya Westfall)

But there are other difficulties in distinguishing between the two groups – other dimensions of fuzziness – above and beyond the existence of hybrid individuals and border-crossers. Not only do both groups pursue rural subsistence, but they both do so intentionally, as a conscious strategy of cultural dissent and resistance. Members of both groups choose to homestead in a social context where other economic strategies and lifestyles are available.

Furthermore, while many “hick” homesteaders have lived in the city, it turns out that nearly half of the “hippie” homesteaders in the MERJ area are from rural families. Similar complexities crop up if we examine other potential sources of difference. Some country homesteaders make good money; some bohemian homesteaders make very little. Some bohemian homesteaders do blue-collar labor for their cash income; some country homesteaders do not. Some bohemians, as we shall see, don’t smoke pot or play guitar or grow beards and braids; some country folks do. In this region, at least, most homesteaders are white, so the difference is not based on race.

Given these complications, you might wonder if there are really two different groups of homesteaders. There are indeed, and they are recognizable because they largely segregate themselves socially into two groups, and because they possess fairly distinct cultural attributes, in terms of what they eat, what they talk about, what words they use, how they discipline their children, what kind of religious and secular worldview they are likely to embrace, and so on. Aside from the individuals who move across this cultural boundary with ease, most homesteaders fall clearly and unambiguously into one group or

the other – not because I have assigned them to a group, but because they act and interact in ways that create and sustain and place them in one of two distinct groups. Almost universally, social gatherings reflect this division, consisting of a preponderance of one group or the other; with the exception of a couple of funerals of well-loved elderly homesteaders, I cannot think of exceptions to this pattern.

To generate a more accurate picture of *either* back-to-the-land movement it is necessary to figure out what, aside from the fact of segregation, distinguishes one group of back-to-the-landers from the other, which is one of the central questions of this dissertation. For the purposes of this chapter, note that the presence of a second back-to-the-land group that overlaps with the “hippie” back-to-the-land movement adds a degree of fuzziness and uncertainty to any description of that movement.

A second problem of definition is deciding how long someone needs to go back-to-the-land in order to be counted as a back-to-the-lander. There are individuals and families who began homesteading forty years ago, at the beginning of the back-to-the-land movement, and have never stopped. At the other end of this spectrum are those who pitched a teepee in the woods for a summer, or – more recently – spent a growing season living on a homestead as volunteer Willing Workers on Organic Farms. The tendency of the death narrative is not only to focus attention on shorter-term homesteaders, but to erroneously read brevity as failure. To get a sense of how inappropriate this interpretation is, consider that it is akin to concluding that since people attend college for only a few years, then college must be a meaningless experience with no long-term effects. I have spoken with many people who no longer homestead, and have yet to find one who described their experience in negative, or even neutral, terms. They see it as a time of intense exploration and learning that retains value as they move through subsequent chapters of their lives. The decision to leave the land usually has little to do with homesteading per se: back-to-the-landers are drawn away by the availability of a professional job in the city, or pushed away by concern about the quality of public schools in chronically poor eastern Kentucky counties, to cite two of the most common reasons.

Even if we avoid the presumption that brief participation is evidence of failure, the question remains: how long does one need to participate in back-to-the-land activities to count as a back-to-the-lander? A weekend? A season? A year? There is no single, optimal answer to this question – and therefore no way to construct a single, optimal census. For present purposes, I have included those who have homesteaded for a year or more, which is convenient but arbitrary.

A final problem of definition involves those who participate in back-to-the-land activities as children. Should they be counted in a census of the back-to-the-land movement? On the one hand, they have not, in most cases, made a choice to pursue rural subsistence. Without exercising choice, can they be said to have participated in a movement? On the other hand, those who experienced homesteading during their childhood describe it as a formative experience. Again, there is no one best answer. Primarily because of institutional restraints on research involving minors – again, convenient but arbitrary – I have not gathered such data.

In addition to these problems of definition, there are two major empirical challenges. First, active back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area are scattered through the hills and hollers. Some homesteads can be reached only at the end of a difficult hike or four-wheel drive up a creek. After years of active study of the back-to-the-land movement, I still run across homesteaders I had not previously encountered or heard about. While I know of roughly two hundred active and former bohemian homesteaders in the study area, this is without question an undercount, and perhaps a serious undercount.

Second, shorter-term homesteaders present an empirical, as well as definitional, challenge. Consider, for example, a family who moved into Jackson County thirty years ago, then moved away after a single year. No informant is likely to recall this family unless their memory is jogged with a photograph or a description. If many active homesteaders are lost in space – hidden away in a holler – many former homesteaders are lost in time and fading memory.

The back-to-the-land movement is surrounded by a penumbra of ephemeral participants. But it is difficult to say whether most back-to-the-landers fall into this penumbra, or into the core of longer-term, more serious homesteaders. This is a crucial question. If the majority of back-to-the-landers only tried country living for a little while, then even if they do not see their experience on the land as a failure, that is still a different back-to-the-land movement – and one closer to the death narrative version – than a movement where a substantial portion of participants create stable alternative ways of life.

Bearing in mind that the data has an unavoidable degree of fuzziness, what does the evidence suggest about the historical trajectory of the back-to-the-land movement in the MERJ area? One way to approach this question is by looking at the age of current and former homesteaders (Figure 3.4).

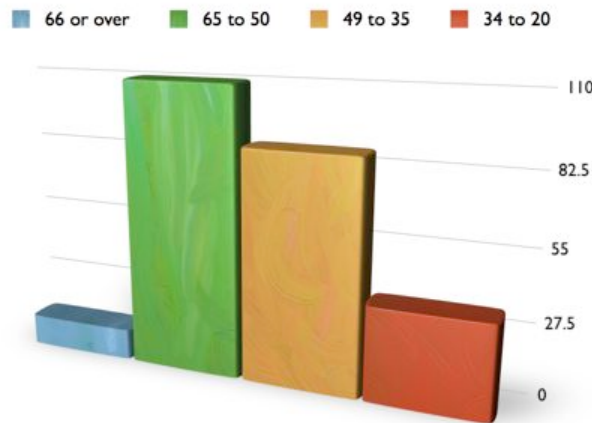


Figure 3.4. Age of active and former homesteaders (in 2009).

To make the data easier to follow, I divide people into four cohorts based on fifteen-year “generations.” The cohort conventionally associated with the back-to-the-land movement is comprised of those who are now (as of 2010) fifty to sixty-four years old. These numbers suggest several things. First, few bohemian homesteaders were born before the end of WWII, which indicates that the conventional view may be correct on one count, at least in the study area: the bohemian back-to-the-land movement does appear to have been initiated largely by those were of college age in the late sixties and early seventies.

Second, while the greatest number of participants are Baby Boomers, there are nearly as many participants in the thirty-five to forty-nine year-old cohort, a finding that contradicts the stereotype of rapid decline. Third, there does appear to have been a drop-off in participation for the twenty to thirty-four year-old cohort. However, a factor that contributes to the relatively low participation by that cohort – and that colors all of the data presented in this chart – is that many back-to-the-landers do not attempt homesteading until later in life. Some people go “back-to-the-land” when they’re twenty (as per the stereotype), but others don’t do so until their thirties or forties or even later. This particular chart therefore does not tell us whether or to what extent there has actually been a decline in homesteading participation by generational cohort over time. It does suggest, roughly, that the stereotype is not an adequate accounting: there is little evidence here in support of the ideas that the back-to-the-land movement was generationally specific and collapsed only a few years after it began.

Let us look at a different measure: how many bohemian homesteaders were active, in the research area, in a given decade (Figure 3.5)?

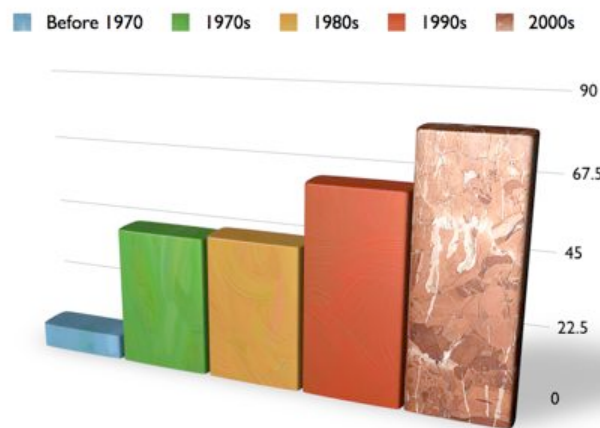


Figure 3.5. Number of active homesteaders by decade.

The main finding here is clear: not only has the number of back-to-the-landers increased, it has *doubled* since the 1970s, which was supposedly the heyday of the back-to-the-land movement. There are enough long-term bohemian homesteaders that over time the total number has increased, despite a relative drop-off in participation by the youngest generational cohort – a drop-off that may well disappear as that cohort ages. Applied to the MERJ area, the conventional description of the historical trajectory of the back-to-the-land movement is flat-out wrong.

This finding cannot be generalized with confidence to the United States or to North America as a whole. But let us speculate for a moment. There is little if any real evidence in favor of the conventional claim about the historical trajectory of the back-to-the-land movement. It is possible that the numbers for the MERJ area are unexceptional. If Simmons's estimate of over a million homesteaders in rural North America in 1970 is accurate, then at present there may be over two million bohemian back-to-the-landers in North America alone (Simmons 1979). A social movement with that many active, intensely-dedicated participants should be – and in most cases would be – considered a phenomenon worthy of study.

2.2. Back-to-the-landers were white, affluent college kids from the cities and suburbs

Perhaps the most striking exception to the standard back-to-the-lander profile – white, affluent college kids from the city – is that nearly half (47 percent) of the back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area are from rural backgrounds. I was often surprised in interviews to find that someone I had assumed was from an urban area had actually grown up in the hills of Appalachia. One such interviewee, Pat Cleary, lives with her lesbian partner in a geodesic dome they built about ten miles outside of Berea. She grew up in a small town in Rockcastle County, and frequently stayed with her grandparents during her childhood:

My grandfather and grandmother were mountain kind of people. They lived outside of town. They liked rivers and they liked gatherin wild things and they raised all their own food, we raised turkeys and chickens, had a dairy cow, had a beef cow that we killed every year, and a pig that we raised and killed every year. So very self-sustaining. They're what led me down this road, which is a good road.

Although rural subsistence represents for her a continuation of a valued family tradition, she is at the same time self-consciously a member of a leftist bohemian counterculture. Her attitudes towards spirituality, sexuality, race, the environment, domestic and foreign policy, psychedelic drugs, and so on, are strikingly liberal. She says so herself: “I am off-the-charts liberal. Yeah. I'm extra crunchy [a reference to granola].” Her attitudes are consonant with those described by Timothy Miller in *The Hippies and American Values*, and at odds with those of many members of her family and her rural neighbors (Miller 1991). As she says, “My dad and my uncle, my mom, all those people, even my brother – they're very conservative people.” In this, her experience is similar to other Appalachian bohemians, who feel a tension between elements of their natal culture they value and

embrace, and elements – such as racism, militant nationalism, homophobia, or Christian fundamentalism – they reject.

Within the category of back-to-the-landers from rural backgrounds, about a quarter form a different kind of exception. These are second-generation back-to-the-landers, people who grew up at least partly on counterculture homesteads, and as adults have decided to continue that lifestyle.

One component of the standard interpretation of the hippie counterculture is that it was founded, in part, on an unprecedented material affluence from which young people in the sixties drew a remarkable sense of entitlement. From this, as Tom Wolfe posits in his description of Ken Kesey's adolescence, they fashioned an overblown estimate of their own potential:

Out here at night, free, with the motor running and the adrenaline flowing, cruising in the neon glories of the new American night – it was very Heaven to be the first wave of the most extraordinary kids in the history of the world...to be very Superkids! the world's first generation of the little devils – feeling immune, beyond calamity (Wolfe 1969: 39).

This is a complex, civilization-encompassing hypothesis which I cannot assess here. What I would like to address, rather, is the hasty leap from a claim about *societal* affluence to the presumption that participants in the bohemian counterculture were consistently, as *individuals*, from solidly middle-class and affluent families. While the majority of back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area did not grow up in low-income and/or strictly blue-collar families, there are too many exceptions for this to hold as a consistent, defining characteristic of the group.

One homesteader, Cynthia Hillyer, grew up in Cincinnati with working-class parents. She did not expect to go to college – "I hated school when I left" – and went into a series of manual-labor jobs immediately after high school.

I went to work for Keebler, and I was an elf, and packed cookies for eight hours a day. And came home smelling of cookies. My roommates said it made them crave milk, when I came home. But it sucked, the work just sucked, really loud, you couldn't talk to the person next to you without screaming at the top of your lungs for all the machines and pneumatics and all that stuff.

Needing to make more money, she applied for a secretary position at the same factory her father had worked at, "and at the interview they found out I had wood working skills and math aptitude, and they needed another woman working in the shop," so she worked on the floor for five years.

I was the only woman in a department of three hundred men [laughs]. And it was fun – I mean it wasn't fun, actually, the work was very very hard...It's a huge company, they made machines that made machines that

made airplanes. Huge football field spaces that had just huge machines in them. Loud and dirty and nasty. I did first shift most of the time, so you get there before the sun rises, by the time you get home the sun's gone.

Until eventually going to Berea College and becoming a teacher, she endured repeated layoffs, and spent years “always hanging on the edge.” Her story, like those of many other bohemian homesteaders, is not one of easy, entitled affluence.

For many homesteaders, the vicissitudes of biography trump the supposedly defining trends of history. Here's one example among many of the lived realities behind the statistics of compounding productivity and national wealth, a young woman who grew up in the Midwest with well-educated, urban parents:

My parents were sort of homesteaders, although I think not so much by choice as much as by just being poor, cause my dad was mentally unstable, and had a nervous breakdown when I was five. He had trouble keeping jobs. They were really intelligent, college-educated people, but just had this economic struggle for a lot of their lives...I mean they had to do a lot of stuff, like their garden was part of their subsistence, they had a big garden and we had to help, and doing stuff like fixing vehicles, and fixing that, doing house repair, that was economic necessity for them.

She grew up in a dilapidated house that they were able to buy for nine thousand dollars:

So it was this hundred-year-old house, that was just – no one had been living in it, and all the pipes were burst, it had ruined all the plaster on the walls. And so they moved into this. It didn't have heat, and my mother was due to have my older sister, in winter, and they were just...[sighs]. My mother has all these stories, she prayed that my sister would be born late, so they would have heat in the house, so they wouldn't have to go pee at the gas station.

Counterculture homesteaders in this part of eastern Kentucky, as a whole, do not fit the death narrative's claim about the kind of people who formed the back-to-the-land movement. They are not, as a rule, from affluent urban backgrounds. They are not necessarily young when they begin homesteading. There are, however, two characteristics that do fit the stereotype, which we will return to below: they are college educated, and they are, with very few exceptions, white.

2.3. They were hippies living in communes

Because of the clichés that surround the term *hippie*, the claim that the back-to-the-land movement was created by hippies is in effect a dismissive claim about the character of that movement. As hippies – according to the death narrative – back-to-the-landers were not only young and naïve, but willfully so, valuing spontaneity and free expression over preparation and diligence. They threw themselves into challenging rural

situations with neither forethought nor a work ethic. Related to this image of indolence is the presumption that most back-to-the-land efforts took the form of disorganized, free-for-all communes, an expression of the tendency to paint the most shocking and extreme possible portrait. A commune offers the possibility of real debauchery: not just laziness, illegal drug use, and sexual deviance, but all this scaled up into a writhing mass of unwashed bodies.

As with many elements of the stereotyped version of the back-to-the-land movement, this is not a complete fabrication. There are people in the study area who come close – on first glance – to fitting the hippie stereotype. One of the best examples is Craig Williams, who grew up in a middle-class family in Brooklyn. “All of my relatives pooled their resources – after the Depression they were still trying to get back on their feet – and bought this apartment building, and every relative I had in the US lived in this apartment building, aunts and uncles and cousins. When we would have dinner we’d go to the main dining room that sat thirty people.” He had never lived in the country before he arrived on a farm in Kentucky in 1972:

We were readin *Mother Earth News*, you know, self-sustainability, how to build a windmill, grow potatoes and intercrop ‘em with strawberries. And it was the period of the *Be Here Now* kinda swami-guru-The-Farm-back-to-the-land all that shit. And so a bunch of us finally said look, you know, San Diego’s nice and the beach is right there but look at all these fuckin people, we need to get outta here. You can’t grow shit here, you know, let’s go. So we all packed up and moved to Kentucky. We had no clue what the fuck.

They piled into an old farm house, grew zucchinis the size of baseball bats (and wondered why no one would buy them), ate shrooms, danced in the pastures, and in general lived in ways that appear to fit well with the stereotyped version of the back-to-the-land movement. Craig’s story begins to diverge, however, from that stereotype once you learn more about it; the similarities are largely superficial. In 1972, he was not a college student on a chemical leave-of-absence, but one of the founding members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, a full-time political activist who had been living in San Diego to organize a massive protest against the 1972 Republican Convention – which was moved at the last minute, as a consequence of the impending protest, to Miami. But even a degree of superficial fit to the stereotyped hippie back-to-the-lander is unusual: exceptions are the rule.

Although the hippie stereotype is dismissive and misleading, it references a real phenomenon. While this phenomenon cannot be reduced to a short definition or encompassed within a single judgment, we can describe some common elements, drawing on the work of Wolfe (1969), Miller (1991), and Niman (1997). The hippie counterculture is distinguished, among other things, by the cultivation of a visible anti-mainstream look: the freak flag, beaded vests, beards, no bras. There is an embrace of certain psychedelic drugs; relatively relaxed attitudes about nudity and sex; an engagement with festive rock music and dancing. Iconic hippie events include not only

Woodstock and the Merry Pranksters – “tootling the multitudes” in their Day-Glo bus named *Further* – but long-lasting practices such as Rainbow gatherings and Grateful Dead concerts (Wolfe 1969: 99; Niman 1997). To this day, some back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area create celebrations that, in descriptive terms, are indistinguishable from their forebears in the sixties: the drum circle around the bonfire, joints passing from hand to hand, dreadlocks and beards and friendly smiles etched in the firelight.



Figure 3.6. A mellow, sixties-esque drum circle – in 2006.

When I began my research, I expected to find the hippie counterculture firmly at the center of the back-to-the-land movement. Elements of such a counterculture are indeed strongly present. Several individuals took their first major steps toward homesteading initially through the radicalizing experience of attending a Rainbow Gathering, a Grateful Dead concert, or eating psychedelic mushrooms. Nor are these stories restricted to those who were young in 1968; they were as frequent in 1980 and 1990 as in 1970.

However, alongside and intertwined with elements of the hippie counterculture were many other strands of leftist cultural dissent. One man, Joseph Rivard, who began homesteading in eastern Kentucky after graduating from college in the early seventies was considered by his country neighbors to be a hippie; at the beginning of our interview, I also assumed he had been part of the hippie counterculture. In fact, he had arrived at somewhat similar social critiques and attitudes as the hippie counterculture, but came to them through Quaker intellectual and agrarian traditions. Another man of the same generation was radicalized by his experience as a Catholic priest in Latin America during the heyday of liberation theology. One woman had been influenced by a hippie counterculture – in an international high school in Israel. A younger woman, in her mid-thirties, from a conservative Christian family, described her transformation as an intellectual process, driven above all by reading, writing, and reflection while attending a

Christian college; she had no substantial contact at all during this period of her life with hip counterculture.

I heard many other stories like these. The back-to-the-landers as a whole represent a dissenting countercultural left comprised of multiple strands, within which the hippie counterculture is best thought of not as a coherent governing style or ethos, but as a set of often visual elements that do not necessarily occur together nor reveal much about the individual who embraces them. Someone like Isabel Faust, who wears her hair in dreadlocks and lives in a yurt, for example, is just as likely to have found a formative counterculture experience in an urban Christian commune as with a tab of acid on her tongue at a Grateful Dead concert.

Just as the prototypical back-to-the-lander is assumed to be a hippie, the prototypical back-to-the-land homestead is presumed to be a hippie commune. While the word “commune” covers a huge range of collective living arrangements, the commune of the death narrative is that of Morning Star Ranch: an unplanned, chaotic, open-admission free-for-all. There have been at least three or four instances in the MERJ area of collectives with this style, which suggests that this is indeed a recurrent form of back-to-the-land activity:

Next thing you know, we had like three cabins full of people and this yurt, and there were people in the warm weather would come up and pitch teepees and tents and live there the whole season. You know, there was like people crawlin all over the place. You never seen so much hair in your life. Guys coming wheelin in from New Mexico with coolers full of psilocybin mushrooms. And everybody for like a week they'd be like *wahaaa!*

This particular genre of back-to-the-land experiment, for all its shortcomings, does have a certain charisma: it's outrageous, it's exciting, it makes – in hindsight at least – a good story. When people recall living on these communes – such as one old farmhouse nicknamed “the Hippie Museum” – there is invariably a lot of laughter, not all of it wry or rueful.



Figure 3.7. Playing a burning piano. One of the wilder parties, way out in a mountain holler. (Tim Hensley)

But this kind of communal homestead, the type of that supposedly defines the back-to-the-land movement, accounts for only four percent of homesteads in the research area. The vast majority of back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area have not tried to live in this way. As Joseph Rivard summed it up, “It was not pile in one big house together, that kind of thing.” By far the most common back-to-the-land form in the study area is a family or individual living on their own smallholding, which accounts for 68 percent of homesteads. The second most common form, representing 35 percent of homesteads, is a collective where more than one family or individual lives upon the same piece of land, but do not reside in the same dwelling. Often this is a collective land purchase, of which there are at least nine examples. Participants intend these to be communities, but they also recognize a need for a private, family-centered space.

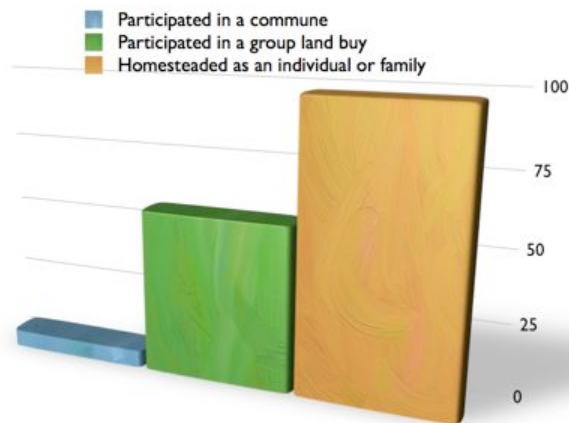


Figure 3.8. Number of individuals engaging in different modes of homesteading.

There are at least two instances of collective land buys that had a strong ad hoc and informal character, and in both cases this led to strife and the eventual collapse or major restructuring of the collective. However, there are more examples to date of such collectives being carefully, even painstakingly, shaped and guided by participants. One such group, with a half-dozen families sharing fifteen acres, has taken each step with purpose and forethought, often doing the work of educating zoning board and housing code officials along the way:

Anna Dungan: The first three households set up all the bylaws. Actually [the collective] would have been a land trust, but in Kentucky law, you can't have a majority of residents be the board. So that was not acceptable to us. So we're an LLC, technically, which wasn't great.

Jason: Limited liability corporation?

Anna: Yeah. So that's been a bit awkward. And then initially [we wanted] to cluster housing, but the zoning board wouldn't have anything to do with it. Like a lot of these things, you know since then the zoning board is really starting to look at cluster housing. So it's kinda like we're – and with a lot of the building code stuff – we're kinda out there at the front end. It's a lot harder. But things are changing.

Rebecca Gould, author of *At Home in Nature*, described a similar finding in New England: “Many of those people (especially the communal ones) didn't last. But the homesteaders I studied were still practicing relative self-sufficiency and living lives close to nature, but they were doing it in a more sophisticated and complex way” (Ashbrook 2011).

2.4. *They goofed around with subsistence*

In the rhetoric of dismissal the claim that back-to-the-landers did not really pursue subsistence production is fundamental, because such production was the crucial element of the back-to-the-land vision. All other goals – living in harmony with nature, escaping the rat race, creating alternative community – were dependent upon a serious engagement with self-provisioning. If the hippies remained dependent upon the mainstream industrial economy, sooner or later they would limp, chastened, back into town. Which, according to the death narrative, is precisely what happened.

As usual, this picture is selective rather than wholly false. There are instances in the study area of rural bohemians who are not serious about subsistence production – but those I have spoken with do not consider themselves participants in the back-to-the-land movement. There are former homesteaders who decided that they did not care for country living – but again, this is not a typical experience. What is common, however, and perhaps supplies the kernel of truth to which the stereotype adds a dismissive twist, is that most back-to-the-landers do not start out as highly-skilled farmers, carpenters, mechanics, and so on, as Craig Williams, the Brooklynite, soon found out:

The first garden we grew we tried to grow it in the shade. I swear to God. It got like five minutes of sun a day. We had corn like that big. [Holds his forefinger and thumb up, about three inches apart.] We couldn't figure it out. Then we started readin and said, "Oh it needs sunshine." That's how stupid we were.

When they got past that hurdle, they hit another:

We had big gardens. And we had squash half as long as this desk. We thought that was great. One day we gathered them all up, you know, what we thought were the good ones, and threw them all in this pickup, and drove down to the shoppin center and tried to sell them to the local people. And nobody'd buy them. And I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on. So I went back up to Johnny [a neighboring farmer] and said what the hell is this. He laughed – his false teeth fell out. He said, you city boys don't know nothin do you?

Although the initial learning curve is steeper for a back-to-the-lander from Brooklyn than one from rural Kentucky, it is something that everyone faces. Effective homesteading requires tremendous knowledge and skill, covering an astonishing range of tasks: replacing a clutch in a pickup, roofing a house, growing vegetables without pesticides, felling large trees with a chainsaw, butchering a deer. Even for those with exposure to rural subsistence as children, adult mastery of such an array of skills takes time, effort, and mistakes.

Another way in which the trope of failed subsistence is misleading is by implying that in order to succeed, back-to-the-landers had to meet all, or nearly all, of their needs

through their own labor. Few homesteaders in the study area come close to this ideal; none achieve it. By such an absolute standard, the back-to-the-land movement would indeed be a failed effort. But such a benchmark is spurious. Subsistence production, throughout history, has been combined with other kinds of extra-household economic relationships, including reciprocal exchange, buying and selling in markets, and state taxation and provision; pure subsistence is a rarity in any setting (Wolf 1966; Kearney 1996). Mirroring the tendency to overestimate the role of subsistence in pre-modern settings is the habit of underestimating or ignoring its role in modern ones. When efforts are made to measure it, the results are surprising. One overview concludes that “the economic value of housework equals 20 to 44 percent of America’s GDP” (Madrick 1997).

Taken together, these observations show that profound civilizational transformations correspond to partial shifts in the mixed composition of household economies, not to absolute shifts from, say, all-subsistence to all-capitalism. Viewed in this light, we can see that when a family boosts the proportion of their household economy supplied through subsistence from, say, thirty percent to fifty percent, they have made a major livelihood change which can be expected to have major repercussions, for better or worse, in many areas of their lives. Contemporary homesteaders do not have to produce everything they need in order to sustain major changes in their lifestyle and in their relationship with the mainstream economy.

Even though they do not succeed in becoming wholly self-sufficient, back-to-the-landers in the study area take subsistence production very seriously. This is evidenced in many ways, from gardening to homeschooling to enthusiastic participation in work parties.



Figure 3.9. Raising a timber-frame house at a work party.

But perhaps the most striking evidence of this is that most homesteaders live in homes that they built themselves, often using creative designs and local materials.

When I tell people that I study “rural subsistence production,” usually the first thing they think of is gardening, perhaps influenced by a growing popular literature on organic farming, farmer’s markets, slow food, and so on. But the single biggest project many homesteaders will tackle is building a home. While the house is being built, gardening is often on hold. Even in the longer term, many homesteaders in the study area limit their food production to a medium-sized vegetable garden, a few chickens, perhaps some fruit trees – a far cry from the local subsistence farms of a few decades ago, from which a family took almost all of the food they would consume in a year (Van Willigen and Van Willigen 2006). However, because housing is a greater expense than food for most families today, the subsistence provision of shelter has a greater effect on a household economy – and upon the economic constraints that delimit how a family may live – than the subsistence provision of food.

Anna and Dave Dungan, participants in the collective mentioned above, and their two young children, recently traded a seven-hundred dollar-a-month mortgage in town – on which they would have paid at least a quarter of a million dollars over the life of the loan – for an owner-built straw-bale home that cost less than thirty thousand dollars, paid for out-of-pocket as they built. This allowed Anna to quit her wage job and Dave to reduce his wage labor to three days a week. Another homesteader, Jacob Millan, a college student who bought five acres of mountain land in the early 1990s for fifteen hundred dollars, built a cordwood cabin for an additional thousand:

Yeah I had about twenty-five hundred bucks on the whole deal and I was out on the land. I was the envy of a lot of my friends who were just like *Jesus* – when they heard twenty-five hundred dollars, that sounded attainable. I remember people wanting to know how I did that. When they came out and looked at it they’re like “Wow, you know, it’s different, it’s not the Taj Mahal. But wow you’re really out here not paying rent ‘n shit, like we’re having to go rent out and start jobs and live on a shoestring and, boy, if you start making money in a position like this you get to keep it.”

In the fifteen years since, he has only had to seek paid labor intermittently, leaving the bulk of his time free to spend as he wishes. If these homesteaders never shell a single pole bean or throttle a chicken, they have nonetheless harnessed subsistence production to radically transform their lives.

However, back-to-the-landers don’t build homes merely as a means to save money. Subsistence production, for them, is not only a means to an end; in many ways, it is an end in itself. One of the unifying themes of my interviews with back-to-the-landers was the pleasure and satisfaction gained from tackling such ambitious projects. This satisfaction was manifold. People spoke about the joy of living in a home they had designed and built themselves.



Figure 3.10. An owner-built, off-the-grid, passive solar home.

They felt a sense of accomplishment at having gained difficult, down-to-earth skills like carpentry or masonry. Several interviewees spoke about gaining a new sense of self, such as Anna, who designed the beautiful strawbale home she built with her husband:

Growing up I was an indoor kid, and I read books all the time. I've always been so immersed in my headspace. And we both did graduate school, and were good students, and that's just been so much our world. It's been such a tremendous shift to move so hugely into the realm of the body, you know of physical labor. And it's been really good. I know how to use my body now, in ways that are safe and I carry myself differently than I used to. So there's all these side effects that are just really interesting.

Of course, subsistence production is not limited to home building, and similar themes attend the full range of subsistence tasks. Craig Williams – who grew his first garden in the shade – didn't give up and retreat back to the city, and several years later, with the help of his experienced Appalachian neighbors, was a skilled farmer:

One year we plowed up every piece of bottom land all the way back that holler. Must have been four acres in different plots. We grew oats in one, we grew feed corn in one, we grew vegetables and crap in another one, sweet corn and stuff in another one, and grew barley for food for the animals 'n stuff in another one. We plowed the ground and all that with a tractor, then we set everything and we planted everything and we cultivated it and harvested it all with horse-drawn stuff.

These skills were a source of an enduring sense of accomplishment and pride. Twenty years later, he grows a huge garden every year, although he doesn't have time to do it the

old-fashioned way. But he still misses it: “Workin horses, cultivating corn fields with a team of horses, yeah. I loved it. I did. I’d like to get back to it.”

3. They clashed with the locals

A final element of the death narrative’s version of the back-to-the-landers is that their outlandish ways and reckless irresponsibility offended the down-to-earth locals. This tended to lead, so the story goes, to the kind of outright clashes and sustained animosity that quickly moved the Sonoma County government to use code violations as a pretext to shut down Morning Star Ranch (Barayón 2008).

The relationship between bohemians and rural locals in the MERJ area is much more complicated than this imagery of inevitable collision would predict. It is also, as I argued in the introduction, crucial to figuring out why there are two groups of homesteaders, which in turn is a necessary step to understanding why homesteading continues to be actively pursued. In this section, I will take an initial look at the complex interactions between hick and hippie homesteaders – but it is a theme that we will return to throughout the following chapters, building up the layers of context required to understand this curious bifurcation of culture.

There are genuine cultural differences between the “hicks” and “hippies.” Some of these differences are relatively innocuous, such as differences in accent (in the case of non-local back-to-the-landers who do not have a country accent), or in whether you plow your garden to keep weeds down, or use mulch to accomplish the same end. But other differences – particularly those relating to world-view – are more consequential.

At the individual level, the country homesteader’s social and religious beliefs are quite varied, but there are at the same time strong currents of fundamentalist religion and social conservatism – homophobia, racism, xenophobic nationalism, support for right-wing politicians, and so on. Even for those country homesteaders who do not embrace such ideas, they form a kind of background. For example, someone might drink or smoke pot, but they often see this as a kind of failure before God, a sin that eventually must be repented. Someone might not be actively churchgoing, but they are likely to believe wholeheartedly in a Christian God and in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. There are many individuals who are not racist, but they present this as a kind of notable exception – not as a default setting. As one rural elder said to a young black student from Berea College: “I am not prejudice about your color or nothing. I love you just like I do anybody else. And you just the same as him [points to a white student] to me.” The hippie homesteaders, by contrast, are strongly and consistently progressive and liberal in their social, political, and religious views.

These opposing beliefs foster a degree of segregation and distance – what John Stephenson referred to aptly as a “muted disdain” – that is a recurrent theme in interviews (Stephenson 1968). Consider the experience of one group of young homesteaders, mostly in their early twenties, who bought land in a remote valley in 1998. You have to drive down a creek and along a rugged dirt road, a mile or more off the power grid, to get there. Several members of the group had been traveling on the Rainbow circuit, living on the road between Rainbow gatherings, and hoped to establish something more permanent.

They immediately began to clear land, as described by a participant who was twenty years old at the time, Elijah Amaro:

There was nothin but a bunch of down trees, that was about it, I mean, everything was just covered. The first night I spent out there we spent all day cutting out a little thirty by thirty section just to set a tarp to put a fireplace, and that's how we started, you know, not much area clear, just a tarp and a fire-pit. And by the end of the summer we had like a whole acre cleared.

Looking the part of Rainbow kids, from dreadlocks to sandals, they received a cool welcome from many of the locals:

There was all kind of rumors about us, you know, people think we're doin voodoo and satanin and runnin around naked, screwin chickens and just all kinds of stuff, so people didn't really want nothin to do with us, you know, like we used to go down to the country store every now and then and there'd just be stares, dude, just like *cooold*, cold stares.

Another homesteader, Cody Shuler – older, settled, and less overtly bohemian – who lives along the same road, spoke about keeping a low profile:

To some extent, I guess I enjoy and actively cultivate a certain amount of anonymity out here. Because of the more conservative and more rednecky aspects to the local culture – there's a certain element of that local culture that I'd just as soon not interact with. So I'm tryin to find that fine line between not appearing too much like an outsider, and yet staying at a certain amount of distance so that I can have some degree of...distance and therefore control over my interaction with the locals in the area.

Cynthia Hillyer, the former factory worker, had a more specific reason to keep her distance:

I think actually [my distance] has a little bit different bent to it, cause, as a lesbian, I was really scared of the mountain folks as far as the traditional religion, as far as goin to the churches around your area – like there's this one lady at the chiropractor who invited me to the Bethlehem Baptist up the road and I'm sure it would be a great way to meet more of the local folks, but if their doctrine says that I'm a sinner type of person – and there are obviously people who will take that to an extreme of hurting me or threatening my family – then I was always extremely hesitant to open myself up to those people. So in those two groups, the sixties crowd I've felt a lot more comfortable with, cause usually they've been much more

accepting of alternate lifestyle conflicts, where the mountain people I thought, “Oh my God, I’m gonna get lynched.”

But the longer I spoke to any particular individual, the more complex the story became. Cynthia herself went on to say that her interactions with her neighbors became, over time, differentiated on a person-to-person basis. “You know,” she said, “there obviously are some people that have some doctrine that are very offended by me, that I’m fearful of, but there are plenty of mountain folk that have been fully nurturing.”

A similar complexity can be seen in Pat Cleary’s words, as she thinks about the interactions between the two groups. At first, she emphasized the positive aspects:

Local conservative people are also kind of curious about us and why we live this way. And have given a lot of help, I mean I learned how to can corn from Edna, I’d made a lot of soap with my grandmother but I was little, you know, I’ve been in their world – and I am gay! And I won’t stay in their world because those things they say about gay people, and my strong beliefs, but at the same time I do have a certain amount of respect for how they live. And maybe that’s it, a mutual respect for how we live and an ability to – I wouldn’t say *tolerate* is a good word – but I think accept our differences, to a *certain* degree.

But then as she continued, a different story came out.

Definitely the more conservative people have made some of the more liberal people suffer. There’s been bad things that have happened. They ran [a woman homesteader] off her land. And I mean that was a horrible thing that was allowed to happen in our community. I don’t agree with, never will, never feel the same about those people again, for what they did. Cause that shows the major difference is that we wouldn’t run anybody off their land because they were female, because they just discovered natural gas, and because they were gay. And we wanted a road through their place. None of the liberal people would do that. Conservative people just almost threatened to murder her, basically. Scared her to death, ran her off.

Joseph Rivard is a quiet, reflective man, who found his way to homesteading – from an affluent childhood in Lexington, Kentucky – through a complicated route, none of it involving hippiedom. He read Wendell Berry, spent summers with a Quaker friend from college on a cattle farm, and fell in love with working with his hands. In 1975 he bought an empty farm in Jackson County with his girlfriend, Sarah, and together they fixed up the abandoned farmhouse. They did not participate in hippie parties or drug use – but were seen, initially, as hippies nonetheless:

We were the first of the hippies back there – in fact, when we bought our place, people said, “Oh these hippies have moved in.” And at that time, it was like, not too long after the Charles Manson whole thing and stuff, and hippies was like the lowest form of life.

Some neighbors never warmed up, in part because Joseph and Sarah were not married when they initially moved on to the farm:

But, yeah, being that we started out as hippies – and our nearest neighbors, they were probably more old-timey than some, as far as like not much education, and sort of way conservative, holiness people ‘n stuff, sort of fundamentalist – they never did really take a shine to us too good.

At first, he said, “We had a lot of explaining to do, about what the hell we were doing here, you know.” But soon they began to form relationships with some of their neighbors:

But Belinda who we’d bought the place from, Belinda and her husband Mark – Belinda was kind of a heavy hitter and she said, no they’re not hippies. And she stood up for us, and that made it more better. Way more better.

They began to trade labor with local farmers, doing fieldwork like putting up tobacco, sharing meals and stories along the way.

I had a beard, about like this [short], except all around the sides, at the time. And hair about like this. [Also short.] And after we’d been there for, you know five years or something, and had gotten well acquainted with one of our neighbor families, and their son, who was – he was probably like eighteen when we moved there, so he was getting up into his twenties when we left. And at some point, I don’t know how it came up, he said, “Well Joesph when you moved here you had long hair.” I said, “No. It was just like this.” He said, “I coulda sworn you had hair down to your shoulders.” Nope.



Figure 3.11. A country homesteader helps out bohemian back-to-the-landers in the 1970s. (Jean Perry)

Thus, mutual suspicion and muted disdain are only one element of a complex set of interactions. One complicating element is that many bohemian homesteaders, like Pat Cleary, are themselves from rural, non-bohemian families. Although they have undergone transformative experiences that distance them from many of the attitudes and mores of their kin, they tend to maintain close and meaningful relationships with members of both groups. Another aspect of these interactions is that Appalachia, like much of rural America, has its own countercultural traditions. While these traditions are not entirely consonant with the often-radical leftism of the bohemian back-to-the-landers, they place a great value on independence and eccentricity, even to the point of celebrating certain brands of outlawry, such as moonshining. There are no examples that I know of in the study area of locals calling the law on their “hippie” neighbors – even in the face of anarchic communes and loud, over-the-top, all-night partying. According to Emma Burrell, a woman who participated in one of the original communes in the early 1970s, “We were all piled up you know, boys and girls, men and women, nobody married, living in these big houses, and nobody ever gave us the slightest crap at all, you know the law didn’t come, the church didn’t come.”

Craig Williams, who was at the center of at least two of the wild, early communes, said much the same thing:

Craig: What was great about it was that once people got to know you and you gained their trust and they knew that regardless of your lifestyle, you were trustworthy, it didn't matter really what you were doing. As long as you weren't doing anything inappropriate with like kids or robbin stuff, you know, rogue type. They all knew, everybody knew we were doing drugs and smokin pot and probably growin it and all that shit. But it was kinda like, it's alright as long as you have respect for people's property and for who they are, it was amazin. We got along.

Jason: So you didn't feel like there was much hostility from the locals.

Craig: You know there was some. But shit, there's some right now.

There's always some animosity, human beings are just like that when they interact.

While many back-to-the-landers express concern about what they see as certain elements of the "local culture," they are at least as likely to describe strong, supportive relationships that they have formed with their neighbors. This is the case in particular with elder locals who are or were active participants in a long-standing mountain subsistence tradition, which began to decline markedly during the long post-WWII economic boom. Many non-local back-to-the-landers came in with a respect for the knowledge and experience of these people, and matured this initial respect into real relationships.

So, has there been a clash, or not? There are real and profound differences between these two groups, and these differences include cultural elements that are opposed to each other. Because of this, there is a real boundary between hicks and hippies. It is a boundary that sometimes remains in place, unbridged, and sometimes is crossed by individuals who find much to value on the other side. But even when people cross this border, it does not disappear; they remain aware of having made the crossing, as in Joseph Rivard's remembrance of his years of homesteading:

One of the things I really treasure about the time I spent in Jackson County was that I learned about what Appalachian people were like and what they were about and how to sort of be one of them. And it just sort of opened this door to this amazing museum, is one way to think about it, of old-timey stuff that wasn't really happening much other places. We knew people who if you got out the *Foxfire* book and start in readin it to them they said "Yeah that's right, yeah we used to do that, yeah, and oh here's what comes next," and they'd tell you what was gonna be in the next paragraph, about whatever – killing hogs or making dried beans. So it was very cool to be part of all that.

4. What *does* unite the bohemian homesteaders?

If the back-to-the-land movement is comprised of people with diverse backgrounds who took a variety of pathways to homesteading, then what unites them into

what appears to be, in the study area, a coherent group, distinct from the other back-to-the-landers?

Part of the stereotype about the hippies is that they were kids who were in – or had recently dropped out of – college. This fact, if true, could be read in many ways. In the case of the back-to-the-land movement, one reading comes to the fore: college experience is taken as evidence of romantic idealism, practical naiveté, a divorce from the hard reality that wellbeing is produced through toil. Since so many other aspects of the stereotype are misleading, how does this one hold up? Are back-to-the-landers, if not college kids, then at least college educated? And if so, how should this fact be interpreted?

Out of sixty current and former bohemian homesteaders for whom I have educational data, twenty-one have earned a graduate degree (35 percent), twenty-nine have a four-year college degree (48 percent), and seven have some college (12 percent) – including several who are working toward their bachelor's degrees. Only three have no college (five percent). By contrast, among the rural population as a whole in the MERJ area, roughly seven percent have a bachelor's degree or higher – compared with 83 percent for participants in the bohemian back-to-the-land movement. Among rural residents of the MERJ area, 47 percent have no high school diploma, and eighty percent have no college experience whatsoever (United States Bureau of the Census 2000). For most of these people, a college seminar would be as foreign as the markets of Oaxaca. Bohemian back-to-the-landers are almost universally college educated; their country neighbors are almost universally not college educated.

The back-to-the-landers in this part of eastern Kentucky are not only well-schooled relative to their neighbors, they are over three times more likely to have a college degree than the United States population as a whole. Among all adults over twenty-five in the United States, in the year 2000, only 26.5 percent had a college degree or more, and 48.2 percent had no college experience at all (United States Bureau of the Census 2000).

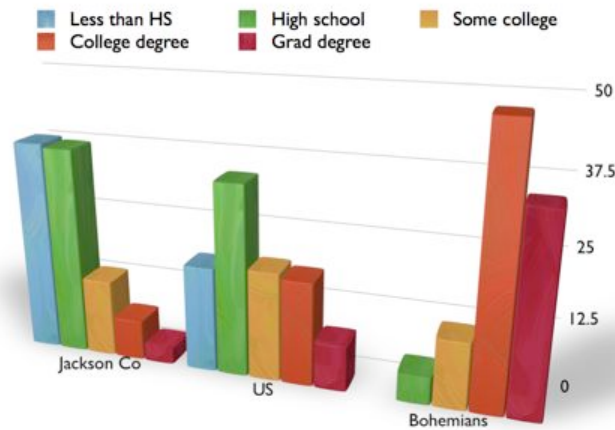


Figure 3.12. Comparative education levels (United States Bureau of the Census 2000).

Another line of evidence in support of the bookish character of the back-to-the-land movement is the frequency with which interviewees cited written works as a major source of the inspiration that led them to homesteading. Writers like Wendell Berry and Helen Nearing were invoked again and again. As I mentioned above, one of the most important influences on Joseph Rivard was Wendell Berry, who he mentioned several times in our interview:

One of my high school friends, who was going to the University of Kentucky, gave me a copy of Wendell Berry’s book, *Farming: A Handbook*. You know that one? It’s got some very cool poems that make it look like farming would just be so cool.

Anna Dungan, who designed and built the strawbale house, began homesteading thirty years later, but tells a similar story. “In graduate school,” she said, “I encountered Wendell Berry, his writing, and that’s what really started moving me toward the sustainability kinds of stuff. That’s when that happened.”

Almost every bohemian back-to-the-lander I interviewed brought up an author or a text at some point. Rebecca Meeks is a long-term homesteader who bought land in a remote section of Rockcastle County in the late 1970s. Originally from a conservative military family, she spoke about encountering the counterculture ideas that led her to homesteading as a graduate student in Knoxville:

Rebecca: I did identify very much with the counterculture, not really so much in college, but whenever I got out of college and hit graduate school – it was actually by then the early seventies; I went to graduate school in

1970. In Knoxville, was a part of the food co-op. It was almost like I was living two lives. I was living a graduate school life and then I was interested in all these counterculture kind of ideas.

Jason: How did you engage with that? First encountered it in Knoxville, first exposure?

Rebecca: That's interesting. I don't know when I first started reading *Mother Earth News*, that was a big influence I guess...It probably was in Knoxville. And it had to do with the anti-war movement, there were a lot of things that were mixed up together with it.

And again, later in our conversation:

I had a friend in northern Kentucky who was looking for a piece of land, and we moved to Rockcastle County – and at that point in time, you know, I'd read Ruth Stout, was really interested in the idea of back to the land, five acres and independence.

For most bohemian homesteaders, the motivation to try living on the land was grounded, in part, in detailed, sophisticated, text-based critiques of modernity.⁴ Texts are also a major source of practical knowledge and information. The “appropriate technologies” enthusiastically embraced by back-to-the-landers – the straw bale houses and Fuller domes, composting toilets and companion planting schemes – are things that they learned about as much through reading as through talking and doing. Although print journalists have maligned it and academic researchers have ignored it, the back-to-the-land movement has nonetheless – as I discussed in chapter one – generated a substantial body of printed work. The bohemian homestead invariably contains its own textual companion: bookshelves groaning with dog-eared copies of *Five Acres and Independence*, *The Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening*, *More Other Homes and Garbage*, *The Humanure Handbook*, and *The Straw Bale House Book* (Kains 1973; Smyser 1978; Leckie et al. 1982; Jenkins 1994; Steen 1994). Alongside this “how-to” library are wide-ranging works that address, directly and indirectly, the question of “why-to”: *A Continuous Harmony*; *Lame Deer*, *Seeker of Visions*; *Food First*; *Altars of Unhewn Stone*; *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (Berry 1972; Lame Deer and Erdoes 1972; Lappé, Collins, and Fowler 1977; Jackson 1987; Starhawk 1993).

⁴ I am not making any claims here about how effective these critiques are in achieving the goals imagined for them.



Figure 3.13. A bohemian outhouse well stocked with readings.

Reading plays key roles even for the bohemian back-to-the-landers who grew up in the country. For these individuals, written works served not as a basic introduction to subsistence, but were an essential ingredient in a broader education within which the homesteading they were familiar with could be understood in a new light, as a meaningful critique of contemporary civilization. These back-to-the-landers also embrace alternative subsistence techniques like passive solar and mulching, and thus, like those from urban backgrounds, draw on texts for practical ideas and know-how. Reading is central to the process by which they create a syncretism between the old homesteading ways they experienced as children, and newer homesteading techniques and motives. Indeed, those from socially conservative families often place even more emphasis on both college and reading as crucial elements of their life story.

With few exceptions, bohemian homesteaders are people who have made radical changes in their lifestyle based to a large extent on ideas they have engaged through independent, non-fiction reading. As we shall see in the next chapter, this degree of literacy and intellectuality places them in a small minority in the contemporary United States – indeed, it places them in a minority around the world and throughout human history.

The distinctive bookishness of the bohemian back-to-the-landers stands out even more if we compare them with their rural neighbors. In interviews, country homesteaders rarely invoke texts when discussing why they live as they do – with the exception of the Bible. Out of all the socio-economic characteristics we have examined, higher

educational attainment and active literacy are the only ones that are both near-universal attributes of bohemian homesteaders *and* unusual for other homesteaders. I cannot reliably predict which back-to-the-land group an individual feels more at home with by the length of their hair, whether or not they smoke pot or were born in a city, if they think George W. Bush was a horrible president, or the size of their income. But I *can* predict it with a single glance inside their home: on their shelves, do they have *The Good Book*, or do they have good books? The bohemian back-to-the-landers are, in effect, a rural intelligentsia. This is the underlying, dividing characteristic that separates the “hippie” homesteaders from the “hick” homesteaders, that creates two distinct social movements out of one overall strategy of dissent.

Although analyses of the back-to-the-land movement in other places do not explicitly emphasize literate intellectuality as a distinctive, defining trait of bohemian homesteaders, it is there to be seen. Rebecca Gould’s admirable study of the back-to-the-land movement in New England is peppered with references to bookishness: “Homesteaders tend to produce as many texts as they do vegetables,” she observes, and “the members of Total Loss Farm [a commune] were highly educated individuals, dissatisfied with the educational, religious, and professional status quo and looking for meaningful lives” (Gould 2005: 25, 34 and passim; see also Jacob 1997).

In addition to consistently high educational attainment, back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area are also overwhelmingly white (over 97 percent). Unlike formal education and active literacy, this does not differentiate the bohemian back-to-the-landers from their rural neighbors, who in this area are also overwhelmingly white (in Jackson County, 99.5 percent (United States Bureau of the Census 2000)). On the other hand, back-to-the-landers are less racially diverse than the student body at Berea College, from which many back-to-the-landers are drawn. While I do not have the evidence needed to explicate the racial uniformity of the back-to-the-land movement in the MERJ area, I have seen no indication whatsoever that the movement is discursively constituted by participants as a racial project, although racial history, patterns, and fears may be an important part of why blacks do not participate.

5. Toward a redefinition of the back-to-the-land movement

Anyone who hopes to foster progressive change faces a fundamental strategic dilemma (Epstein 1991). Do you focus on changing policy and reforming dominant institutions, or do you focus on being – as the bumper sticker has it – the change you wish to see? Choosing the former approach commits you to a number of resource-intensive tactics: grass-roots organizing, securing funding, managing coalitions, deploying techniques of visibility or disruption, and in other ways sustaining the “mobilizing structures” that are familiar attributes of social movements as conventionally defined (Tarrow 1998).

Instead of pushing for change by taking on governments, corporations, or the behavior of the multitudes, counterculturalists aim at melioration through self-transformation. As one homesteader put it, “are you going to change the world or are you going to change *your* world?” Barbara Epstein calls this a “prefigurative” strategy: it aims to directly manifest – to prefigure – ways of life and relationships that dissidents

believe are more appropriate (Epstein 1991). This often involves radical departures from one's natal culture. As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu conveys with his concept of *habitus*, culture is not simply a matter of ideas, comprised of the conscious embrace of this or that particular discourse; it is instantiated in semi-conscious dispositions and tastes and inclinations that are difficult to modify. It is, in a word, embodied (Bourdieu 1984). *Habitus*, rather than policy, is the major target of prefigurative strategies: changing what you eat, how you get what you consume, what kind of labor you do, how you interact with your lover, how you use your leisure time. Such changes form a major part of the journey of the frugal back-to-the-lander: Learning to sleep in the woods. Learning to bathe out of a bucket. Learning to eat cute animals and insect-gnawed fruit. Learning to do without a push-button house and a television. As Bourdieu's concept suggests, radically reworking one's *habitus* on the basis of conscious critique is not easy. Indeed, according to Bourdieu, it does not happen (Bourdieu 1984; Sayer 1999). Accordingly, even as Bourdieu helps us understand it, we might consider the back-to-the-land movement a "revolution against Bourdieu," to lift a phrase from the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci (Forgacs 1988).

Each of these two fundamental strategies of dissent has characteristic virtues and pitfalls. The major pitfall of social movements, conventionally defined, is that in order to fight institutions, they must adopt institutional forms themselves. This has produced a catalog of bitter ironies: Marxists liberating workers by subjecting them to police states, labor union bosses divorced from their rank-and-file, a New Left that foundered under the media spotlight and the siren song of celebrity (Gitlin 1980). In practice, the exigencies of fighting powerful institutions often prevent or seriously delimit the ability of traditional activists to embody progressive ideas in their own lives.

By contrast, the major pitfall of a prefigurative strategy is that it cannot directly confront, in a sustained manner, institutionalized forms of oppression and domination (Epstein 1991). Of more concern for this chapter is a second major pitfall: a prefigurative strategy lacks the organizational armature that creates visibility for traditional forms of activism. Unlike a protest movement whose goal is precisely to receive media attention, and which must adopt an organized structure in order to garner that attention, homesteading is not only unnoticed, but has little immediate or overt use for such notice. Nonetheless, the resulting invisibility of the back-to-the-land movement is partly why the death narrative has emerged as the virtually unchallenged interpretation of it, even among scholars and former participants. The fundamental, defining strategic choice of the back-to-the-land movement produces a movement that is readily overlooked and – because it does involve the reworking of *habitus* – easy to caricature and belittle as a picturesque, romantic, or zany fringe.

The findings reported here suggest that the back-to-the-land movement is an important, ongoing form of educated leftist dissent in the contemporary United States. It shares with many other strands of contemporary and recent leftist activism – from Students for a Democratic Society, to the Sierra Club, to the unprecedented anti-war movement prior to the invasion of Iraq – the college-educated participants, the centrality of text-based critiques and concepts, the seriousness and ambition of purpose. It is distinguished from these other forms of educated dissent primarily by the choice its

participants have made to emphasize a prefigurative strategy. Phrased in the broadest terms, the counterculture and the New Left are two branches of a single movement, rooted in the mass expansion of higher education that began in the 1950s but continues to this day.

Craig Williams, the back-to-the-lander from Brooklyn, has exemplified this unity of purpose by mixing homesteading with more traditional modes of activism over the course of his life – a pattern typical of bohemian back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area. In 2006, Craig received the Goldman Prize – the “environmental Nobel” – for his work leading a grassroots campaign against the Pentagon’s plan to dispose of obsolete chemical weapons through incineration. For Craig, homesteading was not a silly diversion from the task of real activism and organizing: growing his own food and fighting the Pentagon are both part of a single attempt to compose a meaningful, just life in a society which does not hold up well to informed critique.

CHAPTER 4

SCHOOLING AND LITERATE INTELLECTUALITY

I feel like I probably could have accomplished more in my life, and I think I would have been able to get more out of my college education, had I had a better elementary education. If it had just started better earlier. I kinda had to teach myself how to learn, and teach myself how to research – I didn't have any of those skills by the time I got to college. If I'd had all those skills, and good learning habits, and time management – you know, if I had been pushed at all before then – I would have been able to capitalize on the opportunity, and I don't really feel like I did. It really hurt me. I really regret it.

– Dean Jefferson

Fuck you I ain't gonna do no school.

– Elijah Amaro

1. What's the difference between hicks and hippies?

Inasmuch as there is a conventional explanation for the distinction between “hick” and “hippie” homesteaders, it is that the hicks were born and raised in the country, and embrace subsistence as a family tradition, even if the actual economic occasion for it has largely passed away. The hippies are rural interlopers, part of the counterculture back-to-the-land movement of the late '60s and early '70s, and were mainly privileged white kids from the cities and suburbs who moved to the country pursuing naïve ideals of communalism and autarky. These conventional sketches suggest certain readings of the distance and disdain that limits interactions between these two groups – such as the reading presented in the novel *Drop City*, where the hippies offended rural locals with their wild ways, their ignorance about rural life, their dilettantism and their laziness (Boyle 2003).

As I have argued, judged against the MERJ area of eastern Kentucky, neither of these character sketches hold up. The only strongly consistent socio-economic difference

between the two groups is level of literacy and formal educational attainment. I say “socio-economic difference” because there are also fairly consistent cultural differences: in religious tendency, in political leanings, in child-rearing practice, in homesteading practice, in use of leisure time, in diet, in dress, and so on. The question is, does the difference in educational attainment and bookishness explain these other cultural differences? Is literacy and book education the underlying difference? If so, how? Think of all the differences in the US that are treated as sources of conflict: Rich and poor. Black and white. Male and female. Democrat and Republican. Native and immigrant. Devout and secular. North and South. Generally, a conflict between “literacy” and “orality” doesn’t make the list. How could this particular difference possibly stand at the heart of sweeping cultural differences and oppositions between these two groups?

In this chapter I am going to talk about how certain kids get a good education and other kids do not. But the term *education* needs clarification. I use it to refer to a good-quality “book education,” which, at its best, results in a set of attitudes and practices that we might call “literate intellectuality.” It’s the kind of education you would have accomplished if, say, you were a serious, engaged student who graduated from an excellent liberal arts college. But there are important qualifications to make here. First, there are many ways to be knowledgeable and skilled that do not involve literacy or mastery of abstract, intellectual knowledge. Which is to say, there are people who are well educated, in a broader sense of that word, who have never read a book or set foot in a classroom. A second qualification is that some people achieve a book education on their own, autodidactically, without having gone to an elite college, or to college at all. Finally, there are many people who graduate from college but never become independently bookish or intellectual. In the preceding chapter, I used formal educational attainment as a proxy for literate intellectuality – but they are not the same thing.

Another proviso is that I will rely heavily on the terms “middle-class” and “working-class.” Although they are in wide usage, these terms are vague. They refer, in a general way, to the kind of paid labor one does, and the relative social status and pay of that labor. For the moment, I’ll use these terms. But at some point – in chapter five, to be specific – we’ll have to define them more carefully.

2. Make-believe schooling and the rejection of intellect

2.1. Make-believe schooling in the US

Before we can understand the educational experience of homesteaders in the MERJ area, we need to look at some of the key processes in education in the US in general, which is the task of the first several sections of this chapter. With very few exceptions, kids in the contemporary US go to school. By the time they leave high school – with a diploma or without – most of them are considered literate. The World Bank’s *World Development Report* for 2006 does not even report a statistic for adult literacy in the US because it is presumed to be higher than 99 percent (World Bank 2005: 293). Supposed universal literacy is part of what places the US high on the Human Development Index. The best that can be said about such statistics is that they are not entirely false. But they are based on minimalist definitions of literacy, such as that used by the World Bank, where the “adult literacy rate is the percentage of persons aged 15

and above who can, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement about their everyday life” (World Bank 2005: 302).

If we take a closer look, we see that kids in the contemporary US experience radically different kinds of schooling based mostly on their socio-economic background. Study after study, in different parts of the US, have found the same patterns: a minority of kids from affluent, higher-status families are offered one kind of education; the majority of kids, from lower-status families – working class, inner city, black, Latino, rural Appalachian, et cetera – are offered a different kind of education.

To highlight the differences in these schooling practices, let’s consider examples from opposite ends of the spectrum. At the extreme affluent end is a selective private school like Phillips Exeter Academy, in New Hampshire, where I taught during the summer of 2010. Exeter is one of most prestigious “prep” schools in the nation, boasting a celebrity roster of alumni and sending nearly half of its graduates on to Ivy League colleges. Classes are limited to about a dozen students, who sit around a seminar table – “the Harkness table” – and learn through active participation in open-ended discussion. This approach is used not only in humanities courses, but across the curriculum, in social science, natural science, and even mathematics. The teacher is not a lecturer so much as a facilitator, guiding the students in their own process of discovery. According to Exeter’s catalog, students “raise their questions and share their ideas in a process of thoughtful inquiry and collaborative discourse” – a description that sounds like hyperbole but actually does describe what happens in the classrooms (Phillips Exeter Academy 2010). The curriculum is rigorous, challenging, and flexible; the work is designed to be meaningful, fostering the full, creative engagement of the student. Most of the faculty have higher degrees from staturesd colleges.

If this sounds ideal, it’s because it is: this is what formal education can be like when cost is not a major limiting factor, when a school can afford classes capped at a dozen students. The financial resources required to support this kind of schooling are formidable. Phillips Exeter, which has about a thousand students, has an endowment of nearly a billion dollars – nearly a million dollars per student. Annual tuition at Exeter is a little over \$40,000, but the school is able to spend \$63,500, per year, on each student (Frabrikant 2008).

The other end of the educational spectrum in the contemporary US is so different that it’s irresponsible to classify it as the same kind of activity. In the most marginalized communities in the US, schools lack fundamental resources like teachers, books, and working bathrooms. As Jonathan Kozol reported in the early 1990s, “on an average morning in Chicago, 5,700 children in 190 classrooms come to school to find they have no teacher” (Kozol 1992: 52). “For 21 years,” Lathrop Elementary School in Chicago “has been without a library” (ibid: 53). I have visited schools in rural Appalachia where the library consisted entirely of a few hundred Penguin paperbacks – anachronous titles like *The Song of Roland* – that were cut-cover remainders, intended for return to the publisher. At “the best school” in the mostly-black city of East St. Louis, Kozol was directed by a student to go look at the bathroom, “if you would like to know what life is like for students in this city.” He found that “four of the six toilets do not work. The toilet stalls have no doors. The toilets have no seats. There are no paper towels and no soap”

(ibid: 36). It's no surprise that the dropout rate for "students" who attend these kinds of "schools" is high; for some Chicago schools, the rates are over eighty percent. Of those who do graduate in Chicago, 27 percent read at 8th grade level or below; "we may estimate that nearly half the kindergarten children in Chicago will exit school as marginal illiterates" (ibid: 58).

If we take a step back from this extreme end, away from schools that are overtly malfunctioning amidst a blatant lack of basic resources, we arrive at a kind of schooling that is probably the norm for most non-elite kids outside of the inner city, southern Appalachia, and other areas of concentrated poverty. Patrick Finn describes this as "the make-believe school model," and estimates that perhaps eighty percent of students in the contemporary US experience primarily this kind of schooling (Finn 2009: 37). The teacher is in command at the front, the kids are in their desks, the toilets flush: this has the appearance of a working school. But what's really going on here? Multiple observers, working in different schools all over the country and during different decades, report convergent findings (e.g. Anyon 1981; Finn 2009; Kozol 1992; Seiber 1981; Weis 1990; Willis 1977). Classrooms are marked by rote tasks and lecture, with a near-complete absence of conversation, collaboration, or debate. In "the working-class schools, knowledge was presented as fragmented facts isolated from wider bodies of meaning and from the lives and experiences of the students. Work was following steps in a procedure. There was little decision making or choice" (Finn 2009: 10). Here's a typical high school assignment, observed by Lois Weis:

Teacher: Take out your notebooks. The title. "The Reasons for the Growth of the Cities." Put that down. It is at the bottom of page 60. "A. Industrial revolution" (...) Skip a line. Take the next subtitle [from the text]. "B. Problems Facing Cities and Urban Populations." Take the next five subtopics under that. Skip a line between each.

Joe: Just one line between each?

Teacher: Yes. (Weis 1990: 86)

In an entire year of observation, Weis observed *a single challenge to an idea by a student*. And when one teacher tried a different approach, "he was called down to the principle's office, not to be encouraged, but to be chastised" (Finn 2009: 71).

In these kinds of classrooms, the dominant theme, from the perspective of the teacher – faced with thirty bored kids – is control. Of his years as a "hard-bitten" teacher in a working-class school in Chicago, Patrick Finn says that "control was uppermost in my mind" (Finn 2009: 4). From the perspective of the student, faced with thousands of hours lost in repetitive work with little intrinsic meaning, the dominant theme is resistance (Anyon 1981; Finn 1990; Willis 1977). Drawing on both his own experience and research by Jean Anyon, Paul Willis, and others, Finn describes a typical public school day: "Students vandalized school property and resisted the teachers' efforts to teach. Boys fell out of chairs; students brought bugs to the classroom and released them; children lost books or forgot them; students interrupted the teacher... They refused to answer questions and were apparently pleased when the teacher became upset" (Finn

1990: 12). The collision between these two themes, control and resistance, often produces a kind of truce. Schools don't ask for "real effort on the part of the students. In return, the students offer enough cooperation to maintain the appearance of conducting school" (ibid: 59). This Potemkin village version of the classroom, in which superficial industry masks a lack of real learning or purpose, is what Finn aptly calls the "make-believe school model."

2.2. *Make-believe schooling and literacy*

After spending years in make-believe school, what kind of education have these kids gained? As the official statistics have it, most of them can "read and write a short, simple statement about their everyday life." Most of them can do basic grade-school math. They are, in a minimal sense, literate and numerate. This limited definition, however, misses the real and profound effects of differential schooling in the US. A closer look tells a different story.

Many young people who pass through lower-status schools gain what Maryanne Wolf calls "accurate literacy," in contrast to "fluent literacy" (Wolf 2007: 135). Someone who has attained accurate literacy could, say, read a newspaper article aloud in class without stumbling frequently over unfamiliar words or sentence structures. However, for such a reader, translating the marks on the page into words and phrases requires continuous conscious effort. Instead of seeing the pictures and ideas behind the words, they still see the words themselves. For a fluent reader, this step of the reading process has become, through repetition and genuine engagement, effortless and automatic; the marks on the page are transparent windows into meaning. This difference between labored "decoding" and rapid, streamlined comprehension is marked enough that it can be easily seen in functional MRIs of reader's brains: the work that a non-fluent reader must do to translate writing into language shows up as extensive activity in areas of the brain devoted to visual processing. In a fluent reader, activity is limited in visual areas, and concentrated in areas, such as the limbic system, concerned with emotional response and interpretation (Wolf 2007: 141 and *passim*). In experiential terms, these differences are crucial. Although accurate readers, in many classroom settings, appear to be fluent, they do not read or write comfortably and smoothly enough to support the independent, intimate relationship with text that better-educated adults take for granted.

Being limited to accurate literacy – or less – is not something that happens to a small minority. Fully "thirty to forty percent of children in the fourth grade do not become fully fluent readers with adequate comprehension," according to Wolf, and they are unlikely to make the transition to fluency in later grades, creating a "netherworld of the semiliterate, into which more and more of our children slip" (Wolf 2007: 136; Nielson-Bohlman, Panzer, and Kindig 2004). A survey of US adults found that nearly half "probably do not have the skills necessary to read many types of literature" (National Endowment for the Arts 2004: 15). Another survey reported that, in 2003, only 31 percent of *college graduates* were "proficient readers" (Dillon 2005). The particular statistics differ according to the definitions and methodology of the study, but all literacy assessments agree that functional illiteracy and weak literacy are widespread.

This lack of fluency translates into life-long practice. Two recent surveys found that Americans had read, on average, four to five books in the year prior to the survey – although between 27 and 43 percent (depending on the survey) had not read a book at all (National Endowment for the Arts 1994; Ipsos Public Affairs 2007). However, the bulk of this reading was concentrated in a few genres: the Bible or other religious works, popular fiction, and popular history and biography. Works of non-fiction – aside from popular history and popular biography – were read by less than five percent of the population. Natural history, economics, labor studies, anthropology, physics, political analysis, philosophy – the entire corpus of modern science, scholarship, literature, and journalism – is read by less than one in twenty adults in the US.

The make-believe school model, and the endemic semi-literacy it creates, leave many people in the US – despite spending many years of their lives in “school” – with outlandishly poor formal educations. Polls show that a large proportion of Americans are unaware of basic aspects of the world they inhabit; anyone who has worked with low-income students, of any age, has seen this firsthand. For example, even after a doubling of scientific literacy over the past twenty or thirty years – probably due largely to increased college enrollment – only 20 to 25 percent of Americans are “scientifically savvy and alert,” according to Jon Miller, a scholar who has studied public awareness of science for over thirty years.

American adults in general do not understand what molecules are (other than that they are really small). Fewer than a third can identify DNA as a key to heredity. Only about ten percent know what radiation is. One adult American in five thinks the Sun revolves around the Earth, an idea science had abandoned by the 17th century. (Dean 2005)

Similar results are replicated across fields of knowledge. Many Americans can't name a single bill that has recently been passed into law. They don't know who the vice president is. They cannot locate continents, let alone individual countries, on a map. They don't know who fought in WWII or why. They don't know how their own bodies work. Despite near-universal religiosity, they fail spectacularly on a religious quiz consisting of questions like “Where was Jesus born? What is Ramadan? Whose writings inspired the Protestant Reformation? Which Biblical figure led the exodus from Egypt?” (Goodstein 2010; also Herbert 2008; Pew 2007). For the most part, as I will argue, this sweeping ignorance is not the result of laziness or dimwittedness. It is the patterned result of a systematic concentration of pedagogical and epistemological resources in the hands of a minority of privileged children, and the dispossession of most other children.

This lack of factual awareness is easy to discover and quantify through surveys, it is easy to describe, and it has a kind of gee-whiz shock value – used to comic effect in Jay Leno's “Jaywalking” quizzes, where he stumps people on the street with what ought to be common-knowledge factual questions. It is also easy to cast in terms of international comparisons, and thus is readily harnessed to what is a dominant theme in popular critiques of education in the contemporary US: a concern with international economic competitiveness (Chronicle of Higher Education 2010; Steinberg 2010). The

claim is that since poorly-educated people aren't qualified for the better jobs, the US will generate, over time, fewer and fewer good jobs, which will be located overseas instead. For many writers who sound an alarm about the state of schooling in the US, pointing to such widespread, dramatic factual ignorance is sufficient indictment. But I introduce it here mostly as a convenient index for a larger, more subtle, and harder to measure outcome of failed schooling. A lack of familiarity with the basic contours of history, geography, political economy, science, and so on, while important, is only one component of a broader set of skills, capacities, and interpretive habits that often go missing when a person is weakly literate. The best overall term I can think of for this condition is *a-intellectualism*. One of the outcomes of differential schooling is that working-class kids are much more likely to wind up not only with weak literacy, but rendered permanently disinterested and divorced from sustained intellectual self-development – with effects far more profound than international economic competitiveness.

2.3. *Make-believe schooling and anti-intellectualism*

Make-believe schooling largely fails to cultivate literate intellectuality. But for many kids, it goes beyond mere failure, and actively drives them away from knowledge based in texts.

To understand how this works, John Ogbu's concept of "oppositional identity" is crucial (Ogbu 1991). Ogbu, an anthropologist, was puzzled by the way that some minority populations excelled in school while other minority groups fared poorly. Sometimes the same ethnic group did well in one country but struggled in another; for example, in Japan, "there is a minority known as Buraku who tend to do poorly in school when compared with the dominant Ippan students. However, in American schools, Buraku and Ippan immigrants do equally well" (Finn 2009: 40). Ogbu explained these patterns by pointing out that the minority populations who struggled academically were "involuntary" minorities: they had not chosen to move to a different place, but had been moved by force to another place, or conquered in their own homeland. They were subject to violence and oppression by the same dominant cultural group who designed the schools that their children were sent to. Under such conditions, these children tend to develop "oppositional identity" to the culture of the school. The school is not seen as a neutral site of learning, but as a place of continued cultural subjugation.

Even when there is no overt ethnic clash involved, make-believe schooling generates a kind of oppositional identity all by itself. To understand how this works, we have to remind ourselves of what kind of classroom most lower-income students in the contemporary US spend their time in. They are one of thirty or so students, who are supposed to sit quietly and listen to a dumbed-down lecture in which they have little or no input. They are taught by teachers who face hundreds of students in a day, who have very little prep time, who are considered successful if they can keep their classrooms quiet, and who are increasingly subjected to lock-step curricula imposed from above. Furthermore, as Patrick Finn points out, the majority of public-school teachers come from the same communities in which they teach, which means that teachers at a predominantly lower-income, working-class school often grew up locally or in nearby working-class

communities, and thus have not had much exposure in their own lives or families to progressive educational techniques. In short, students are being commanded to spend their time doing things that quite clearly have little intrinsic merit, supposedly in return for extrinsic benefits far off down the road. They are, in effect – to borrow language from Ogbu – involuntarily interred in a dominating institution (Ogbu 1991).

For most kids caught in this situation, there is no good choice. There's not much scope for even being aware of more effective kinds of schooling, let alone switching to an elite school or radically reforming your school. The realistic choices are to accept the make-believe school bargain and acquiesce in return for the grades – even though they bear far too little intrinsic value – or salvage some sense of pride and élan by attacking the institution that is attacking you. In practice, this means wielding a particular subset of what James Scott called “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth” (Scott 1985: xvi). I am not sure how this plays out for young women, but I have yet to meet a gathering of public school guys who could not trade story after story of serious school vandalism, theft, absenteeism, prank calling, bomb threats, insulting teachers, trying to derail class, going to class stoned or drunk, and in a hundred other ways harnessing every opportunity to disrupt the institution (cf. Willis 1977).

This opposition to a certain kind of schooling plays out in different ways for different kids, depending largely on factors outside of the school itself. In cases where a young person has positive experiences, outside of school, of literacy and literate knowledge, frustration with the school itself may not translate into a rejection of book learning. But for young people whose only experience of reading and writing is inside the school, opposition to the institution readily becomes opposition to literacy itself. Instead of merely failing to cultivate literacy, and leaving young people a-intellectual, make-believe schools actively create anti-intellectualism. But how this plays out for a particular individual is shaped by what happens at home.

3. Two parenting styles

3.1. Unequal childhoods

Study after study in the US (as well as Europe) has found consistent differences in childrearing practices among parents from different socio-economic backgrounds, regardless of race or geographic location (Duncan 1999; Finn 2009; Heath 1983; Howell 1972; Lareau 2003; Rubin 1992; Willis 1977). In what follows, I will sketch a composite portrait of these differences, drawing from multiple sources but emphasizing Annette Lareau's work *Unequal Childhoods*, which is outstanding in terms of its rich detail and its explicitly comparative approach, which compares findings *across* classes (Lareau 2003). In addition to being supported by multiple independent studies, the description here is consistent with my own experience in a number of starkly different settings in the contemporary US, from low-income communities in rural Appalachia and on the Yurok reservation in northern California, to affluent professional communities around universities in Chapel Hill, Berkeley, and Lexington, Kentucky.

One of the most prominent aspects of the difference in parenting styles observed by Lareau is in the amount and kind of attention given to children by their parents. The middle-class parents in her study gave their children much more direct attention than working-class parents, especially in the form of sustained verbal interaction.⁵ Both middle-class and working-class parents tended to read to children until they were three or four years old, but middle-class parents read more frequently and often continued reading long after their children were capable of reading on their own. Middle-class parents reliably engaged their children in conversation about the details of their lives and thoughts, asking specific questions about their day at school, their visit to a friend's house, or what they'd been reading. These parents worked to elicit their children's ideas and engaged them in debates and intellectual sparring. They would sit down and work through homework with their children – not episodically or in passing, but consistently and closely. Middle-class parents also scheduled their evenings and weekends around organized activities for their children, spending many hours every week ferrying their children to music lessons and football practices, and spending thousands of dollars over the course of a year on fees and equipment. Lareau refers to this intensive parenting style as “concerted cultivation.”

The working-class parents observed by Lareau took a markedly different approach. They were affectionate with their children and worked hard to keep them safe and healthy. But they saw little need to actively foster sustained conversations with their children. They did not engage in the middle-class practice of quizzing a child with a series of questions. Children were generally left to themselves, often in the company of siblings or neighborhood friends, to organize their own play and entertainment. If the parents were occupied with something – watching a TV show or talking – children were generally expected not to interrupt. Parents would often set aside a time for children to do their homework, but seldom worked with them on that work, or would do so for a few moments now and again in response to a specific request from a child. Working-class parents could not afford to pay for the same level of organized, after-school activity as middle-class parents – but they also did not see such activities as a crucial part of their children's development. For one working-class mother, Ms. Taylor, “being a good mother did not include an obligation to cultivate her children's various interests, particularly if doing so would require radically rearranging her own life” (Lareau 2003: 79). From the perspective of middle-class parents engaged in concerted cultivation, it might seem as though working-class parents are simply too harried by practical concerns to manage a sustained high-level of active attention. As we shall see, practical concerns are important in generating these distinct parenting styles, but it is important to note that the working-class parents studied by Lareau did not feel guilty about their parenting style; they were not hoping to achieve concerted cultivation and then falling short.

⁵ For Lareau, middle-class families were those that had one or more adults working in a professional job, such as lawyering. These families were affluent but not truly wealthy, and both parents tended to have at least a college degree. Working-class families had one or more adults in lower-status and lower-paying jobs, such as secretarial work, and did not have college degrees. Lareau uses a third category, unemployed families, but for the most part their parenting styles matched those of working-class families, and I will treat them as a single category here.

Rather, they saw their approach as sensible and appropriate. Lareau appropriately calls this parenting style “natural growth.”

In addition to dramatically different levels and kinds of sustained interaction with children, these parenting styles differ sharply in how children are disciplined. Instead of disciplining their children by issuing commands, threatening to spank, or spanking, the middle-class parents in Lareau’s study negotiate. In one black professional household, “We never heard [Alex’s] parents yell at him nor saw the use of physical punishment” (ibid: 116). The disciplinary strategies used by this family were an outgrowth of the strategies they used to cultivate their son’s verbal and cognitive skills. Instead of corporal punishment, “we observed them repeatedly, systematically, and determinedly use verbal negotiation to guide Alex through the challenges in his life” (ibid: 116). Children in middle-class households were not typically expected – with some exceptions depending on the circumstances – to simply follow a parental dictum silently and without question. There was little in the way of “discipline” in the usual sense carried by that word when applied to parenting: guiding their children’s behavior, for middle-class parents, was a process of negotiation and reasoning, where the children are expected to respond with questions and counterarguments.

The situation in working-class homes was completely different. Children in these homes were expected to obey parental commands quickly and without question. In instances where children did not obey, their recalcitrance was met with elevated sternness and the threat – or reality – of physical punishment. Questioning or counterargument on the part of the child was seen as an illegitimate questioning of parental authority, regardless of the coherence of the child’s protests. As with middle-class negotiation, this represents the extension of a certain general approach to parenting, where the parent’s role is to shape the child primarily through setting boundaries on behavior; within those bounds, the child is granted a great deal of autonomy. Again, from a middle-class perspective, it would be easy to think that working-class parents prefer *not* to beat their children, but find it difficult to pull off a more negotiated approach. In Lareau’s study, this was not the case. Working-class parents were not embarrassed about the use of corporal punishment; they clearly considered their methods of discipline to be appropriate. Ms. Taylor, for example, “places a premium on respect for adults...she remarks that she thinks Tyrec’s periodic misbehavior is due to the fact that he has not had a beating recently” (ibid: 71). In an appendix, Lareau notes that she had research assistants who were themselves from middle-class families, and who were quite shocked when they witnessed yelling and spanking by working-class parents. But it also cut the other way: a research assistant from a working-class background was “shocked” and “disgusted” by the “disrespect that many middle-class children used in routine interactions with their parents” (ibid: 267).

While *Unequal Childhoods* is brilliantly researched, it is just one study of eighty-eight families in a single, unnamed city somewhere in the US. Can we really generalize about middle-class and working-class families across the US based on a single ethnographic research project? Of course not. But many other studies have come to similar conclusions in other locations (see Lareau 2003, page 291, for a list of surveys that support her findings). Shirley Brice Heath found analogous patterns of language use

and discipline in her comparative study of middle-class and working-class communities in South Carolina (Heath 1986). In a famous study, Betty Hart and Todd Risley observed families in Kansas City over several years, and documented a tremendous difference in verbal practice, with children from “privileged” families being exposed, on average, to thirty million more words by age three than children from “underprivileged” families (Hart and Risley 2003). Marianne Wolf reports similar class-based differences in reading practices (Wolf 2007). In England, Basil Bernstein observed the same difference in approaches to discipline – negotiated and verbal versus authoritarian and corporal – on the part of parents from different social classes (Finn 2009). I have not found as much research on middle-class life, but study after study shows fairly similar patterns for working-class parents all around the US (e.g. Duncan 1999; Howell 1972; Rubin 1992). On the other hand, I am not aware of *any* study that makes opposing claims.

In addition to substantial support from formal research, Lareau’s claims jibe with my own experience – and, as in Lareau’s study, these claims have held across lines of race and ethnicity. My father, who has an MA in English, and has worked over the years as both a high school and college teacher, engaged me and my brother in the kind of intensive verbal give-and-take reported by Lareau. He spanked me once – a memorable experience mainly because of its uniqueness – but otherwise my brother and I were irritating, back-talking kids who always wanted to know, in detail, why we had to behave a certain way. My stepfather, Merk, is a Yurok Indian who lives in Requa, California, at the mouth of the Klamath River; his formal education consisted of being kidnapped off the reservation and shipped to an abusive school designed to strip Indians of their culture. On those occasions when he worked for a wage, it was usually as a skilled physical laborer, working on logging crews, fishing, or guiding recreational fishermen on the river. I was fifteen when I met him, so he played a parenting role to me only to a limited extent – but with my half-sister, Orowi, I seldom if ever saw the sustained, quizzing verbal interaction that was ordinary with my own father. Merk clearly loves Orowi and is affectionate, but it would never occur to him that it was part of his job to carry on in-depth conversations with her.

In Appalachia I have seen the same patterns, both in my own life and in my role as a researcher. Well-educated parents, such as bohemian homesteaders, rarely, if ever, spank their children. At hundreds of middle-class gatherings and social events, I have never seen a parent spank or hit a child; I have rarely seen a child yelled at, unless they were about to wander out into the road or too close to the fire. In such settings in the contemporary US, beating a child is not merely frowned upon, it is very nearly criminalized. When I taught at Phillips Exeter, we were required by law to report any signs of child abuse – but what constituted child abuse, in an affluent New Hampshire setting, verged over into the kind of corporal punishment that for many other parents is simply responsible parenting.

By contrast, our working-class next-door neighbors follow the “natural growth” style of parenting as if they had read *Unequal Childhoods* like a cookbook. The father used to work in a factory, before he was laid off, and the mother worked as a manager at a fast food restaurant; neither is educated beyond high school, although the father is a skilled computer buff. After school and in the summer, the daughter and son spend their

hours outside, playing in the yard and around the neighborhood. Aside from a few weekend church excursions, they do not participate in organized activities, nor do they spend time playing or talking with their parents. With few exceptions, the parents' sole verbal intervention is to issue directives: "Come back inside!" "Go get your brother!" These directives are backed up readily with the threat of force, which is not idle.

The kind of corporal punishment that would horrify many educated, middle-class parents is common among the working class. I saw it growing up, for example when I was about ten years old, and a working-class friend and I were caught shooting bottles with a BB gun behind his house in eastern Kentucky. His father, without hesitation, lifted him off his feet by one arm and beat him at length like a piñata. Among this group, whipping a misbehaving child is not seen as a failure of parenting. Elva Northern, who raised her children in Jackson County in the '50s and '60s, is clear about this:

They got this child abuse law anymore for people that's kind of afraid to really make [their kids] mind. Sometimes you have to get tough with a child and hurt him once to help him realize that you are the boss. I did with my son. I made a believer out of him. I whooped him all over that hillside.

In the 1950s, many middle-class parents would have approved of corporal punishment. In the decades since, however, middle-class attitudes on parenting discipline has shifted dramatically; working-class opinion has not. James, who is at least fifty years younger than Elva, still holds the similar beliefs:

James: Now that's somethin right there at this day in time that's a big thing I believe is how people raises their kids. People is lettin their kids run wild, they have no discipline whatsoever, I mean they're clueless. Generation after generation. I mean, the Bible is again' [against] that, I know from experience Daddy and Mommy kept a tight reign on us, we respected our elders and we knew we had to mind. Listen to Mommy and Daddy and respect 'em. And I am very high on that, I'm glad they did. I believe they made me who I am, I mean it's a lot of what made me who I am. And it's a hard thing to do and I'd about rather do anything to get on my children, and I just about cain't. But I force myself to make 'em walk a pretty straight line. I believe it'll pay off. I can't just let 'em run over me.

Jason: You spank or you just are kinda stern in other ways?

James: I try to be stern in other ways, but if we really do run into a head-on collision, I'll take a switch. I'll take a switch or a belt. And I'll whip one.

Jason: Were your parents like that?

James: Yes, buddy. If I got out of control they'd sure set me on fire. And then it was a rough thing, but now buddy I am glad of it. I am real glad of it.

3.2. *The “cultural logic” of parenting styles*

Where do these different parenting styles come from? What processes create them? Why should there be such marked, consistent differences in childrearing across class lines? The working-class parents and the middle-class parents in Lareau’s study all live in the same city. They are not recent immigrants from different countries, carrying on practices specific to different national cultures. They all speak English. They don’t live in different centuries. So why don’t they all raise their children in the same ways? Or why are there not consistent differences across racial lines regardless of class? Or – perhaps most plausibly – why isn’t there just a welter of different childrearing techniques? Why didn’t Lareau, or Heath, or myself, observe a complex patchwork of different parenting styles? Here’s a professional family that spansks their kids in the backyard with a cut sapling, there’s a working-class family that eschews corporal punishment in favor of negotiation; here’s a working-class family with no televisions where everyone brings a book to the supper table, and here’s a professional family that lets their kids run around town most afternoons.

According to Lareau, each of these two parenting style has an underlying “logic.” Each style, in other words, makes a certain amount of sense, given the typical circumstances for families in these two socio-economic groups. I would argue, along with Lareau, that the most fundamental underlying factor in the generation of these different parenting styles is a differential access to basic resources. Most obviously, this means money. The working-class families that Lareau studied were defined as working class largely because the only jobs they had access to were relatively low paying. They were members of one of the fastest-growing socio-economic categories in the contemporary US: the working poor, comprised of those who labor full time but do not get paid enough to comfortably make ends meet.

Low wages are easy to measure. But unless you’ve been there, it is hard to fully appreciate the way that insufficient income ramifies nightmarishly into a scarcity of every other necessary resource. You live in a crowded apartment building in an unsafe neighborhood because it’s what you can afford. But then you can’t sleep well because you can hear the neighbors fighting or snoring on the other side of the drywall. You don’t go to the dentist because you can’t afford it, and then you can hardly concentrate through the chronic toothaches. When you fall ill, you go to the cheap emergency room and you get the treatment that was popular in 1980; the guy who owns the company you work for went to the nice hospital and got the cutting edge stuff (The New York Times 2005). You can’t afford to go out and buy a new Lexus, so you drive a badly-used Fiesta, but it breaks down regularly. How many executives or professors lose their job because they wake up in the morning one too many times to a car that won’t start? Finally, even though both middle-class and working-class families work long hours in the contemporary US, working-class folks often work at jobs that are less fulfilling, less flexible, less a source of pride and zest, and are more repetitive, more likely to cause injury, and more exhausting.

In other words, a lack of money turns into a lack of other things that are more important than money – regardless of how disciplined you are or how hard you try or if you never drink or if you go to church and walk the narrow path. A shortage of income

turns into a lack of sleep, a lack of quiet private space, a lack of health, a lack of security, and a lack in general of the ability to turn one's efforts efficiently into the outcomes that you hope for and need. As Lareau notes, all of this means that working-class families face relatively greater challenge in the many practical "steps involved in getting children through the day." Basic childcare tasks:

take more time, are much more labor intensive and create more frustration for poor and working-class families than for their middle-class counterparts. Trying to make ends meet through public assistance requires repeated encounters with cumbersome bureaucracies. No access or only limited access to private transportation means that even routine tasks like grocery shopping may require waiting for buses; keeping appointments with health-care professionals can involve similarly complicated logistics. In addition, in settings where resources are chronically strained, little problems (e.g., broken washing machines, an unexpected delay in a cash reimbursement) can have serious, far-reaching consequences. (Lareau 83)

Under such conditions, it would be genuinely challenging to pull off the middle-class parenting style of concerted cultivation. Lareau picked the phrase carefully: it's called *concerted* for good reason.

3.3. *Differences in experience of literate intellectuality*

Insufficient income, and the myriad insecurities and inefficiencies that it generates, helps explain why it would be difficult for the working poor to adopt concerted cultivation of their children. However, it does not explain why they show little interest in doing so. According to the researchers cited above, as well as my own experience, parents who use the "natural growth" approach generally do not see it as a kind of parenting they default to in the face of a lack of time and energy. Nor are they embarrassed about spanking a child or shy about describing corporal punishment as an appropriate technique. There are other aspects of this bifurcation in parenting that are impossible to explain solely on the basis of an uneven distribution of income and other basic resources. For example, it is not clear why so many families with sufficient income and high-quality free time would consistently decide to channel those resources into intense verbal cultivation of their children, negotiated disciplining, and serious involvement in scheduled, organized activities. Why not use a natural-growth parenting model, and enjoy all that leisure?

The crucial factor here is that the lack of basic resources endured by working-class parents extends to what we might call "pedagogic resources." The working-class parents observed by Lareau and other researchers have never even *seen* the inside of an elite-quality classroom, unless it was to mop the floor under the Harkness table. They did not grow up in a house with a thousand books on the shelf. They did not grow up with parents who knew how to give them an in-depth critique of an essay they were working on or correct their misunderstanding of the Pythagorean theorem. If this sounds a bit circular, it should. Above all, this chapter is an attempt to explain why working-class

children tend – after a decade or more of schooling – to be weakly literate and weakly book educated, while affluent children of professional parents tend to be much more strongly literate and book educated. But here in the heart of the chapter, we encounter the same thing that we are trying to explain – differential educational outcomes – invoked as a key aspect of the explanation. All this means is that, inasmuch as the explanation offered here is accurate, what we are witnessing – and living through – are cyclical social processes in which certain social patterns and conditions tend to foster certain ways of being, which then tend to sustain those initial patterns and conditions.

In short, the lack of resources faced by working-class parents includes a lack of experience with literate intellectuality. This has several effects. First, it means that even if they want their kids to do well in school, they are not sure how to go about cultivating academic or intellectual skills. They have trouble or lack confidence in helping children work on their homework. As one of my low-income students at Berea College told me, “Once my math classes started using letters, my mom couldn’t help me anymore.” For many working-class parents, doing well in school means getting good grades, period, which in most schools is simply a function of completing pro forma homework and behaving. It is difficult for such parents to see the links between, say, a child’s habit of reading fantasy novels and the ease with which they finish written homework assignments or the scores they achieve on standardized verbal exams. It is probably even more difficult to see the links between techniques like verbal quizzing or negotiated, reasoned disciplining, on the one hand, and academic accomplishment on the other. Here’s a characteristic interaction reported in Lareau in a working-class household: “When Katie gets stuck on a [homework] problem, she turns to her mother for help. Unlike in middle-class homes, where parents typically help in stages, offering a series of prompts designed to get their children to figure out the correct answer, Katie’s mother issues a straightforward directive” (Lareau 2003: 89). As long as the homework is filled out correctly, nothing is amiss. As Patrick Finn sums up, looking at the results of one study in a Rust Belt city which retained very few well-paying blue collar jobs, “although [working-class] parents desperately wanted their children to go to college, they didn’t know what to do about it any more than Chicago steelworker parents or my parents did a generation ago” (Finn 2009: 73).

A second, closely related effect is that working-class parents are unlikely to be able to critique the pedagogical practices or curriculum of the schools their children attend. Even if they are frustrated with the schooling, they are not generally able to produce a detailed critique of classroom practices or content, or recommend better practices or content. If a school appears to be failing their child, there is little they can realistically do vis-à-vis the school itself. This is in sharp contrast to middle-class parents, who show a penchant for “overseeing, criticizing, and intervening in their [children’s] institutional lives” (Lareau 2003: 181), including mounting coordinated takeovers of school policy-making bodies and imposing detailed revisions in classroom practice (Sieber 1981).

A third effect, noted by Lareau, is that a lack of strong literacy denies working-class parents access to progressive ideas about parenting and progressive critiques of traditional, authoritarian parenting (or what counts in the contemporary US and Europe as

traditional parenting). Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether these “expert” ideas about parenting are well founded or not, such ideas are inherently literary ideas, by which I mean that they are only fully expressed and justified in text. Every middle-class mother-to-be that I know, and many middle-class fathers, begin their adventures in procreation by purchasing or borrowing books on parenting. Not just one or two books, but armloads. Lareau sees this selective, class-based exposure to a “generally accepted” set of expert parenting guidelines as so crucial that she describes it in depth in the opening pages of *Unequal Childhoods*, arguing that these guidelines form a “dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised” (Lareau 2003: 4).

3.4. Are these parenting styles different but equal?

These two parenting styles are profoundly different, so much so that they could hardly fail to have major effects on children. This begs the question: is one of these parenting styles better than the other? Or do they represent different but equally effective ways of being in the world? Or is that question impossible to answer? Perhaps a critic cannot truly set aside the coloring effects of her own childhood experience and make a neutral assessment. This is a question, after all, that involves making a judgment between two cultures, a kind of judgment that is considered categorically suspect in most academic disciplines that have anything to do with culture.

For the most part, Annette Lareau follows suit, taking a strongly relativist approach when it comes to the effects on children of these two different parenting styles. In many ways, this approach shows its value, allowing her to see subtle drawbacks and benefits in both styles. Thus far, I have emphasized the ways in which the concerted cultivation technique tends to foster literacy and certain kinds of intellectual development. So let me emphasize here some of the benefits of natural growth and some of the disadvantages of concerted cultivation.

In many working-class homes, children are given tremendous leeway over shaping what happens in their free time. According to Lareau, this has a number of benefits. Basically, it allows children to figure out, on their own, how to cooperate and be creative in coming up with enjoyable activities. “The children we studied tended to show more creativity, spontaneity, enjoyment, and initiative in their leisure pastimes than we saw among the middle-class children at play in organized activities” (Lareau 2003: 83). In middle-class homes, leisure time is often regimented, leaving children little time for spontaneity and creativity – except within narrow confines established by adults. Working-class children learn valuable social skills during their open-ended play: “Tyrec and other working-class and poor children learn how to be members of informal peer groups. They learn how to manage their own time. They learn how to strategize. Children, especially boys, learn how to negotiate open conflict during play, including how to defend themselves physically” (ibid: 83). In rural Appalachia and on the Yurok Reservation, many working-class children pick up practical skills and knowledge at the same time that they are *not* picking up literate intellectuality. Their parents may not help them much with Pythagoras or Shakespeare, but they are liable to help them learn to pull an engine or gut a fish. Working-class families also tend to have much stronger family

ties, interacting on a daily or weekly basis with an extended network of kinfolk that is largely absent in many professional homes. Although whether you think this is a good thing or not may depend on the people who actually make up your family, the modern erosion of family relationships which reaches its apogee in the professional family represents the disintegration of a fundamental aspect of human life; it cannot be presented as an unalloyed good.

Finally, one drawback of concerted cultivation is beginning to draw substantial media attention: pushing it to a logical extreme, many children and parents in affluent families find themselves caught in an unrelenting, hectic dash of competitive enrichment. Mothers and fathers spend their free time as chauffeurs; teenagers experience the kind of burnout we might expect from grizzled CEOs.

Should these observations lead us to conclude that these parenting styles are like two roads that take different paths up a steep mountainside but both arrive at the peak? Are they, in terms of their effects on children, different but equal? I think it is fair to say that Lareau tries, in places, to argue that this is the case, but doesn't quite manage to pull it off. The conclusion that natural growth and concerted cultivation are different but equivalent begins to erode if we notice that many of the drawbacks associated with concerted cultivation are a function of overbooking activities, and not a function of close verbal attention and negotiated discipline. While the hectic, over-organized schedules of many affluent children may represent a logical extension of an earnest commitment to active "cultivation," the verbal and disciplinary aspects of concerted cultivation are in no way dependent upon signing up for as many after-school lessons as possible. Which is to say, it is a simple matter to realize many of the benefits that Lareau documents for concerted cultivation, while minimizing the drawbacks that she also documents.

But Lareau's relativist stance is warranted to a point: at the very least, it seems to be the case that concerted cultivation comes at a cost – that, as with any cultural attribute, it is impossible to achieve some particular way of being without closing the door on other ways, and that try as we might, something of value will be lost.

4. Do Finn and Lareau help explain hicks and hippies in the MERJ area?

4.1. Schooling in the MERJ area

So far in this chapter, I have argued that children from poor families are unlikely to end up with a positive, independent relationship with reading and with written, intellectual knowledge. They are much more likely than affluent children to endure make-believe classrooms, and they are much less likely to have parents who can provide them with sustained support and guidance at home in intellectual matters. Children of higher-income, professional parents are much more likely to experience higher-quality schooling, as well as parenting styles which actively cultivate literacy and respect for intellectual accomplishment. Ultimately, over the next several chapters, I will develop a set of explanations for why differential literacy stands at the heart of the major cultural and social differences between "hick" and "hippie" homesteaders; the goal in this chapter is to begin to explain how such sharp, class-based differences in literacy and literate intellectuality are created.

However, the discussion so far in this chapter has drawn on research from all over the US and Britain, which begs the question: does it apply to the MERJ area? I briefly discussed how parenting styles in the MERJ area jibe with the finding of Annette Lareau – but I have not discussed schooling. Have children who grew up in the area over the past several decades experienced the kind of make-believe schooling described by Patrick Finn and so many other researchers?

Determining the precise degree to which Finn’s summary portrait of public schooling in the US applies to the MERJ area is beyond the scope of this dissertation; to be truly confident about such claims would require a major ethnographic research effort encompassing dozens of schools; moreover, since my arguments here are about the effects of schooling on people of different ages, such research would have to cover a period of several decades. Nonetheless, the available evidence corresponds closely – and without exception – with the findings of researchers in lower-income schools all over the US. Let us review that evidence.

To begin with, certain statistical data on schools are available publicly through government institutions such as the Census Bureau, the federal Department of Education, and the Kentucky Department of Education. These data do not paint a picture of thriving schools. For many years, Kentucky public schools have ranked in the bottom third of US states in per-pupil spending. Currently, Kentucky ranks 37th in per pupil spending, at \$5,319; this is not much higher than Utah, which came in last place, spending \$3,861 per student (Dixon 2012). By contrast, New York State, which was ranked first, spent \$12,984 – more than twice as much. Twenty years previously, in 1988-89, Kentucky was ranked 45th, again spending less than half of the leading state (National Center for Education Statistics 2012).

It is important to note, however, that the current level of spending represents a massive improvement. According to William Hoyt, “from 1969-70 to 1995-96, the 148.7 percent increase in real spending per student in Kentucky was the highest among all 50 states and significantly above the national average increase of 84.2 percent.” Note also that the above figures are state averages; the poorer districts, such as Jackson County, used to spend considerably less than more affluent areas, like parts of Fayette County. In 1989, just before the Kentucky Educational Reform Act of 1990 evened out geographical disparities in school funding, “average per pupil spending for instruction...varied from \$1,499 to \$3,709” (Hoyt 2012).

Certain statistics, such as test scores for specific schools, are only publicly available for more recent years, so these have limited ability to shed light on the past. Nonetheless, they suggest how much of a struggle it is for contemporary public schools to succeed in educating children in the MERJ area. One statistic, compiled by the Kentucky Department of Education, attempts to measure the “percentage of students who are college or career ready” for each public school district throughout the state. A given high school graduate is considered college or career ready if they have successfully “met an indicator,” where the indicators “include student performance on the ACT, compilation of college placement tests or attainment of an industry-recognized career certificate” (such as an HVAC certification or certification in using a certain software package). According to this rough proxy, well under half of Madison County students

were college or career ready in 2010, with somewhere between 21 and 40 percent of students meeting the criterion. In Jackson County, located entirely within the Appalachian region, less than *one in five* graduates meet it; moreover, this measurement does not include those who drop out, which in 2011 was more than one in four students (Kentucky Department of Education 2011).

A similar image of educational failure emerges from recent testing data. At the one “magnet” school in the MERJ area, Model Laboratory School, which is affiliated with Eastern Kentucky University, average ACT scores were just that – average. The composite score for 2011 was 21.4, which represented the 55th percentile nationally. At the sole high school in Jackson County, Jackson County High School, the composite ACT score was 17.3 – at the 28th percentile nationally. Again, these numbers are not reflective of the student body as a whole, because they only represent the performance of those students who are actively considering enrolling in college. It is highly unlikely that a student who scores in the 30th percentile in reading has made the transition, described by Maryanne Wolf, from being an accurate reader to being a fluent one (Wolf 2007).

Such statistics are valuable, but their main virtue is that they are easy to collect and easy to report. They don’t really tell us much about what’s happening inside these schools. What teaching style did the teachers use? Were classes based in discussion? Was there room for self-directed learning and genuine student input? Were the low test scores in Jackson County a product of the schooling – or was the schooling a bulwark successfully preventing even lower test scores? The test scores don’t by themselves tell us whether the schooling is helping students learn, preventing them from learning, or having no effect. So what, if anything, can we conclude? We can say that the general context of public schooling jibes with the descriptions in Finn and Lareau and other researchers: in the MERJ area, schooling is poorly funded compared with how it is funded at the best American schools. In the past, it used to be even more poorly funded. As a result, classes are large – with an average, for kindergarten through 12th grade, of 26 students per class in 1987-88, and 23 per class in 2003-04 (Watts 2007). To provide a contrast with the other extreme, compare this with twelve per class at Phillips Exeter Academy. Test scores are abysmal; the vast majority of students are not transitioning to independent literate intellectuality. At Phillips Exeter, the average composite SAT score was reportedly at the 96th percentile.

But to find out what all this means in terms of the students’ experience in the classroom requires qualitative data. While I did not conduct a series of interviews on education per se, in interviews with those who had grown up in the MERJ area, education was one of the topics discussed. Especially important here are the experiences of individuals who experienced more than one kind of schooling. Those who only attend one particular kind of school throughout their youth have little basis for comparison; for them, the school seems natural and timeless, even if they dislike it. It’s hard to draw them out about their experiences in the classroom – *it was just school, I didn’t much care for it. What else do you want to hear about?* They have little awareness that the schooling they experienced had a specific character, and that it could have been very different.

As with the statistical data above, this ethnographic material, while not conclusive – due to the small sample size – echoes not only Patrick Finn’s meta-ethnographic

findings, but those of Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, which I quoted briefly above, and which focused on some of the most flagrantly malfunctioning schools in the United States.

One interviewee, Dean Jefferson, the son of countercultural back-to-the-landers, moved back and forth several times between Los Angeles and the MERJ area. His experience is diagnostic. He attended fourth and fifth grade in Rockcastle County in the mid-1970s, at the elementary school in Livingston, a small rural town with about two hundred residents. The school was underfunded and remarkably authoritarian – like a one-room schoolhouse out of a Laura Ingalls Wilder story – and instruction consisted of memorization and worksheets, punctuated by beatings. It was “very rural,” he said, “with mostly poor students.”

The school, the building itself, was decrepit, falling down. There was no playground, there was no grass. We did recess on the parking lot. Yeah, actually where the dumpsters were. So we climbed on the dumpsters – I'm not making that up. There was no playground equipment. There was a gravel and broken-asphalt parking lot. I remember we would have Bible study in the classroom once a week, and then a couple of times a year, maybe once a semester, somebody would come and hand out Bibles to all the kids. Little, plastic-backed Bibles, and we'd kinda spend all day doing Bible study stuff.

One of the most remarkable examples of the authoritarian character of the school was that children were not allowed to talk during lunch.

We weren't allowed to speak at lunchtime in the lunchroom, in any public place. All the students were lined up to go to lunch, had assigned seating in the cafeteria...It was complete silence during the meals. The kids were not allowed to talk. And, if you did talk, the punishment was to be taken to the front of the cafeteria, and paddled, in front of the rest of the kids. So, there wasn't a lot of talking [laughs] – it was a fairly effective means of control of kids. Yeah. It was a pretty unnatural environment for a bunch of – I mean these are fourth and fifth graders that I was hanging out with.

Dean went to sixth grade in Los Angeles, then moved with his mother back to the land in rural Jackson County, where he attended seventh and eighth grade in Sand Gap, an even more rural town than Livingston. As with the school in Livingston, the lack of funding was severe.

It was the same story, the facility was pretty decrepit, cinder block building, with a coal-fired furnace that would malfunction three or four times a semester and we'd all have to leave the building on our hands and knees because of the black smoke. No air conditioning.

The same kind of authoritarian schooling model was in full effect at Sand Gap: it represented, in Dean's words, the "antiquated but persistent idea of education that it's a downloading process: you're gonna sit still, and I'm gonna shove some stuff in your brain, and you're gonna keep it there."

We did Bible readings in class, we read the Ten Commandments off the wall every morning. You know, everybody stood, and over the PA the principal would lead the Pledge of the Allegiance, and read the Ten Commandments. They were posted in every room. And that was the daily ritual, every morning. At that age I was old enough to realize that that was not something I felt like I wanted to participate in, but – yeah, I was the only kid in that group who saw anything wrong with it, or was uncomfortable at all. I learned pretty quick that there was no percentage in voicing that to anybody. I got a couple of beat downs on the playground about it, so I kinda just followed along, go along to get along.

Children could be paddled not only for a genuine transgression, like assaulting another student, but also for questioning the factual accuracy of the teacher. Dean told several stories like this one:

I remember in the eighth grade, I had one class, and it was the teacher who taught social studies and science. I was the only kid in that class who had ever left the state of Kentucky. Including the teacher. I was the only kid in the class who had ever been on an airplane. Including the teacher. But, when a kid asked how high do airplanes fly, she goes, "Well the highest airplanes fly at about eight thousand feet." Which, it was obvious she didn't know, but instead of just saying she didn't know, she just picked a number. So I of course raised my hand, and said, "No, I don't think that's right. I was just on an airplane, when I went to California last, and I remember the pilot very clearly saying we were at thirty-two thousand feet." And she proceeded to argue with me and tell me I was wrong, and I had misunderstood, and that wasn't accurate, and that I needed to stop having these outbursts in class and giving these kids the wrong information. That was another incidence of ending up in the hallway getting beaten by the principal. And I believe there was talk of potential suspension – "You need to spend some days at home."

Other interviewees who attended local schools reported similarly authoritarian, top-down schooling, where the role of students was to be "seen and not heard." Jeff Payne – who, like Dean, went to several different schools in different states – attended Madison Central High School, in Richmond, in the late eighties. He described class instruction as taking a single form: "you sit in a chair, and listen to a lecture." Classes were large, "usually about forty kids in a class. It was overcrowded." I asked, "How did the kids respond to that?"

I know I didn't respond very well. I didn't want to be there. *Ever*. And it was just – it was *chaos*. A book should be written on Madison Central in the early eighties when I was there. Cause I think there were like twenty kids that died the two years that I was there. We had someone get struck by lightning, you know, somebody drowned in the Kentucky River cause he was drunk, there were car wrecks, overdoses, shootings. I mean it was like some kind of inner city thing. They busted like – had a big arrest one day, arrested like twenty kids or something, for dealing drugs at the school. Kids dipping snuff and spitting on the floor in the back, and rubbing it in with their boots. The whole place was kind of gross.

The ineffectual character of the make-believe classroom stands in contrast to the few bright spots interviewees described within the local schools: an exceptional teacher; an experimental approach; a gifted program that met a couple of times a month, but which meant more to the interviewee than all the other instruction combined. One interviewee remembered such moments fondly, from Berea Community School in the late 1970s:

They basically experimented on all of us. They tried like Spanish immersion, put me in it in second or third grade for a while, and had SPICE [the gifted program] and all that kind of shit. I felt like there was – in fourth grade, they basically handed me and about four or five other kids our math textbooks and said “Go work at your own pace, do every problem in the book,” basically, and we just read and taught ourselves the math. It was a lot of just trying out different things to foster the kids, their intellectual stimulation on their own.

Dean was one of the few children of bohemian homesteaders who actually attended school in Jackson or Rockcastle Counties. The hallmark of bohemian homesteaders is that they are book educated, and thus they are actively concerned with the quality of their children's formal education and have the knowledge to recognize poor-quality schooling when they see it. Most countercultural back-to-the-landers over the years have chosen to move to Berea or homeschool before they would send their children these schools, such as Lori West, who homesteaded in Jackson County in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

Our son was born about a year after we were there [on the land] and then our daughter almost three years later. Really, I think there were two reasons why we changed course and moved to Berea. A huge reason was schools. It was the fact that the land up there is located in Jackson County. Our friend Judy McCann taught in the schools. I had served on the textbook committee one time to pick textbooks in schools. And John, Herbert, and Alice [children they had helped raise] had gone to the schools. And Emma's kids had gone to the school. So I knew a lot about

the schools. Knew a lot about the county. I was not really interested – I mean I knew we could balance it at home as far as academics maybe – but I wasn't really happy with the thought of some of the socialization influences. And I realized that, you know, maybe Madison County is only a step more enlightened, but still, school has a big influence on kids.

4.2. *Four categories*

The available evidence suggests that public schooling in the MERJ area generally conforms to the findings of researchers elsewhere: with some important exceptions, such as the gifted programs, local school kids over the decades have endured authoritarian, top-down classrooms structured around lectures and focused on keeping the students quiet and in their chairs. Does this mean that the theories and observations from other places explain the distribution of literate intellectuality between bohemian and country homesteaders in the MERJ area? Do Finn and Lareau apply? After all, there is plenty of make-believe schooling in the area, and both styles of parenting documented by Lareau are in evidence.

However, there are a couple of problems in applying these ideas to the MERJ area. One of the problems is that it's nearly *all* make-believe schooling. In these four counties, with a total population of 130,000 people, and dozens of public schools, there are only a couple of alternatives, both located away from the mountains, in Richmond. There is only one school that might qualify as an affluent private school, and one higher-quality public magnet school – with a four or five year waiting list. The vast majority of children attend poorly-funded public schools with large classes, an emphasis on control, and all of the other attendant problems discussed above. Increasingly, well-educated families respond to the lack of alternatives by homeschooling their children, a difficult task that ties up a parent for many years and usually falls to the mother, rather than the father. But the current emphasis on homeschooling was less common in the past, and so has had little effect on any but the youngest contemporary homesteaders. Thus, the lack of educational alternatives in the MERJ area was even more pronounced when those who are now adult homesteaders were in school; when I was a child in the area in the 1970s and 80s, I did not know a single kid who did not go to public school.

Why is this a problem for applying Patrick Finn in the MERJ area? Finn shows that there are radically different kinds of schooling offered to different children in the US, and he links this to radically different outcomes. However, if many homesteaders, from both groups, are from the area, and if as children they all attended more or less the same kind of school, how can this account for the difference in literacy between them?

There is a similar problem in applying Annette Lareau's findings to homesteaders in eastern Kentucky. The bohemian homesteaders tend to be from better-educated families – but a sizable minority is from working-class backgrounds. If bohemian homesteaders are marked by literate intellectuality, which is fostered by avoiding make-believe schooling and having parents dedicated to concerted cultivation, how can we explain the prevalence, in the MERJ area, of bohemian homesteaders from working-class families?

Finn and Lareau do shed light here, but it's not in an absolutely straightforward way.

It is straightforward enough, however, to fit in a two-by-two grid:

Real school –and– Concerted cultivation	Real school –and– Natural growth
Make-believe school –and– Concerted cultivation	Make-believe school –and– Natural growth

Figure 4.1. A grid formed by the intersection of two axes: the type of school an individual attended, and the parenting style they experienced at home.

In terms of their access to the pedagogical resources described by Finn and Lareau, homesteaders in the MERJ area fall into three of those four categories:

One group – represented by the top, left square of the grid – attended higher-quality schools *and* had parents who actively fostered literate intellectuality. Because there are so few real schools in the MERJ area, essentially everyone in this group grew up outside of the area – and they all are all clearly, unambiguously, bohemian homesteaders.

A second group, in the lower left square, attended make-believe schools, but in some way encountered literacy and literate education outside of school, in ways that took hold: they had parents who were highly literate and practiced concerted cultivation; they were friends with other children who were highly literate; or – in a handful of cases – they were exceptionally bookish in an otherwise non-literate family, usually as a result of shyness and introversion. Many of the people in this group are from the MERJ area. In terms of their culture and who they socialize with, they are bohemian homesteaders.

A third group, in the lower-right square, attended make-believe schools and possessed no resources outside of school to offer them an alternative route to book learning. Their parents were weakly literate and had themselves experienced only make-believe schooling or, in many cases, minimal schooling or no schooling at all. Most individuals in this group are from the MERJ area, or nearby counties, and they are, almost without exception, culturally and socially members of the country homesteader group.

There is the logical possibility of a fourth category, in the upper-right: those who attended a higher-quality school but did not have book-educated parents who practiced concerted cultivation. This category is empty. I have not encountered anyone in the MERJ area who fits in this category – even among those who moved to the area from elsewhere. In the contemporary US, you don't just *happen* to land in a good school: they are too scarce, too selective, and too expensive. Higher-quality formal schooling is simply not available to children without substantial parental resources to invest, including money, concerted cultivation, and sustained interest in seeing their child attend a particular kind of school.

Let's look at some examples from each of the three populated categories.

4.3. *Good school, literate intellectuality at home: bohemian homesteader from elsewhere*

In chapter one, we met Margaret Bingham, a homesteader who was raised in the cities of the northeast, with progressive, college-educated parents. This was a strongly intellectual household, and her parents did not leave their children's intellectual development to chance:

Margaret: My father had thousands of books, I'm serious. And we got paid a penny apiece to make an index card of each book.

Jason: That you had read?

Margaret: No, no. That he had. He wanted to organize his books.

Jason: So he outsourced the library tasks.

Margaret: Yeah. So I learned to spell Kierkegaard and Nietzsche at an early age. So yeah, always books, always school and learning, which was great, and we all did well in school.

Jason: So you were encouraged to read?

Margaret: Oh yeah, definitely.

Jason: Talked about ideas at home?

Margaret: Oh yes. "Let's have an intelligent conversation at the dinner table." That was the mantra.

Margaret mainly attended public primary and secondary schools, although she experienced alternative schooling through a Unitarian church in Baltimore, and she was aware of alternative schools through friends. That she would attend college was more-or-less a foregone conclusion, and when the time came she sought out a particular kind of college education:

Margaret: I applied to Hampshire College which was an alternative college. I was interested in alternative things.

Jason: Now when you say alternative, what does that mean?

Margaret: That means – well – they don't have grades. It's more self-directed. Yeah, it was more, I don't know, hippie. The names that people used to describe it: hippie, granola. But I was very interested in alternative ideas of lifestyles and – even in high school I knew people that went to

alternative high schools, not meaning the ones now, where it's kids who get in trouble, it's more like a free-spirit kind of a thing. And wanting that.

Hampshire College delivered the kind of alternative approach that Margaret had sought. She experienced a wide array of cultural and political dissent during her years there, from a student-run whole foods coop to coed-bathrooms. "You would go into a bathroom," she said with a chuckle, "and the feet would be pointing the other direction in the next stall." She learned to rock climb and kayak in the outdoor program. She joined the Clamshell Alliance, a non-violent direct-action group that fought against the construction of nuclear power plants (and was also, incidentally, one of the main sources of Barbara Epstein's idea of "prefigurative movements," which I introduced at the end of chapter three (Epstein 1991).

Margaret fits squarely within the category of homesteaders in the MERJ area who experienced both concerted cultivation at home and real schooling in her formal education.

Even though she was from a lower-middle-class family in terms of income, in terms of her life-long engagement with writing and with literate scholarship, she would easily place in the top five percent in the nation, if not higher. However, among bohemian back-to-the-landers in the MERJ area who are originally from the city or suburbs, this level of literate intellectuality is typical – even as, in most other regards, the stories are remarkably diverse. This is true regardless of the generation of the back-to-the-lander.

One final note before we move on to a couple more examples in this category. According to the stereotypical view of the sixties counterculture, discussed in chapter three, Margaret should count as a pretty clear example of a hippie. But her own assessment is different:

Margaret: I liked the counter-cultureness in Hampshire but I wouldn't say I engaged in it – well I never engaged in it fully. I never thought of myself as a hippie.

Jason: So you have in mind some of the – I don't know how to say it – the intense partying, the drugs and the sex?

Margaret: No, no thanks. I never got into that. I felt like I was enjoying life too much to have to be not in it. It just seemed like that hard drug scene and everything just wasn't of interest.

One of the oldest back-to-the-landers I interviewed, Dylan Graves, who was born in 1941, grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. His father had a PhD in chemistry from the University of Chicago, and was recruited into the Manhattan Project in 1943. Dylan's parents were both well educated, and he went to the public school in Oak Ridge, which was full of scientists' kids. When he graduated, he traveled far away to attend a liberal arts school: "My parents were first-generation intellectuals and intellectual snobs, and they believed in small liberal arts colleges, so my sister went to Swarthmore and I went to Carleton." At Carleton he became more or less a full-time political activist, organizing against the Vietnam War, marching with the picket lines in the Civil Rights movement,

and serving in the summer of '65 as the acting national secretary of Students for a Democratic Society. During our interview, he said that he didn't read much – but he also repeatedly referenced political and historical material that he'd learned about through reading, talked about starting an activist magazine during college, and for many years has edited a literary magazine.

Anna Dungan, the woman who designed and, along with her family, built a straw-bale home as part of a stable intentional community, was born more than thirty years after Dylan, in the mid-1970s. She grew up in an insular and somewhat isolated family in a small city in Ohio. She grew up poor and with strongly evangelical parents – which in most cases is not a recipe for book learning. Church was a major part of her life. She attended “three times a week. Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening. I went to a Christian school through eight grade [at which her mother taught], and then I was really active in the church youth group through high school.” Nonetheless, she was extremely bookish from a young age:

Yeah, [reading] was all I wanted to do. As far as I remember it. I think I learned to read when I was four. And I would have read all day – well, I played with Barbies and stuff, too. And Legos. I was a very imaginative kid, I guess. But I didn't do much physical activity or outside stuff. I was never really into sports too much...I was just reading so much fiction. And like you, not so much science fiction, but fantasy, myth. There was a lot of biography. It was like so much an escape for me.

Because Anna is unusually literate, in my experience, for a child raised in a fundamentalist family, I asked if her parents were also strongly literate. It turned out that they were both college educated and active readers.

Anna: Yeah, my parents really like to read. And they listen to classical music. It was kind of a different cultural thing. It was very different than their families. Their families were not at all bookish – but they, their families, were definitely middle class. They certainly weren't like ignorant rural...I don't know...

Jason: Blue collar, working class?

Anna: Not at all, not at all.

Anna turned down a chance to attend Yale, because she and her family were worried that she might “spiritually backslide” at such a secular institution; she attended Wheaton College instead. Even though it was a strongly Christian college, it also exposed her to ideas that she had never encountered before, and her early reading blossomed into a wide-ranging exploration that left her religion transformed and placed her on the path to homesteading.

4.4. Make-believe school, literate intellectuality at home or elsewhere: bohemian homesteader

Elijah Amaro is a tall, slender man in his early thirties. For the past several years, he has lived in India and Nepal, but in the late 1990s he was a participant in one of the impromptu and shorter-lived back-to-the-land communes. He lived in what became known as Hippie Holler – that remote valley that can only be reached by driving up the creek, which I mentioned in chapter three. For two or three years, he survived on minimal income, gardening and working on a cabin built from local materials. At that point, however, the collective began to fall apart.

Eventually after people started moving out there it wasn't really going anywhere; we just had all these dreams of building these houses and living out there in this community, but there was too much in and out, no one stayed out there. Eventually I felt like I was being misled cause David [the informal leader of the group] was feeding us all these dreams and after a year or two nothin happened. He went on and slept with the next-door neighbor's wife, and I was like, man, I can't stand this. I just needed to do something cause I felt like I was being led around.

A few participants who had bought separate parcels stayed on in the homes they had built. But Elijah moved back into town, where he eventually got his GED and enrolled in Berea College.

His path to participation in the bohemian counterculture is very different than that of Margaret or Dylan. He was born in New York City in 1978 to Panamanian parents; his parents divorced young, and he is estranged from his father:

I don't really know my dad that well, he wasn't really that good of a dad, you know, he was addicted to drugs and all kind a things, you know, so I don't really know where he is or know if he's alive right now or nothin like that.

His mother and stepfather did not engage in the concerted cultivation of literacy and intellect. "My family wasn't too much into reading," he noted, and "never pushed me to read." By his mid-teens, he was distancing himself from his family, "couch hopping" and staying away from home as much as possible. The public high school he went to, in Ocala, Florida, did not provide much in the way of a real literate education, either:

When I went to school all my classes were dropout prevention; they knew I was gonna drop out beforehand. I was in the worst-of-the-worst classes, you know, so all the teachers I had, they could care two cents about us, they pretty much knew if we stayed we're gosh darn lucky and if we left you know pretty much ninety-five percent of us were gonna end up in jail or dead. So I was at the lowest of the crop at my school.

And drop out he did. He simply drifted away from school, not even telling his parents, and into a life on the road. This experience of the classroom colored his perception of schooling for years afterward. When someone suggested, seven or eight years later, that he apply to Berea College, his response was definite: “I was pretty much like fuck school man, institutions suck, brainwashin and dah dah dah dah. And she was like if you change your mind I’ll get you an application, and I was like yeah fuck you I ain’t gonna do no school.”

So how can Elijah fall into the category of those who are unusually literate? So far he sounds like he ought to belong with those who experienced neither concerted cultivation nor real schooling, and thus ended up divorced from literate knowledge. There are two reasons he avoided that fate. The first reason is that he developed a reading habit, on his own, early on in life:

I always read; even when I was burned out on high school, I always read a lot. Reading’s always been a part of my life.... My mom read a lot of romance. My dad didn’t even read the newspaper. I was really the only one [in my family] who read. I was always reading, especially fiction, always going to the libraries. Even when I was smoking pot I went to the libraries. I even became a book thief for a while, ganked books. I was always into books.

After he dropped out of high school, he lived among the urban street kids for a few months, sleeping under bridges, until he attended a Rainbow gathering outside of Ocala. That was the second reason he developed an unusual degree of literate intellectuality: the Rainbow Family of Living Light functions, for many young participants, as a kind of mobile, distributed, alternative school (Niman 1997). In the following exchange, Elijah sketches his experience as a student at Rainbow U:

Elijah: Yeah, my ideas now formed through Rainbow. Helped develop ideas I already had about the world, general things I’d read about. Definitely helped me have a more larger worldview; every thought you could imagine was there, from Christianity to whatever.

Jason: People trying to be open there?

Elijah: Yeah, that’s what it’s all about – the rainbow, different walks of life, different ethnicities, tryin to live together in one global community instead of being separated off, it’s about everybody and everything all together.

Jason: Is it a place where people teach each other skills?

Elijah: Yeah yeah – I mean, whatever you wanna get into. There’s someone there who knows *somethin* about *somethin*, and someone’s always willin to learn you. I learned how to make drums, build fires, how to take care of my poop and stuff like that. Or just how to camp out an’ things like that, you know, I can build myself a squat spot, build myself a fire. There’s all kinda skills like that from how to make teepees, learned

how to juggle, cooking, all kinds of skills. The rainbow is about your own initiative; no one's gonna drag you –

Jason: No one's gonna kick you out.

Elijah: If you don't want to do anything, no one's gonna make you; maybe he's just spun out on acid, who knows?

Jason: Is it a place where your political consciousness opened?

Elijah: Yeah – there was tension between Rainbows and the Forest Service. There were only a certain amount of people allowed in the woods, and the Rainbows were fighting those laws. People were always mobilizing at gatherings, lots of activism; a lot of people were not involved as well. Some people were there for spiritual reasons, some people just don't care.

Jason: Do people pass around books?

Elijah: Yeah, some places have libraries – the larger gatherings – anything from biodynamics to yoga, dumpster diving, you name it. You can trade, Ram Dass, hippie dippie books, Native American books. Astrology.

Pat Cleary, the “super crunchy” homesteader we met in chapter three who lives in a geodesic dome, followed a somewhat different trajectory. She grew up in Rockcastle County and attended low-quality public schools there. In our interview, I was trying to get a sense of how she would critique society, and asked what she thought most needed to be changed. One of the things she emphasized was education:

And also, especially education. I don't think we should have thirty children to a classroom, I think we should have ten or less, and I think it should be much more interactive, because that dominator culture starts right there. You're sitting here, somebody older and taller is standing above you, and that's how it all starts, and you're learned – put in your place, you're trained to be a factory worker from the time you step in there, and I think that needs to change. Just the whole way we approach any kind of learning or interaction should be much more egalitarian.

Pat is thus typical of this category in that she spent her early years in largely make-believe schooling. Unlike Elijah, however, and more typical of individuals in this category, she did have a degree of support at home for the development of literate intellectuality. Her parents were relatively well educated for the region, they expected her to get good grades in school, and they did have reading habits of their own. However, they read mostly fiction or read in a limited way for school – they were not literate *intellectuals*, and in becoming a literate intellectual, Pat moved well beyond them in her own approach to reading.

My family is conservative but they are also very educated, my brother is a physician, my mother is a chemist, so we are very, they are not just redneck, you know what I mean? Well they're that, too, but they're

different in that they did read, when they want to. But they didn't read because of curiosity – it's like either for academics, or like my dad just disappearing into fiction.

When I asked Pat why she had turned out to be so different from her family in terms of her ideas and her culture, she came back to reading, and the way that she pushed it in a way that the rest of her family did not.

Jason: Do you have any idea why you took a trajectory that was so unique, so different than some of your other family?

Pat: Well, I don't know about it. I mean I see one of my nephews doing the same thing. I think maybe, I don't know that again is a spiritual question. I just have – I'm a person who likes to read, I'm a person who likes to be outside and I don't – I mean my dad read but he read Louis L'Amour. Yeah he would read that, my mom would read a little, mom was always into crazy stuff, but my stepmom was into historical romance. But me, I read philosophy. I mean I was really I think even at like age six already reading, well anything I could get my hands on.

One of the most poignant stories I heard was from Elizabeth Brower, a homesteader in her sixties who is from a rural Appalachian family. Elizabeth is one of the few individuals who seems to be genuinely and equally at home with both bohemian and country homesteaders, although she is definitely liberal in her political and social attitudes. Partly this cross-border comfort is because of her welcoming and gregarious personality, but it is also because she was able to provide for herself, through reading, a level of literate education that was unusual for rural eastern Kentucky. When the first back-to-the-landers began to move into her small town in Estill County in the mid-1970s, she was immediately drawn to their educated company.

Neither of her parents had experienced college, but her mother was an avid reader and encouraged Elizabeth to become one as well.

Elizabeth: My mother was a reader, my dad [with an eighth grade education] didn't read. He wasn't a big reader. But no mother read constantly. And would try to get us to read, and my sister read, just like she did. I didn't read until I was thirteen, and my neighbor gave me *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and it just changed my life. Mom started handing me the books then after that.

Jason: So you said it changed your life, partly cause it got you reading?

Elizabeth: Oh, it got me reading, which changes your life.

Jason: How so?

Elizabeth: Oh gosh, you learn – you know, if you can't travel in a car, you have to travel with your mind. I mean, you learn, I learned a lot of things.

Despite her hunger for learning and new experiences, as a young woman in Appalachia in the 1960s, Elizabeth was not expected to go to college. She was expected to have a family. Which is what she did. Although she has been able to provide herself with a literate education through life-long reading, it has been a struggle to do so; and she was never able to go to college:

Ok, one thing I do want to say, my parents did not expect me to go to college. That is such a big disappointment; I have had to get over that. I *wanted* to go, and I thought about it but of course I was married when I was sixteen. So that was way out of the point. But my dad really resented his children the smarter they got. That's a country man thing. It really is. He – and he loved my brother to death, I mean loved him, and when he wasn't in the room he bragged about Stan – but when Stan was in the room it was things like “Well you think you know so blankin much. Dah dah dah dah dah.” And I really wish I did have a formal education because what it would have done is it would have opened my mind a lot more. Which my mind needed to be opened. And I needed a lot more self-assurance – hoo Lord! I didn't have much self-esteem until one day it just floated through and I got it, but it was not there for the longest time.

4.5. Neither good school nor literate intellectuality at home: country homesteader

Pat Cleary and Elizabeth Brower both attended weak schools, but they had family members who read and who were supportive of the reading habits that they developed as kids. In both cases, this reading habit has been instrumental in bringing them into contact with the world of written inquiry and critique, and in pushing them into becoming participants – despite their family background – in the sixties or post-sixties bohemian counterculture. Such stories are not rare in the MERJ area, but they are not common, either. In the rural areas and among lower-income families in particular, it is normal for a young person to grow up in an environment in which there are no adult models whatsoever of real literacy. There is no experience of the profound ways in which one's thought and perception can be developed through reflection based upon reading.

Up into the 1960s and 70s, many teenagers in rural eastern Kentucky did not finish high school. The goal of schooling was not to develop college-ready kids with foundations in a wide array of subjects; it was to pass on a basic facility with the “three R's,” reading, writing, and arithmetic. The goal of many of the kids was to quit school as soon as possible so they could begin their adult lives of working and courting. This was Elizabeth Brower's experience of schooling, leavened by her mother's cultivation of reading at home. Harm Smallwood, who grew up in a poor family with a coal-mining father and a subsistence farming mother, had the same experience of schooling – but he did not have the contact with books at home. He quit Silver Creek Elementary School, in Madison County – the same school I attended in first grade, incidentally – as soon as he could to begin working, and didn't hardly stop till the day he died.

After I got to be about twelve, the only things on my mind were gettin me a job, and buyin me a car. When I got fourteen, I started working at the planing mill making fifty cents an hour. I was gettin a lot of know-how behind me. I stayed in that kind of business, paintin and buildin, all my life. And to tell you the truth, I enjoyed it. That's all I knowed. Hard work. I didn't know nothin else.

In Harm's generation, this was a normal life trajectory, and there was no shame in it:

Harm: I went there seven years, until the sixth grade. That's as far in school as I got. But then you weren't looked down on much, but now school is so important.

Jason: Probably most of the kids quit when they could work?

Harm: They didn't require you to have a high school education, if you could do the job, that's all it was. I can read, I can write.

But still, like Elizabeth, Harm regrets his lack of a formal education.

I'd give anything in the world if I could have went to school, but I didn't have too much of a choice. I've made it through the years, but some of 'em were hard – I wish I could've done it better. Still to this day I wish I could've done things different.

Harm's story is typical for the time and place he was raised – but it would be easy to misinterpret what this means. It was typical in the sense that it was what most of his peers in the MERJ area experienced. It was not typical in the sense that it *had to be like that*. Dylan Graves, the homesteader who grew up in Oak Ridge, was of the same generation as Harm, and also grew up in southern Appalachia. The near-absolute lack of contact with the powerful use of literacy that Harm experienced in his childhood was not a historical absolute: it was a socio-economic phenomenon.

Another piece of evidence that supports this claim is that, fifty or sixty years after Harm was in school, his experience of it is still common for rural Appalachian youth. Seth Halpin is a young man, about twenty years old, from a rural homesteading family with no penchant for reading. I spent an afternoon with him, running errands in his pickup truck, right after he had dropped out of high school. His feelings about school were the same as Harm's – without the regret of late-life perspective: he had sat patiently in the classrooms, learning nothing of value, until he could legally leave school and begin his adult life. Despite my quizzing, he had nothing to say about school itself; it was a blank. It had zero value for him. He had no stories to tell about it.

At sixteen, he already had substantial experience with skilled manual labor, building barns, running fences, and so on – activities he had plenty of stories about. He had already worked for money in the summers, and he had simply bided his time until he could turn to this full-time, which he did. He made good money putting up fences, rented an apartment and moved in with his girlfriend, and began adulthood. He didn't miss

school, because it was make-believe; it was like a gigantic, decade long time-out. But much more importantly, he didn't miss the literate life of the mind, either, because he had never once encountered it.

5. Some read, some don't. Who cares?

So what? Some people in the US read ok, and some read really well. Some read occasionally or only when a task necessitates it; others stay up half the night reading, caught up in a book. Why does it matter? It's not like the "merely" accurate readers are getting lost on the freeway or can't write a check. So they're not reading Proust for fun, they've never written a ten-page paper explicating *Mrs. Dalloway*, and they can't describe a molecule. Who cares?

Many experts conclude that we shouldn't. A recurrent theme in critiques of higher education is that it makes little sense to spend enormous collective resources training young people with skills that they will never need at work, as Richard Vedder argued in a debate in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "A large subset of our population," he wrote, "should not go to college, or at least not at public expense. The number of new jobs requiring a college degree is now less than the number of young adults graduating from universities, so more and more graduates are filling jobs for which they are academically overqualified" (Chronicle of Higher Education 2010). Since these people will never need to write a research paper in order to flip burgers and answer phones, why waste all the time and effort it takes to teach them how to do it?

Another group of experts arrives at a similar (if less blatantly spelled-out) conclusion, although they arrive there via different arguments. The field known as New Literacy Studies adopts, almost as an axiom, a strong cultural relativist stance towards literacy. They propose that there is no single level of literacy that is appropriate for everyone; the very act of defining and measuring such levels is to arbitrarily impose one's own cultural standards upon other people. There is, in this view, no general condition of literacy – there are only specific literate acts, occurring in and deriving their meaning from their specific contexts (Collins and Blot 2003; Ewing 2003). For example, if a particular young adult can perform tasks like reading road signs and writing a check, and if that's the only immediate need they have in their life for literacy, how can some external observer claim that they need to read more or write more? Doesn't that amount to the observer arbitrarily applying her own cultural norms to someone else? Perhaps working-class people are developing literate practices that are well suited to their own lives (Berliner 1996)?

There are other reasons to ask why the differential attainment of literacy and literate intellectuality matters. The bookish life of the mind, after all, does not begin to exhaust the full expression of human brilliance and attainment. The knowledge and accomplishments of the first fifty thousand years or more of human history took place in the complete absence of literacy. In rural Appalachia today, there are still families, like that of James Hamilton, whose members have never set foot in a school house, and yet are highly skilled, broadly knowledgeable, and possessed of keen intellects and a vibrant curiosity. As James' grandmother put it, regarding her decision to keep her children out of school, "Then the Lord told me, He said, they won't have a lot of book sense. But they

will, I'll make them know how to *do*." They can pull a tractor apart and rebuild it, help a calf through a difficult birth, train a team of mules to pull in harness, efficiently build a log house from standing poplars, and can a winter's worth of food – all without ever having read a single sentence. One youngster had his own rifle when he was five years old – even younger than James – and would hike out into the woods by himself, shoot a rabbit, bring it home, clean it, and give it to his mom to cook. I once spent an afternoon with James, replacing the clutch in my Honda. We had both repaired a clutch or two before, but neither of us had worked on a Civic. While I was reading the *Haynes Manual* to figure out how to proceed – “Step 1, remove the transmission from the vehicle” – James studied the car itself, and soon announced a much quicker and easier route than the one in the book. In that case, literacy went head-to-head with independent thinking, and lost.

Like many people who are not book-educated, the Hamiltons are what we might call *practical intellectuals*. They apply a practiced analytical intelligence to an astonishing array of mostly practical tasks. This is a different set of tasks than the ones tackled by, say, Noam Chomsky – but is there any basis for arguing that it is of less value? If anything, the more obviously and directly valuable skill set is that of the Hamiltons. Will the latest version of generative grammar see me through a cold, hungry winter? If James Hamilton had been sent off to Phillips Exeter, he might have gained one broad set of skills, but only at the cost of losing the chance to develop a radically different and also valuable set of skills. And note that if he had been sent to the local make-believe school, he would have paid a similar cost, but received little in return but a crash course in fistfights, oxycontin, and gut-wrenching alienation.⁶

Many working people have come to similar dismissive conclusions about literacy and literate intellectuality as the pundits and scholars mentioned above. When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I worked on a carpentry crew in the mountains east of Berea. During lunch breaks, I would find a shady spot and sit down with a book, a practice that drew chuckles from my fellow workers. As one of them told me, with the confidence of an elder steering wayward youth, “Boy, there ain't nothing in them books you cain't learn in the real world.” Was he right?

⁶ Note that these two skill sets – literate intellectuality and practical intellectuality – do not have to be mutually exclusive. But there is some opportunity cost between them, in that the more time an individual spends engaged in a certain kind of task, the less time there is to practice other tasks. Nonetheless, the often sharp differentiation between those possessed of practical skills and those possessed of more purely intellectual skills is more of a product of current social and institutional practices rather than an inherent trade-off in human life.

CHAPTER 5

CAPITALISM, CLASS, AND EXPLOITATION

You see people that have been working in the factory for twenty-five years and have locked into it with car loans and house loans and boat loans. Obviously a lot of creativity dies in that kind of environment. And I guess at that point my foster mom had passed, and it was “What do I want to do?” Life is too precious, I don’t want to stay in a factory my whole life.

– Cynthia Hillyer

1. Literacy and class

In chapter three, we saw that one of the few underlying socio-economic differences between bohemian homesteaders and country homesteaders was the uneven distribution of literate intellectuality between the two groups. In chapter four, I described some of the key processes that shape this distribution. The fundamental driver is the highly unequal class distribution of basic resources like time and money. Basically, accomplishing literate intellectuality is resource intensive, and when people lack basic resources, they are much less likely to accomplish it. This is particularly true when there is – as far as they can tell – no direct need in their lives for literate intellectuality. A map of the distribution of literacy is a map of the distribution of certain kinds of important resources, and thus, to some extent, a map of the distribution of power in society. However, I also argued that the links between exploitation, domination, and relative poverty, on the one hand, and command of literate intellectuality, on the other hand, are indirect: income or job type does not, *by itself*, determine whether a given individual becomes fluently literate and book educated, or not. Rather, income and job type form the basic ground upon which the individual stories play out.

This chapter builds on the above arguments in two ways. The first way is by examining directly the fundamental driver in the distribution of literacy, *capitalist class*. The terms *capitalism* and *class* are used all the time by social scholars and lay people alike, but are seldom defined. Moreover, across the range of scholarly works where they are defined, there is no clear, agreed-upon definition. One of the main tasks of this

chapter is to provide such a definition. What is capitalism? How does it work? What does class mean? We have to develop solid, clearly stated, and usable definitions before we can anchor explanations in these terms. The first part of this chapter temporarily leaves the MERJ area behind, focusing instead on providing a basic, general orientation to capitalism and some of the best thinking about it. In the rest of the chapter, we will see how these ideas apply to the MERJ area, by taking a look at the kinds of jobs available to people.

The second way in which this chapter builds on the argument so far is by taking a closer look at the interactions between capitalist class and literate intellectuality. Like so many of the social processes discussed in this dissertation, these interactions are reciprocal: the jobs created by capitalists shape the distribution of literacy, and the distribution of literacy shapes the kinds of jobs capitalists are able to create. Hence, I will argue two related points about the interaction of class and literacy.

The first point is that your level of literacy and formal education helps determine, out of all the available jobs, which ones are actually available to you. Since the vast majority of the population is comprised of workers – in the sense that they must work for a living – literate intellectuality by itself is not a ticket into the true elite of those who get paid for owning land and factories and stores; being well educated does not make you rich. But formal education is usually a ticket out of the blue-collar and lower-status working class; it has a major impact on what *kind* of worker you end up being. People who spent their childhoods trying to milk some entertainment out of make-believe classrooms and whose parents raised them under a regime of natural growth will tend to end up with very different jobs than people who went to magnet schools, were raised under a regime of concerted cultivation, and attended a high-quality college.

Where you end up in the array of existing jobs matters because these jobs, particularly at the extreme ends of status and pay, are radically different. If you thought the contrast between different kinds of schooling was drastic, just wait till you walk out through those school doors into the job market. Furthermore, when people spend decades of their lives in such jobs, they end up with such radically different life experiences that they might as well be living on different planets. These jobs tend to reinforce people's initial pedagogical experience, so that one's childhood educational situation becomes locked in – and magnified – as one's permanent adult fate. If you didn't get literate intellectuality as a kid, you're liable to get even less of it as an adult. If you had more than your share of it as a kid, you're liable to get even more of it as an adult. Between these different experiences – occurring within the confines of what is supposedly a single nation – there is little overlap.

The second point is that in the absence of effective labor activism, capitalist elites are able to more freely shape the available jobs in their own interest – namely, to maximize exploitation – than they otherwise would be. Rather than existing solely as an unavoidable side effect of modern production, the lower-quality jobs within firms are created by elites to increase the prevalence of weak positions for workers, and to actively mitigate against effective labor activism. In other words, while a lack of literate intellectuality on the part of an *individual* will influence that person's assortment into an array of existing jobs, a *collective* lack of literate intellectuality gives relatively free reign

to elites to shape the array of existing jobs – particularly on the low-status end – in ways that benefit them, and hurt everyone else.

At this point, I have been using the words *capitalism* and *class* – and others derived from them, like *working class*, *middle class*, and *class exploitation* – for four chapters without defining them. It is past time to do that.

2. Defining capitalism

2.1. Existing modes of production

Since capitalism is one of the major shaping forces of world history for the past several hundred years, defining and understanding it has been one of the central preoccupations of social science for as long as there have been social scientists. Not surprisingly, many different definitions and models have been proposed. Sometimes these models are differently worded versions of fundamentally similar ideas; sometimes they focus on certain parts of a complex whole and leave the rest to other theories; sometimes they are radically divergent, logically incompatible, or unworkably abstruse. To this day, after two or three hundred years of capitalism, there is no single, dominant definition of it that scholars agree upon.

Without a clear, agreed-upon definition of capitalism, other key concepts remain confused. For example, in common usage, the word *class* can mean many different things and be measured in many different ways. And this is just as true of supposedly expert usage as well as of vernacular use. Class can refer to a person's income; their wealth; the kind of work they do, as in blue collar or white collar; and even cultural attributes like what they eat for dinner or what kind of car they drive. Each of these definitions suggests a particular, distinct way of measuring class and assigning people to different classes. This confusion makes it difficult to think clearly about one of the most important sets of social processes shaping our lives. For example, medical researchers in the US have not focused much attention on class, as opposed to race, in part for the simple reason that, as Stephen Isaacs and Steven Schroeder conclude, "class is difficult to define" (Isaacs and Schroeder 2004).

Even though there are many productive ways to think about and analyze capitalism, the current lack of clarity is unnecessary. The ongoing academic debates about capitalism have generated their share of fog over the decades. But, if you're willing to work to find it, they have also generated a set of progressively better descriptions and analyses. In this chapter I am going to present a summary of these descriptions.⁷ In doing so, I am wading into the academic equivalent of long-standing and bloody British hooligan rivalries and picking sides. It is interesting to follow these rivalries, but for present purposes mapping the academic turf is less important than trying to put forward what I think is the best available set of ideas for understanding capitalism.

⁷ Some of the most important texts I draw upon in this chapter are Bowles et al. 2005; Burawoy and Wright 2002; Marx 1976; Marx 1978; Nove 1983; Sayer 1995; Sayer and Walker 1992; Wright 1989; Wright 1994; Wright 1997. Pride of place goes to the writings of Andrew Sayer and Erik Olin Wright. I won't cite these works individually unless I'm drawing a specific idea or quote from them; because they often make similar and overlapping arguments, they've blended together in my head into a more or less unified line of argument.

A number of different scholars converge on a common approach. They define capitalism according to the “relations of production”: the real, actual relationships between people involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. A particular, distinct set of such relationships is called a “mode of production.” In this approach, capitalism is a particular mode of production: capitalism is when wage workers produce goods or services that will be sold through markets to consumers, on behalf of business owners who, in search of a profit, try to pay the workers less than the value of what they produce.

This definition is easy to read but hard to get a feel for, partly because we are so used to the all of the ingredients. Buying and selling wage labor? It’s all around us, all the time, and thus hard to see as a particular way of arranging economic life. One of the best ways to get a feeling for the peculiarity of capitalism is to ask, *what economic activity around us now is not capitalist?* In other words, what other modes of production are present in modern societies? Let us glance at the most important ones.

Consider, for example, public schools. They involve wage labor – but they are not owned by private individuals seeking profit. Nor do they sell a product or service, strictly speaking, through a market. By the definition above, they are not capitalist. The same goes for government functions in general, from the military to national parks to wastewater treatment – a mode of production, referred to as “state socialism,” that accounts for something like forty percent of all formal economic activity in the contemporary US. Of course, governments often engage with capitalist enterprises, such as when the Pentagon orders F-22 Raptor jets from Lockheed Martin. Different modes of production, as a rule, don’t just sit side by side – they interact with each other; according to the parlance, they “articulate” with one another.

In terms of size – but not political power – the subsistence mode of production rivals both capitalism and state socialism. As we saw in chapter one, while it’s hard to estimate the total value of subsistence activities in the contemporary US because they don’t leave a trail of dollars, they account for somewhere between twenty and forty percent of all production. They are ubiquitous: they encompass not just gardening and building homes, but changing diapers, washing dishes, mowing the lawn, and bolting the IKEA table together. Because the worker and the consumer are the same person, subsistence activities are clearly not capitalist – although, as the IKEA example is meant to show, they often articulate with other modes of production.

Capitalism, state socialism, and subsistence are the biggest modes of production in the contemporary US, but there are others as well. In the smallest businesses, of which there are tens of thousands, goods and services are produced to be sold on a market. However, the workers and the owners are generally the same people – hence, this is not capitalism. Scholars sometimes call this “petty commodity production”; it’s kind of like mini-capitalism. Another mode of production where the workers and owners are the same people is “market socialism,” which is where a worker-owned company (like the publishing house W. W. Norton) produces goods for sale on a market. Worker-owned co-ops provide a compelling, real-world contrast to capitalist businesses, and we will return to them later in the chapter. Finally, my current employer, Berea College, is a private enterprise that pays me a wage in exchange for my labor. It is still not capitalist: although

the distribution of wages within the college may not be fair, no one is able to command a profit through ownership of shares of the college, which is one of the diagnostic features of capitalism. Along with well over a million other institutions in the US alone – schools and churches and hospitals and activist groups – Berea College represents yet another mode of production, the non-profit corporation.

Measured by the labor they absorb or the value of the goods they produce, capitalist activities account for well under half of the total US economy (Bowles et al.: 132; Madrick 1997). Thus, while capitalism is *politically* dominant – serving as a wellspring of wealth and power for the US and global elite – in *economic* terms it is merely one among many articulating modes of production.

Each of these modes of production has its own dynamics, its own tendencies to drive human behavior in certain ways. Capitalism is such an important mode of production because of its unusual dynamics. One of these is that capitalists are thrown into endless market competition with one another, a competition that they must engage in unless they wish to be overrun by competitors and possibly lose their place as capitalists. In some ways this elite competition is a major step forward from what came before. It's essentially law-abiding. I'm not supposed to compete with another firm by, say, kidnapping the owner's grandmother or firebombing their factory. Furthermore, I am competing to produce things that people must need or want – otherwise I couldn't sell my goods. And, ultimately, there may be more wealth to be gained from producing ordinary things – sneakers and toothpaste – rather than catering to the desires of the elite, which helps to tame capitalism somewhat.

But within these (not always observed) restraints, this competition is ruthless and open-ended. Anything I can do to make a better product or a cheaper product or to sell more products is a chance to gain that much more wealth. And what if I don't want to engage in this endless, fanatic competition? What if I'm not a restless, hungry, type A individual? It doesn't matter – if I don't search for every strategy to produce and sell more stuff for more profit, someone else will. And soon I will no longer be a capitalist.

Thus, one of the basic dynamics of capitalism is that it constantly changes the way goods and services are produced. Which is pretty much the same thing as saying that it constantly changes the basic contours of human life. Capitalism unleashes an unrelenting barrage of social change, which the economist Joseph Schumpeter famously called a “gale of creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1950: 84).

A second, closely related dynamic is that capitalism constantly expands. If I can figure out a way to open a new geographic area to the sale of my products, I had better rush to do so. So capitalism, once it arose a couple of centuries ago, didn't just sit in England and Germany. It promptly stalked off across the whole planet. But it expands in non-spatial dimensions as well, colonizing ever more aspects of human life. At first, capitalists just produced goods like clothing. But now, a mere two hundred years later, it is difficult to think of a human desire or need that a capitalist firm does not attempt to cater to. You can give capitalist birth, if you prefer. You can send your children to a capitalist kindergarten and capitalist grade school. When the kids get older, they can watch capitalist sex on the capitalist Internet, and when you get older, you can be warehoused in a capitalist nursing home until a capitalist worker embalms you.

2.2. *Exploitation?*

Competition between capitalist businesses is judged on many bases, some of them generally beneficial, such as boosting labor productivity through technological innovation, introducing new products, producing less waste, and so on (Reynolds 2002). But it also judged on the degree to which capitalists can intensify the exploitation of workers. In concrete terms, if I can figure out a way to get more work out of my employees for less pay – regardless of the effects upon those employees – then I get to put more profit in my pocket. And the more profit I make – perhaps we should say, the more profit I *take* – the better my chances of competing against other capitalists. There are many, many potential ways to intensify exploitation. If I can get away with it, I can simply cut wages. I can pay workers the same, but make them work longer days or work faster. I can fail to provide basic safety precautions, which leaves more money as profit. I can move my workshop from a place where workers are resisting exploitation to a place where they are not. I can selectively hire vulnerable people, like children, women, illegal immigrants, or prisoners. I can use my wealth to fight against the passage of laws that make it harder to exploit workers, like social security and minimum wage requirements. And so on, ad nauseam.

That capitalism is a historically unprecedented system that has driven profound social upheaval is not debated. Scholars agree on that. But on the question of exploitation, they disagree – and in doing so, they differ on one of the single most important questions that we can ask about modern civilization. The question is this: does capitalist wage labor count as exploitation? There are various specific ways to define the word exploitation, but let's stick close to the common meaning of it, for reasons that will soon become clear: exploitation, according to my dictionary, is to “benefit unfairly from the work of someone, typically by overworking or underpaying them” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Under capitalism the question is thus, when a business owner gets a cut of the surplus product, is it fair?

When I ask my students this question, many of them argue that it is indeed fair. One day, they are unable to define capitalism, yet the next day they rush to make a definite moral claim about this central aspect of it. I am not entirely sure why this is, but part of it is that they understand the stakes involved in the question. If you conclude that it is generally fair that business owners receive profits, then we live in what is essentially a just society, with a few important ethical problems around the edges, problems that could be solved without radically transforming the way we live. If you conclude that capitalist wage labor is founded upon exploitation, then we live in a society that is rotten to the core. In that case, it's not just that some rich people are greedy, or that some politicians can't keep their britches on, or that there are pockets of enduring racism, or that now and again we go to war for mistaken reasons. Injustice and corruption are no longer episodic or localized or – perhaps most importantly – *contingent*: they are foundational. They are essential features of our civilization.

How can such an important question still be open for debate?

There are plenty of pundits whose jobs depend on not overly criticizing the status quo, and who must either skip over this question or “conclude” that wage labor is not

exploitation. But let's focus on sincere attempts to answer this question. Basically, I think, this question is not settled because in contemporary capitalist economies, exploitation can be hard to identify. In some other settings, it was obvious. When a Viking ship showed up to rob an Irish village, the raiders were obviously benefiting unfairly from other people's labor. Under slavery it was obvious – or is obvious to contemporary eyes, at least – that the slave-owning family appropriated for themselves a portion of the goods and services that slaves produced, without making a fair exchange of goods and services produced through their own labor.

Why is it not clear, under contemporary capitalism, whether or not profit represents the unfair taking of the labor of others? There are a number of complicating factors that are often brought up, some of which are genuine complications, some of which are not. Those who think that wage labor is not exploitation will often point out that wage laborers have voluntarily chosen to work for a given employer. Workers must see the proposed wage as fair, otherwise they would not have agreed to work for it. But this argument ignores the fact that many less-skilled workers don't really have a choice: they have to work, and all the jobs available to them pay about the same.

Another claim, common in the discipline of economics, is that owners are getting paid for taking a risk: they have provided an essential resource for the firm, money, which they could lose. This argument is also weak, in many ways. Where did a wealthy owner get their wealth in the first place? Possibly through exploitation – in which case, they are risking money that ought not be theirs. This doesn't answer the question about exploitation, it just pushes it back in time. In any case, who risks more? A worker who puts most of their adult life into a company – or a millionaire who plays the stock market as a kind of glorified casino, and who risks getting a crimp in his luxury?

For ordinary people – by which I mean non-economists – an important factor that makes it hard to see exploitation in capitalism is that the most well-known business owners work hard and make real contributions to their firms. Men like Bill Gates, Henry Ford, and Sam Walton are American folk heroes of discipline and innovation. They worked harder and smarter than the next guy. They went head-to-head with other businesses, and through their own skills, won. Surely they deserve their wealth?

The word *capitalism* thus contains layers of confusion: within the confusion about its basic definition lies a further confusion about whether a central aspect of capitalism – class exploitation – actually exists or not. On the right side of the academy, the discipline of (neoclassical) economics has used such confusions as an excuse to largely pretend that exploitation does not exist and is not worth spending much time figuring out. And if you don't believe exploitation exists, then the relationship between owners and workers is not a class relationship; it is a *market* relationship. This is partly why mainstream economists focus so much on markets: they think capitalist relationships are market relationships, period. Nothing more. On the left side of the academy, Karl Marx's famous attempt to come up with a kind of formula for measuring exploitation, the labor theory of value, is itself full of holes. Economists delight in poking their fingers in these holes (e.g. Blaug 1997), and left-wing social scholars have spilled a tremendous amount of ink and effort trying to plug them up (e.g. Harvey 1999). Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it the "belabored theory of value."

The question of whether or not there is exploitation is particularly difficult because it is not enough to track the flow of money in a firm. Exploitation is not simply a transfer of cash or goods from one person to another: it is an *unfair* transfer. My four-year-old son takes a tremendous amount of my labor, but there is nothing immoral in this transfer. This is a large part of why it is difficult to come up with an explicit, objective, formulaic measure of exploitation, especially under capitalism: exploitation is not simply a flow of resources, but a flow of resources *with certain moral qualities*. Celebrities and best-selling authors enjoy huge flows of money derived from the pockets of ordinary, non-rich people – but it is not clear to me that this income represents unfairly benefiting from someone else’s labor, and if not, then it doesn’t count as exploitation. Because of their insistence that only quantitative models and arguments are valid, mainstream economists make it nearly impossible to recognize exploitation, regardless of their personal politics. And in trying to battle economists on their own turf, by defining exploitation in a formulaic, quantitative manner, Marxists – starting with Marx himself – have set up a math problem that cannot produce the answers they want.

While it’s an interesting exercise to try to come up with a general working description of exploitation under contemporary capitalism, it takes too many words to do it here; it is genuinely a tricky problem. For the moment, let me give an example where exploitation is pretty clear, just to help us get a rough sense of what we’re talking about. Consider Nancy Walton Laurie, who upon the death of her father, Sam Walton’s brother Bud, inherited a stake in Wal-Mart now worth roughly three billion dollars (Wikipedia). Each year she receives an income probably in the tens of millions of dollars – without having to lift a finger. In this example, many genuinely confusing complexities have been cleared away. Ms. Laurie did not create Wal-Mart. She deserves no income for innovation. She does not labor. In short, her income is *unearned*, which is how it is classified by the IRS on her tax returns. Furthermore, this ongoing income stream is clearly derived, ultimately, from the labor of other people: from the women who work in the sweat shops sewing the clothes that Wal-Mart sells, to the merchant sailors and truck drivers who move those goods, to the software designers who create the systems that efficiently track those goods, to the cashiers who scan the items on the way out the door, to the upper-level managers who – one hopes – spend their time trying to keep the whole thing running smoothly. This is a clear example of exploitation: Nancy Walton Laurie is benefiting unfairly from the labor of other people. In more general terms, if one individual receives a flow of income from mere ownership of corporate shares, without working, at the same time that the people who actually work in that corporation are struggling to get by, it is difficult to imagine how this could be anything but unfair.

Alongside contemporary examples of exploitation, we can lay a consistent historical track record: capitalists will reliably search for ways to get more work out of employees for less pay, almost without regard for the effect upon workers. They have, when allowed to do so, done everything short of mass murder, including working young children sixteen hours a day or more, seven days a week, year after year, in the “satanic mills” of Victorian England and the Gilded Age United States. Such reckless disregard for human life is perhaps the best evidence that wage labor is inherently exploitative: for

wealthy men and women to gain even more wealth by destroying the lives of children is to benefit unfairly from another's labor in one of the most depraved ways imaginable.

In addition to a more-or-less consistent definition of capitalism, the scholars I am drawing upon here provide a simple, coherent definition of class: A class relationship is one in which there is exploitation. Capitalism, according to this definition, is a class system, because business owners so often unfairly benefit from the labor of their employees.

Does this definition of class describe all the complex socio-economic locations we see in the real world? Of course not. But, as we saw above, one of the major problems with the term *class* is that it is commonly used to cover a whole range of different phenomena, which renders it incoherent. Exploitation is such an important part of human society that we must have good terminology for analyzing it, and this simple definition – class occurs when one group exploits another – helps us along that path. At the same time, this definition means that there are important economic, status, and cultural differences that are usually spoken about in terms of “class” – does a family eat hot dogs and soda pop for supper, or quinoa and braised salmon? – that require us to develop other concepts, in addition to class, before we can understand them.

One of such concept that is of critical important is that of “location in the division of labor,” developed by Andrew Sayer and Richard Walker (1992). The mass production of any good – like car struts, for example – must be broken down, or divided, into many different tasks. Someone has to pay the utility bills and sign the paychecks; others have to map out the overall layout of the factory; someone has to design each distinct industrial machine; other workers have to run the parts through those machines. Each of these different jobs represents a different “location” in a division of labor. One reason that it is important to notice the division of labor, as a necessary part of modern production, is that the different tasks that are created when a complex job is divided up are inherently unequal. Some jobs are more physically demanding, some are nastier, some are more interesting, some get you outside, some keep you up all night. But one of the most important ways in which jobs differ in quality is that some of them place a worker in a more powerful position than others. For example, a job that involves supervising other workers unavoidably and inherently conveys a kind of power that a non-supervisory job does not.

These are all characteristics of the division of labor within a single corporation. The same characteristics hold true for the division of labor in society as a whole, only more so. In modern industrial societies like the US, the number of different jobs and products is astonishing. In Britain, one attempt to classify the different occupations found well over 10,000 different specific jobs. In the Soviet Union, where central planners had to try to keep track of such things, there were over twelve million “identifiably different products” (Nove 1983: 33). As in the factory, this society-wide division of labor creates jobs of different qualities. In some cases, the division of labor and capitalism work together to shape the character of a given job – but the division of labor can be a source of inequality in its own right. Compare, for example, an independent plumber and a doctor who owns her own practice. They are both petty commodity producers; neither is a capitalist worker. Both enjoy some measure of independence and autonomy at work.

But the doctor is seen as the higher-status person, and probably makes considerably more per hour.

Nothing I have said so far about the division of labor is specific to capitalism. The necessity of breaking work down into specialized tasks, the necessity of having different individuals perform those different tasks (rather than having everyone rotate through the different tasks), and the inherent inequality of those tasks – these are all characteristics of large-scale, technical production, regardless of whether it is capitalist production or not. All of these things occurred in factories in the Soviet Union, which were owned by the government. All of these things occur in factories that are owned by the workers, like the Okonite factory in Madison County, Kentucky, which makes industrial cables. Capitalism produces an advanced division of labor, and thus an advanced division of labor is an important aspect of capitalist societies. But an advanced division of labor is not the same thing as capitalism, and it also produces some important dynamics of its own. I will argue at the end of this chapter that we could live just fine without capitalist class – it does not do society as a whole any good. But we cannot live just fine without an advanced division of labor: to get rid of it would be to turn back the clock to before 1800 or so, when life expectancy, around the world, as far back into prehistory as you care to go, was about forty years at best, not over seventy years as it is in industrialized nations today (Clark 2007; Wells 2010: 23). The division of labor is a study in tradeoffs and necessary evils.

2.3. The division of labor and capitalist exploitation

The division of labor serves as a source of power for some workers. Within capitalist production, well-positioned workers can use this power to shield themselves from exploitation and the authoritarian domination that typically goes with it. Recall that capitalists, driven by competition with other capitalists, will intensify exploitation in any way they are able to. Contemporary, high-tech, large-scale production, however, provides some workers, as individual workers, with sources of power that allow them to resist attempts to intensify exploitation. A computer programmer, for instance, is doing highly-skilled work, and may be the highest authority at her firm on her particular area of programming. It would probably backfire for her boss to treat her in an authoritarian, controlling manner – the boss, at best, would just be in the way. Her expertise therefore assures her a degree of autonomy. It also makes her a more valuable employee, and thus she is likely to be paid well – as long as her expertise is both uncommon and not-yet automated.

Workers who are not well positioned in the division of labor also have significant power to resist exploitation – but they must organize themselves into effective unions in order to realize that power. This is a difficult task, and one that business owners and managers almost never allow to take place unchallenged.

How does this help us understand the diversity of real-world socio-economic locations generated by contemporary capitalism in the MERJ area? To a large extent, the interaction of one's position in the division of labor with capitalist class, defined by exploitation, generates the different kind of jobs occupied by the capitalist working class. The profoundly varied work conditions and wages of different capitalist workers is, quite

directly, a detailed map of the balance of power between workers placed in different jobs, and capitalists. This map shifts over time, partly because capitalists are under pressure to turn relatively powerful workers into powerless workers. In the case of unskilled workers, by union busting; in the case of more skilled workers, by such strategies as mechanization, deskilling, or finding cheaper labor overseas. Very few positions are permanently safe from degradation.

Are there good labels for the workers who work in positions with different amounts of power and autonomy, so that we can refer to them quickly and accurately? Not really. If we want to be accurate, we have to use detailed labels that would quickly become tedious. If we want to be concise, we sacrifice accuracy. However, for the story I am telling, the most important aspect of these different worker positions is that they differ highly, even within the capitalist working class, in terms of the desirability of different jobs, in terms of worker autonomy, in terms of their pay, and so on. They differ, in short, in the status they convey to different workers. Thus, in terms of describing these different socio-economic positions, the existing terms of “working class” and “middle class” actually work quite well – or, rather, they work well once we have examined some of the complexities lurking behind them, and made our meaning clear. Working-class people are those whose access is limited to lower-quality and lower-status jobs; middle-class people are those whose access includes higher-quality and higher-status jobs.

Thus, I will also sometimes refer to “lower status” and “higher status” workers. These are labels that many lower-status workers would find offensive. And I agree: they are offensive. There is no good reason why a plumber should be seen as a lower-status person than a doctor. They both do skilled, difficult, necessary labor. In many ways, this is precisely the problem: a class society is one in which certain individuals are shoved into a low social status, not because they deserve it, but because that’s what it takes to exploit them.

Thus, the existing array of jobs in the MERJ area is in part a map of a complex balance of power. Let’s take a look at that array of jobs, with a focus on contrasting the labor experiences of workers in jobs of different qualities. What is it like to work at a low-quality job in the MERJ area? What’s it like to work at a good one?

3. The array of jobs in the MERJ area

Appalachia is a low-wage area, with markedly lower overall wages than the rest of the country. This is particularly true of central Appalachia, the portion that includes eastern Kentucky, where the wage gap has persisted for decades. “Despite gains in educational attainment and over \$9 billion in federal outlays since 1965,” according to economist Robert Baumann, “the wage gap between Appalachia and the rest of the country is only slightly smaller in 2000 than it was in 1970” (Baumann 2006). We saw this in chapter two: despite years of gains, income in Jackson County stood at roughly half the national average as of 1989, and remains close to that level today (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012).

Jobs are not evenly distributed throughout the MERJ area. The towns of Berea and Richmond, both located in Madison County, have concentrations of employment opportunities, but these are scarce in the more rural counties. In 2010, there were six

times more people living in Madison County than in Jackson County (82,916 versus 13,494); at the same time, there were more than *fifteen* times as many jobs reported in Madison County (23,837 jobs in Madison County and only 1,538 in Jackson) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). As a result, as we saw in chapter two, many people have moved from Jackson, Estill, or Rockcastle Counties into Madison County in search of jobs; many others drive daily into Madison County to work. The lack of work in the more rural counties registers in the figures on unemployment, which was six percent in Madison County in late 2012, but thirteen percent in Jackson (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). (Of course, formal unemployment numbers in the US underestimate endemic underemployment, because they don't count those who have given up looking for work, or those who work part time but would prefer to work more.)

The lack of employment in the rural areas is striking. The public schools and county government are, in many central Appalachian counties, the largest source of steady employment. In an interview with Janet O'Conner, who works as a medical professional in Irvine – the county seat of Estill County – I asked why so many families struggled with issues such as mental health and drug addiction. She immediately answered in terms of jobs:

There's no work. There's maybe a Family Dollar store, McDonald's, there's grocery, you know, there's that kind of work. There was a lumberyard that I think that still does some stuff, and then there was a coal – they washed the coal or something. And I don't think they're doing that anymore. There's no theatre, no swimming pool, nothing to do. I mean *nothin*. Yeah, the work, there's just no work. A lot of people are on disability. A lot of my clients tell me they probably wouldn't have gotten into drugs if there had been something to do.

Because Madison County is the major source of local employment, I will focus on it in this section. The low wages characteristic of Appalachia are apparent in Madison County, even though the county lies predominantly outside the Appalachian mountains. For all industries, Madison County's average weekly wage in 2008 was \$605, lower than the average for Kentucky of \$720, and representing only 69 percent of the US average of \$876 (Curry 2010). Yearly personal income was only 64 percent of the national average – this is for the most affluent county in the MERJ area (*ibid*).

Not long ago, the area was primarily agricultural, but this has changed rapidly since World War II. In Madison County, there were still 400 farms as of 2010 (Curry 2010). These are family farms that don't employ much, if any, wage labor; many of these farmers are older men and women who hold down day jobs in addition to their farm work. By contrast, in 2011, there were 4,335 workers in manufacturing in Madison County – the largest single category of employment in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. The proportion of jobs in manufacturing in the county is twice the national average. Retail trade comes in second, with 3,823 workers, followed by two other service categories: "health care and social assistance," with 3,738 workers, and "accommodation and food services," with 3,421 workers

(Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Together, manufacturing and non-professional service account for nearly two-thirds of the jobs in the MERJ area.

What does this economic data mean? As with the data on education, census reports on sectors and wages, while important, don't tell us much about the experiences of people working in these jobs.⁸ Hidden with these statistics is the grim fact that many workers in the MERJ area work long hours at jobs that numb the mind and damage the body. They have little control over when or how they do their work. Within a supposedly democratic society, they spend half their waking hours in authoritarian settings. They work at jobs that are temporary, or jobs that were supposed to be permanent but disappear with little or no warning. They live without basic securities such as reliable access to medical care. There is a maldistribution of vulnerability: misfortune that the privileged would shrug off – a speeding ticket, a sprained ankle – is for many the first bitter turn in a spiral of disaster.

Workers in low-status jobs in the MERJ area don't have many alternatives. They could switch from one low-paying job to another. They could join the military, and many do. Of course, for many enlisted folks, soldiering ends up being just another autocratic working-class job with better-than-average benefits. As a worker on an aircraft carrier summed it up, "The advertisement is about parachuting from a helicopter, the reality is scrubbing windows twelve hours a day" (Chermayeff 2008). If they've got a high school diploma or GED, they could go to college, probably at Eastern Kentucky University, which has more-or-less open enrollment. However, as we saw above, they probably don't have the basic academic skills that college tractable, and so their chances of successfully graduating are limited. Out of all the students who enroll at ECU, only one in three ultimately graduates (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). But many do go to ECU, often in the evenings, and a few end up with a degree and move out of the worst-quality jobs.

3.1. Low-status jobs: retail

The fastest growing kind of wage labor in the US is low-paying retail and service sector jobs (Mishel et al 2009). If you have only a high-school degree or less, these probably make up half of the jobs you have a realistic shot at in the MERJ area. These are jobs like stocking the shelves in Wal-Mart, ringing up candy bars and cleaning toilets at a gas station, mopping floors in a nursing home, or flipping burgers in a McDonald's. Aside from involuntary unemployment, in terms of pay and status, these jobs represent

⁸ Also, as with schooling, the best comparative testimony comes from those who have experienced a wide range of jobs, in terms of job quality and status. In the following sections on jobs in the MERJ area, I focus on the stories of three individuals who have worked across the spectrum of job quality: Jeff Payne, Janet O'Conner, and myself. My own experience is crucial here, for two reasons: because it represents years of participant observation in different workplaces, and because without it I would have no real sense of the incredible differences in job quality across the employment spectrum in the MERJ area.

the bottom of the barrel. If we want to know what it's like to work at a low-quality job in the MERJ area, this is a good place to start.

Jeff Payne is one of those individuals who cannot be clearly placed among either group of homesteaders. Culturally he is clearly a bohemian, but he grew up poor in the MERJ area with a single mom who had a series of hard-living, working-class country boyfriends. He married a local woman whose family fits culturally with the country homesteaders. Not only does he have decades of experience with both of these social groups, but he has worked a tremendous range of jobs in the MERJ area, from several years in minimum-wage retail jobs to working as a land surveyor and as a senior computer programmer in an engineering firm in Lexington.

For a couple of years in his early twenties, Jeff worked at a major fast-food chain store in Berea, a transnational, capitalist corporation that I'll call Burger Nation. He worked mainly at the cash register, but he was also a closer. "I had to clean the grill, sweep up front, mop, clean all the dishes, I would take out the trash, all that kind of stuff." The pay, of course, was minimum wage. As a single man without children, Jeff was able to pay his bills. But he couldn't afford to buy a car – a challenge in a non-urban place like Berea, which is sprawled out and has no public transportation. He had to walk everywhere. There were no benefits. "None," he said, "You got free cheeseburgers."

Minimum wage jobs in the US have long represented poverty-level pay, meaning that you can work full-time and still fall below the official poverty line. But even the higher-paying non-professional service jobs are low wage: in 2010, the average weekly wage – before taxes – for a service worker in Madison County was \$503 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

Unlike in some of the jobs we'll look at here, Jeff didn't do the exact same task over and over for his whole shift, so it wasn't gruelingly monotonous – but that was the only positive thing Jeff had to say about his experience at Burger Nation. When I asked him how he felt about the years he spent there, he didn't even pause to think:

I fucking hated it. I felt like it was degrading. I had people that were highly ignorant that were in charge that were on a power trip because they were in charge. You never had any time off, they would never let you take a Friday or Saturday off, ever. You worked till two o'clock in the morning. You know, I worked there for well over a year, and raises came up and they gave me fifteen cents on the hour. And that was supposed to be like "Oooo!" you know, but I don't even think that was a cost-of-living increase. It was a slap in the face is what it was. There were very few people in there that had any kind of education beyond high school, and it was very much a soap opera, you know everybody trying to fuck everybody else that worked there.

One of the defining features of all of the low-status jobs that we'll look at is that the work is simple and repetitive, and thus provides no long-term intellectual challenge, scope for creativity, or sense of meaning.

There was nothing interesting about it at all; I felt like I pretty much knew everything I needed to know about my job in the first two months. There was nothing else to, you know – no other ways to improve upon that, really. I came in and did my job and went home.

Years spent at a job like this bears a heavy opportunity cost, in terms of foregone self-development.

Other than having a few good stories to tell and stuff, I don't feel like I drew anything out of there at all. No real skills, self-improvement, nothin. I do not feel like I learned anything. And yeah – it's weird just having that experience for as long as I did, I walk in to those places now and just look, and I almost feel sorry for 'em.

My experience working in fast food was like a carbon copy of Jeff's, varying only in terms of trivial details. I worked in the kitchen of a national fast food chain, Blue Oyster, in the late 1990s. It was one of the only jobs I could find in Richmond, where my wife was in college, and the only fast food job I could get at the time, because I had long hair. The kitchen at a Blue Oyster has no windows and is entirely out of view of the dining room, so they didn't care what I looked like.

My work at Blue Oyster consisted almost entirely of breading shrimp, one at a time, by hand. Hundreds of shrimp every day. I got a break every hour or so – to go to the walk-in freezer and pull out another huge bag of breading. As with Jeff, it only took a couple of days to get up to speed, after which I had learned all there was to know about breading shrimp, which consisted of a few strategies about how to move my fingers and wrists. These strategies required some attention to figure out initially, but once practiced they were simply unconscious maneuvers, like walking down a sidewalk. After that I just tried not to watch the clock too much, and tried not to count the money, because it was too depressing. Another fifteen minutes down – only six hours to go. Another buck-seventy-five in my pocket – how far will that go, against the rent? Any time I purchased something, I knew exactly how much it really cost, and I knew how little my hours were worth.

Aside from the managers and front staff, the senior person in the kitchen was a quiet, dignified country woman in her late fifties, who assembled complicated seafood salad plates. That's what she did, all day long, year after year. There was a bit of banter in the kitchen now and then – who had slept with whom, mostly – but most of the time people were head-down in their work. There was virtually no intellectual content in either my job or any other job in the kitchen. There was essentially no scope for mastering new knowledge or developing new skills – aside from that defining skill of so much working-class labor, toughing out the clock. There was no democracy whatsoever. The managers assigned us job tasks, which we kept day after day. After my first two or three days on the job, there was no need to ask anyone a question. The authoritarian structure was not so much imposed by fiat as built into the character of the labor itself. What was left to decide? Which foot to put my weight on as I breaded the thousandth shrimp? I could have

stayed there for years and gained nothing except the seven dollars I was given in return for each hour marked off of my life.

Jeff Payne also worked for several years in another category of service-sector jobs typical of the MERJ area, stocking shelves at local grocery stores, including at a national chain with a unionized labor force. These jobs were similar to working in fast food: they required low-skill labor that offered little challenge or opportunity aside from bringing home a check.

You'd sort of plateau after about a month, where you got it down, you learned to – if the shelves were empty, you could grab about four cans at a time and just start throwin that shit up there. We also learned that they're payin you by the hour and the quicker you get done, the sooner you're off the clock. I was stuck there anyway [in Richmond] – I had to thumb it back home. So nobody really worked too hard.

Ironically, he said, he was treated worse in that union job than in other low-quality, non-union jobs, like working at Burger Nation. The stockers often had to hang out in Richmond for several hours off the clock, waiting to do their job. The quote below illustrates how little control low-status workers have over their work life, but it also is an example of the coping strategies – in some cases, self-defeating – that people use to deal with the bleakness of their work life.

What happened at least twenty percent of the time, you would come in – they would tell you to be there at seven [in the evening]. And the delivery trucks would be running late. Because they told you to be there they had to pay you a certain amount of time. So they'd have you clock in for two hours, and clean shelves, and then they would send you home, and say come back at midnight to finish your shift. Cause they didn't want to pay you straight through. It led to a lot of drunk time on the job. It was usually – nobody felt like they wanted to go home. [And with no car, Jeff couldn't go home.] We'd all go to the bar. And everybody'd get fucked up. It made for some fun evenings. You know, it was pretty nuts. There were a lot of evenings when I'd walk around with a Sprite can full of vodka, and just party on the job. I think that was fairly common.

Most of the people in the MERJ area who work at these bottom-of-the-barrel retail jobs don't plan to stay there forever. They hope to move up to a more prestigious job, like cutting hair or, as Jeff put it, “working in a jewelry shop.”

One of the most common hopes is to move up to the area's best-paying working-class jobs: factory work. Manufacturing jobs are the great development hope of the MERJ area, as is the case in many parts of the rural southeast. According to Bradford Jensen and Amy Glasmeier, manufacturing jobs “have long dominated employment opportunities in rural America...and contributed steady, comparatively high-wage, high-benefit employment opportunities for rural workers.” For Appalachia in particular,

attracting manufacturing has been a “cornerstone of the region’s economic development efforts” (Jensen and Glasmeier 2001: 252). Madison County, with more people working in factories than in any other sector, exemplifies this strategy. When Berea or Richmond gains another factory, this is touted as a success. Indeed, the workers who land these jobs end up relatively affluent; they aren’t living below the poverty line. But what are they giving in return for this taste of the American dream?

3.2. Low-status jobs: manufacturing

In the summer of 2003, I worked at a typical Madison County manufacturing job, on the assembly line at Tomiko, a capitalist factory that made struts for cars and minivans. At its peak, Tomiko was one of the largest employers in the region, with well over 800 employees (Curry 2010). Every worker at Tomiko was hired initially by a temp agency, Key Services, which – I was amazed to see – had a tiny, windowless office *inside Tomiko’s factory*. The woman who hired me, Patty, was polite, indifferent, and nearly silent. “I’m so tired,” was one of the few things she said. She did not check my references or ask me any normal interview questions at all. I filled out the forms, took a quick test in remedial English and math, and then Patty asked me, “Do you have steel-toed shoes?” I said I did. “Can you start tomorrow morning?” That was the entire interview. She handed me a glossy Key Services “Employee Handbook” which told me about how Key would help me advance my personal and career goals, with pictures of cheerful, athletic, multi-racial executives in immaculate corporate suites. The settings in the brochure didn’t look much like the cafeteria I walked through as I left the temp agency’s office: ranks of cafeteria tables just like the ones in high school, lines of worker’s worn plastic lunch coolers stashed on a shelf by the wall, grey vending machines, garbage bins bleached with age. I would work ten hours a day, six days a week. And as a temp worker, I would be paid seven dollars an hour, before taxes, without benefits.

Hiring initially through a temp agency is common in capitalist factories in the area. For those working as temps, the higher-wage promise of industrial work is deferred, sometimes indefinitely. Sonya Broadwater worked at Tomiko for a year, hoping the whole time to be “hired on direct,” which would have raised her pay by three dollars an hour and given her access to benefits. She eventually quit, in part because she realized that “They were never gonna hire me...Because they didn’t have to pay me insurance, and they didn’t have to pay me very much.” She felt like this was partly because she was a woman, a conclusion echoed by other interviewees. One remarked that

The idea was that you could get hired on full time, but mostly I didn’t see too many women have that, they didn’t get hired on full time. And, like there was one girl there who had been there for a year-and-a-half. And then you’d see these young guys, eighteen, twenty, come in, they’d be there five months, boom, they’re hired on full time.

At Tomiko, I worked on the “e-coat line,” putting bare metal struts on racks that moved by in an endless stream, hanging down from an overhead chain. After we were done loading a rack, the chain would lift it up toward the ceiling, and carry it far across

the factory and into a sealed area where the rack would be dipped into a vat of paint. An electric current would run through the rack and the paint, “electrocoating” the parts – hence the name “e-coat.” When a rack came back to us, we’d unload the painted parts and load it up with unpainted ones.

The repetitive character and the long hours at Tomiko are typical of factory work in the MERJ area – as around the world. Interviewees who worked at different factories in Berea had essentially the same labor experience. Sonya Broadwater worked mainly in a room by herself, sorting metal parts into bins and looking for burrs and other blemishes, for sixty hours a week. Elijah Amaro worked at a different capitalist factory, KU, on two different occasions. Like Tomiko, KU was a “branch plant” that produced car parts to feed into the big name-brand assembly plants located throughout the southeastern US.

The first time around I was workin, I was welding brake pads together. I’d bring my headphones in and jus like click on the music and jus weld brake pads all day long, you know, ten hours a day – *rrrrr rrrrr rrrrr rrrrr*. So I pretty much had my own little station n stuff ‘til I ran out of parts and then they had me gluing little bolts to these things – *chik-a chik-a chik-a chik*. The second time I was on this paint line, you know putting these little parts on these racks that went to this machine and got painted. So, yeah, second time I was more on the line. They didn’t really have like a huge assembly line.

As Italian writer and activist Antonio Gramsci remarked, this isn’t intrinsically bad work – it leaves your mind freer than many other kinds of labor, like waiting tables or running a busy cash register (Forgacs 1988: 294). These positive aspects, however, are overshadowed by the length of the work week: the shifts were ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week – and this made all the difference. As a graduate student and teacher, I have worked similar hours, and while this is not necessarily healthy, the two labor experiences are incomparable. The character of repetitive, de-skilled physical labor is radically different depending on how long you have to do it: four hours on a rapidly moving line can be invigorating. Eight is torturous. Twelve is a nightmare, both mentally and physically. Interviewees stressed the negative impact on their minds. Sonya Broadwater’s summary of her time at the factory was “I didn’t like it! It took all my energy. All my creativity disappeared.”

Like Jeff Payne, Janet O’Conner has worked through a wide range of jobs in the MERJ area, including spending almost a year on the assembly line at KU, the same factory as Elijah.

But then after a few months I just realized I couldn’t do it. It just was too boring... I remember one moment, one morning when I walked in and that bell went off and I was like, “This is purgatory.” [Laughs] Cause, I mean it was like I had just left there, and then there’s that clock. And there’s the same people, and those clothes and that smell, and [big laugh] – and it’s not going away!

For those hired-on direct, Tomiko paid ten dollars an hour, plus overtime, plus health benefits, so this was one of the best-paying jobs available to many people in the area, and they would hang onto it as long as they could. The first day I sat down to lunch in the factory cafeteria, an older man leaned down the table toward me and said, “Boy, you better run now, while you still can.” No one laughed. What he meant was that once you get used to that big paycheck and get a truck payment and a house payment, you’re locked in. The next day at lunch I sat down next to a fellow who had a Bible laid open on the table in front of him; he and several other men read the Bible every day during lunch and even during the two fifteen-minute breaks. When he noticed that I had returned for a second day, he shook his head and told me, “Once you’re in, you can’t get out.”

Janet O’Conner saw the same thing at KU:

I saw all those young guys comin and getting hired on and they’re like “I just got me a brand new four-by-four [pickup truck], man, twenty thousand dollars,” and I’m like, “Oh you poor thing!” I just felt so bad for ‘em. I just saw their whole life and what it was gonna be like. You know, they’re just stuck in that trailer, with that truck, that maybe breaks down before they ever even leave that position.

Because of its repetitive nature, the work is physically damaging. On the e-coat line, I worked beside a young woman named Melinda Jackson, who drove down out of the mountains every morning to come to work. When I told her, after a couple of weeks on the job, that my wrists were beginning to hurt and make creaking sounds, she said, “Oh honey, I haven’t felt my hands for years.” Janet O’Conner also suffered repetitive stress injuries:

I stayed on that one machine for like a month or two, that was the last one I worked on. That was the one that really got me. It hurt my hip. But I noticed the first day I worked there, they had these plates that had holes in them and the holes hadn’t been quite big enough. So my first day I had to have this die, this thing to poke through the holes and hit it with a hammer. All day long. And then when I got done, I couldn’t hardly shift the car – just after one day. It *hurt*. [Laughs] And then I’d be like aching in the bed you know, going “*Good lord*.”

I have never talked to anyone who worked on the line in a MERJ area factory, for more than a week or two, who was not injured.

Another common risk of factory work is the presence of fumes or other toxins in the workplace. At Dresser Industries in Berea, now closed, a local resident named Ed Abney spent “spent more than two decades up to his elbows in a drum of the solvent, trichloroethylene, while he cleaned metal piping.” A University of Kentucky study found that Abney and 27 other workers had “either the anxiety, tremors, rigidity or other symptoms associated with Parkinson’s, or had motor skills that were significantly

impaired, compared with a healthy peer group” (Barringer 2009). At Tomiko and KU, there were often paint fumes or other kinds of air pollutants in the building. “There was sort of this white smoke up in the top of the factory at all times,” Janet remembered, “cause of this [machine] oil burning.” Unlike many workers, Janet initially felt empowered to take action:

I looked up one day and just was like “Oh my God. Wonder what this smoke is doing to me?” That was another reason I left. And then I did – I complained a little bit, I was like, I talked to some of my coworkers saying, OSHA really needs to come in here, cause this is just not healthy. I’d just come out of college, sociology major, “Let’s go work with the labor movement!” you know. I know exactly how to get in there and talk to the administration and get all this done. But the more I talked with people – and it wasn’t with like a mission in mind, I just would chat with them and kinda feel em out. They just didn’t feel empowered enough to do that, and – I got the sense that OSHA had been there, and they knew what it was but they kinda found a way to work around that regulation. So there was no sense in anybody trying to do anything about it.

When I left the factory to continue with grad school, my coworkers like Melinda Jackson remained, as so many employees must, hanging on desperately to that good job. As I write this paragraph, she is working, hanging little round O-rings onto pegs as fast as she can. She must fulfill all of the needs of human life – loving, learning, remembering, reflecting, communing – in the few shattered hours that remain in each day after work. But by the usual economic measures – including statistics on income and unemployment often cited by Appalachian scholars – Tomiko workers are the beneficiaries of local capitalist development. They are generally, by these measures, not among the thirty percent of local mountain residents who “live in poverty.” According to this view-from-a-distance, Tomiko looks like a success story. Tomiko looks like a plausible solution, instead of a distinctively modern circle added onto hell.

The factory floor is strictly authoritarian and hierarchical. Every morning at Tomiko, before the lines started up, the workers under a certain floor boss met for about ten minutes. The boss would tell you what your job would be for the day. There was no discussion or input from the workers. The boss did not talk about how he made these decisions or defend them in any way. You were expected to quietly comply. Sonya Broadwater sorted parts for a year without ever knowing what the parts were for or why she was assigned to that particular job. This autocratic approach was a product of policy, not personality; my floor boss was a kind and gentle man. I saw no interaction between floor workers and the handful of men above the floor boss in the hierarchy – the engineers and quality-control men who walked around in white coats with notepads. In a kind of reverse racial hierarchy, all of the really high-status workers were Japanese. They did not speak to, greet, or even acknowledge the floor workers.

It’s the same basic governance model at other area factories, like KU:

They'd let you know what to do when you first walked in. In the morning the boss would say: "You're still on that machine, go on over there." There were days when you were expected to work overtime, you know, and you just had to. Or not have your job. So I just did it...For the most part, if there was a machine that needed to be on overtime and you were working it that day, you had to work it till they said that's enough."

The only example I saw of workers pushing against strict top-down control was one time when the parts starting coming off the rack with a slightly marred finish. The more experienced women at the e-coat station immediately stopped the line and called a supervisor. I couldn't even see what was wrong at first. After a couple of minutes of comparison and scrutiny and pestering questions, I could see that the defective parts had a slightly matte finish. A supervisor came, glanced at a part, and snapped, "If it's black, put it on the rack." The women reluctantly started the line again, and worked another three or four minutes, grumbling the whole time. Melinda shook her head and exclaimed, "I ain't never buying me a Neon!" Then they stopped the line again. This time they insisted that the problem be addressed before they continued to work.

With few exceptions, manufacturing workers are from lower-status working-class families. It is rare for a MERJ-area factory floor worker to have a college degree. Aside from myself, I didn't meet anyone at Tomiko with a degree. Janet said the same thing about KU. "I don't think there were too many college graduates there," she recalled. "These were folks that were born and raised here, high school graduate, no college." Their alternatives to working at a factory generally represented a major step down in terms of wages.

Many workers thus fervently hope to get past the initial temp-agency stage. After I was on the job for a couple of weeks, Tomiko gave all the temp workers an exam. My coworkers were nervous. Apparently the exam helped determine who would be hired-on direct, and thus radically shaped your future income. It turned out to be another, longer test of basic reading and math, with some material mixed in about proper Standard American English usage. Afterwards a young woman from the E-coat line, Brenda, spoke to me – the first time she'd addressed me – worried about passing. "There's so much in there I just don't know. I'm just not intelligent." Some of my coworkers pestered me for my score, probably because it was clear from the way I talked that I was book educated. "You coulda shared some a' them points around with some of these other poor people," said one young man, only half joking.

There were a handful of workers, out of several hundred, at Tomiko who did not fit this profile – but they didn't stay long. I worked there for a month before moving to Berkeley to begin a doctoral program. Elijah Amaro graduated from Berea College and then worked at KU for about a year, saving money to move to India, where he has lived ever since. He never intended to stay long at the factory. Janet O'Conner went to grad school and now works in a professional job, as does Sonya Broadwater. I know of probably a dozen other highly-literate people who worked at Tomiko or other local factories for periods of time, but I only know of two who have stayed on for more than a year or two, and both are technical supervisors; neither one works on the floor.

If you asked people at Tomiko what they think about the job, would everyone describe it in the negative terms that I have used? No. You'd get a range of answers. However, virtually no one working on the floor at Tomiko has also worked in a high-quality professional job; they have limited comparative experience upon which to judge their job at Tomiko. Not only that, but many of them have no realistic alternative to working at Tomiko, at least not without taking a major reduction in their material standard of living. In this situation, there is a high premium on finding ways to feel good about what you do. It is hard enough to do the same work for so many hours and so many years even if you manage not to loathe it (unlike one young man who had worked there for seven months, and who repeated, every day, under his breath, over and over, "I hate this job. I hate this job."). This means that even if a job is really, really bad, workers strive to cast it in the best possible light. "Men in the routine types of work," writes one labor expert, "come over the years to accept and make the most of their situation" (Kornhauser 1965: 77; Freeman and Rogers 1999).

Among the local working class, Tomiko is a contentious topic. It was the largest of several local industrial employers and it had high turnover, and so everyone from a working-class family has either worked there or knows someone who has. Dueling currents of disgust and pride run through the shop floor, but also spill out into online chat rooms, such as Topix.com.⁹ Some workers express a kind of sadness:

I worked my butt off and was there every day and I couldn't get out to do anything. I asked but someone else always came first. You can't ask for PTO [paid time off] when someone else has that day because they would be short handed. I missed out on a lot of stuff with my kids, they are now grown and they had to raise theirselves because I wasn't there.

And here's the telling perspective of a woman whose mother worked there:

My mother worked there for ten years. It destroyed her body. She got rheumatoid arthritis before she was 50. The doc begged her for years to quit working there. I remember her working over 30 days straight. She would get up at 4 am to be there at 5 am and didn't get off work till 3:30. Work 6:30 to 3:30 on Saturday and then another 6 hours on Sunday. I absolutely hate Tomiko. If it did not supply money to our local economy and jobs to our people, I would love to see it burn to the ground.

But here are more representative comments, clearly showing the effort to cast working at Tomiko in a positive light:

⁹ Topix.com is a website offering online discussion space organized by locality. It is especially popular with lower income and less educated people, whose voices often don't make it into print media. Because of this, Appalachian native and author Silas House remarked that "If you're looking into the heart of a community in modern America, you must go to Topix.com" (Wylie 2012).

Yes we are working a lot of overtime, and sometimes it really sucks. But I think the money is worth it. I am a husband and a father and I am proud to take care of my family, so to me it's worth it. They use us, we use them that's how it works. It will slow down soon and we'll be bitching about not getting overtime.

This job has paid my bills for 10 years and kept a roof over my families head. I am very thankful to have a job. Stop slamming Tomiko. There are several people that have worked there for years and raised their families off their pay there. At least these people are working and not sitting back drawing a check. Don't know why if you aren't working there you are complaining. It is nothing to you if you don't work there. So shut up.

I am thoroughly disgusted by the folks that get on here anonymously and degrade others for the job that they have and the reasons they have it. How does it affect you, where I work????? Find something else to bitch about, seriously! We're all just tryin to get by, why piss on us for it????? A job is a job is a job, at least we're not livin off the state. ARE YOU?????

3.3. Middle-status jobs

When I was in my late teens, and again several times when I was older, I worked on carpentry crews in rural eastern Kentucky. These carpentry jobs are a good example of middle-status and middle-quality jobs in the MERJ area. The pay is generally similar to that of factory work – for those hired on directly by the factory – but the work itself is more interesting, and in demanding a great deal of skill, it offers the chance to learn over time, to exercise autonomy, and to take pride in your accomplishments.

I started working carpentry in 1989. I was employed by several different contractors, but spent the most time working for David Goolsbee, a gentle, soft-spoken man who had moved to rural Kentucky in the first wave of counterculture back-to-the-landers in the early '70s. He designed and built passive-solar homes out in the country for affluent families, mostly in the beautiful Red Lick Valley in southeastern Madison County. This was a small enough business – there were about ten of us on the crew, a mix of hicks and hippies – that it's hard to classify; it lays somewhere between petty commodity production and capitalism.

David had an architecture degree and was a talented designer, but he was too cerebral and introverted to be a top-notch crew boss. A good carpentry boss pours out energy like a rock star, like my late friend Gary Scholl, who would whoop and yell and get everyone fired up. “Nail it ‘fore it rots, boys!” We'd have to go hound David sometimes to get lined out with work. Once when one of our coworkers, Bones, slipped off the edge of the roof where we were working and plummeted out of sight, David's response was a quiet, deadpan “Oops.”

Unlike many house-building crews which specialize in one task – pouring concrete, framing, dry walling, roofing, insulation – we did it all except the plumbin' and 'lectric. Unlike Tomiko, KU, Blue Oyster, or Burger Nation, the tasks were varied,

challenging, and required tremendous skill. One of my first days on the job I was sent up to help run rafters, which required toenailing the rafters into place while perched two stories off the ground on a two-by-six top plate. I made a hell of a mess. It was only after many months of full-time work, and helpful advice – “just throw your hammer at the nail, don’t try to guide it the whole way” – that I was able to do these things well. There was also scope for learning new ideas and concepts, not just bodily skills – especially in a practical intellectual way. There was plenty of room for doing a job poorly or well, depending on how carefully you thought it out beforehand, and all sorts of interesting trouble-shooting. How do you get the concrete truck out of the mud, where it’s bad stuck? How do you get the walls to line up when they’ve been built a little crooked? This scope for learning was open-ended. Most of the workers continued to gain new skills for many years, taking an active interest in this process. One interviewee, who had worked in carpentry in the area, said that “People were proud of what they did in the construction world, and were willing to share some knowledge with me, had pride about how they did the job.” Several men, like Bones, were able to eventually become their own contractors, based on what they had learned.

There were other pleasures as well. Until we got to the finish work on a house, we worked more or less outside, usually in beautiful rural settings with the green mountains rising all around. Of course, this cut the other way in the winter, when your hammer was like an icicle in your hand, even with gloves on, and the lumber pile would freeze into a solid block. There was a lot of room for banter and joking, like tossing a feisty corn snake in the truck cab of a guy on the crew who was scared to death of snakes. Now and then Nathan, James Hamilton’s uncle, just to add a little spice to the day, would pull back the safety catch on the nail gun and open fire from the roof on everyone walking around below. We worked with the radio on – Lynnard Skynnard and Zeppelin if the country boys had charge of the dial, NPR if the hippies did. I listened to the collapse of the USSR on the radio while framing a garage. My coworkers were happy to let me pick their brains about house building, including David, who indulged many detailed questions about design and alternative architecture. Our work schedules had some flexibility. If your kid got sick or you spent the night in jail, you weren’t going to lose your job. I was able to leave for a semester of college and come back to work again. Mostly because of David’s character, this was not an authoritarian workplace. He was in charge, but only to the extent that he had to be because he had the blueprint. His preferred mode was to let the more experienced workers take the lead as much as possible.

As an unskilled worker, I started out at four dollars an hour, under the table, no benefits. Being paid under the table seemed good at the time, since no taxes were taken out. But it also meant I had no workman’s comp, which hardly occurred to me as an immortal eighteen year old. A couple of years later, I was up to seven dollars over the table. Overall, despite the low pay and a decent chance of getting badly hurt, these carpentry gigs were good-quality “working-class” jobs, like many jobs that require skilled manual labor. However, note that even these relatively good jobs provided limited opportunity for the development of literate intellectuality. If you wanted to develop better ideas about the broader world, aside from some NPR news, you’d have to do it on your own time after work – when you’re tired, when you’ve already used much of your will

power for the day. Some of the workers did, and some didn't, in a precise adult reflection of the childhood processes we looked at above. Because it offered no scope for bookish intellectual development, I would get restless after a couple of months of full-time carpentry. When I eventually returned to college determined to finish, it wasn't because I didn't like carpentry. But I didn't want to do it forty hours a week for the rest of my life.

After several years of working at Burger Nation and in grocery stores, Jeff Payne was hired by a small locally-based land-surveying company; as with my carpentry job, this was a firm that straddles the line between petty commodity production and capitalism. Jeff worked there for five years, an experience that contrasts at every point with his experience in low-status capitalist retail jobs. One of the most important differences for him was that the work was challenging and there was a lot to learn.

There was whole lot of different things you would do as far as field work, I mean we had boundary surveys, construction staking, you'd lay out roads, you had to calculate grades and things to get the roads to go in. You have a hand-held computer out in the field, you know the equipment was pretty technical, you gotta be trained on all that kind of stuff. And beyond that what I noticed after doing it for many years, even folks that had been there – that had learned all the technical stuff, that could run the gun or whatever – if you went out to a job site and were just looking for property corners, that people with more experience would find 'em more often.

Another aspect of the workplace that Jeff enjoyed was the collegiality of his coworkers. The soap opera atmosphere typical of fast food and factory work was gone.

I was the least educated person at Richard's place. Everybody had a college degree except me. Or more than one. Richard had a master's. Basically everybody he hired had a degree of some kind, it was oftentimes an English degree or psychology, that sort of thing. But yeah I was the least educated person there. And we weren't fucking each other. It was very different. It was very much like a community, and we felt like we were building the company together.

At the same time, this was not a high-paying job, despite the best intentions of Richard Sparver, the owner. Jeff started out making close to minimum wage without substantial benefits, at a time when he was married and had a couple of kids to support. "We were," he recalled, "on welfare for a while" – even though he worked full time. However, the wages did improve over time.

By the time I left there, everybody had medical insurance, we got a paid vacation. We had a few small benefits. There was no vision or dental, that kind of thing. No retirement, nothin like that. And I topped out at I think eleven-fifty an hour, I was making there. For having no education and workin in Berea I thought that was a pretty decent damn job.

In looking back on his time in some of the lowest quality jobs in the region, Jeff's assessment was unequivocally bleak: "I fucking hated it." His retrospective take on his time as a surveyor couldn't be more different: "I felt appreciated, respected, and there was basically no limit to personal development. There was always something new to learn, always something different." When I asked if he would have taken the surveying job over Burger Nation, even if Burger Nation had paid more, Jeff laughed. "I'm sure I would have."

Janet O'Conner experienced a middle-quality job working as a production potter and owner of a pottery shop. Without employees, this was genuine petty commodity production. In some ways, being a professional craft artist is like working in a factory: to pay the bills, you have to crank out product. "It's a lot of hard work," she said. But again, there are major differences in terms of the role of creativity and the scope for learning.

There's room for growth – what are you gonna do with your form, and the function of your pots? How are they gonna look, what kind of glazes are you gonna do? You can experiment here and there. So you could grow as an artist, or you could grow as a businessperson. You could work with kids part time, with your art. There's all kinds of things you could do with pottery.

Another important aspect of working as a potter was the autonomy.

I could pace myself. If I felt like throwin the bread and butter items that day, pretty much I could choose that's what I was gonna do, unless we're really in a crunch. And there was varied things to do, you know, I could set my goals for the day, nobody would tell me how to do it. It was my shop. I took pride in how it looked.

Again, as with Jeff's job as a surveyor, Janet chose to be a potter over factory work even though it paid less. "Yeah, there'd be days where we weren't sure if we were gonna make the rent. We were definitely starving artists. And we got food stamps for a little while." Other interviewees told similar stories about middle-status jobs that didn't necessarily pay a whole lot more, but supported a much better quality of life and held out promise for the future.

3.4. High-status jobs

If middle-status jobs in the MERJ area offer a profoundly different quality of life than lower-status ones, what about the highest-status jobs? It turns out that the same differences that distinguish middle-status jobs from lower-status ones come into play again. Sometimes this includes increased pay and benefits, but the distinction often turns on other, less tangible elements: again, scope for learning and creativity and a demand for skill, autonomy, flexibility, and a sense that the work is meaningful.

Janet O'Connor, who felt like she was in purgatory in the factory, sounds completely different when she talks about her current job. About a decade ago, in her mid-thirties, she enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Kentucky, and is now employed as a counselor and therapist at a government agency in one of the rural counties in the MERJ area. She works with a low-income population with lots of problems with unemployment and drug abuse.

Three days a week I work in what they call a treatment and rehabilitation program, for people with chronic mental illness. It's really fun. So three days I'm there, two days I'm in the outpatient office, seeing clients, you know with whatever troubles they bring to the door. Give 'em an hour and we talk.

When we first started talking about her work as a counselor, she remarked several times that she liked it. I asked why. Her reply is worth quoting at length, because it summarizes so many of the qualities that distinguish the highest quality jobs:

Janet: It's varied, what I do. And I get to use my training in social work – I have a Masters in that. I'm with great people on the staff. They're all smart and funny and they handle pressure well – you have to, cause it can get crazy. Some days, it can be clicking along fine, and the next thing you've got three emergencies, and this much paperwork from yesterday you haven't done yet cause you had two emergencies yesterday. But everybody just sort of supports each other and laughs. So I like that. I never thought about this when I started graduate school, but I'm really finding that therapy's a nice art. And there's a creativity to it and there's so much to learn and so many approaches you can take. And if you really do it with your heart and with creativity, you can make a difference. Even with the most broken people. I mean I've got people that have come in and I can't even believe they're still alive, the shit they've been through. And within a few months, you know, I've seen changes, and thinking differently, and holding themselves a little differently. And I really like that feeling.

Jason: So it feels more meaningful.

Janet: It does. Yes, it's very meaningful.

Janet makes about thirty-five thousand dollars a year at this position, which is in the range of many middle-status jobs in the MERJ area, and even some low-status ones. Her overwhelmingly positive assessment of the job is based on what she does with her workdays and how she feels about it, rather than upon the pay. She feels ok about her salary partly because it is enough to meet her needs, and partly because she works for a public agency that is struggling with budget cuts and where everyone's pay is limited, rather than for a factory that is slashing wages even as the distant owners rake in higher and higher profits.

Jeff Payne's experience is a little different. After five years at the surveyor's firm, Jeff was offered a job as a programmer with a capitalist software company in Lexington, Kentucky. He enjoyed his work at the surveying firm, but this job offered much higher pay and benefits. When he began, he was still learning how to be a master programmer.

I mean when I first started, I had just taken a few programming classes at school, I walked in and I was like "I don't know that I can do this." And they basically said, "You'll figure it out." And here's a book. Here's your tools. Try this.

But he soon became the lead programmer at the firm, which is what they hoped for when they hired him. This was a fully professional job, with a salary of nearly \$70,000 a year, plus benefits and retirement. As Jeff commented wryly, "There was no welfare at that point."

This was a position that demanded a high degree of skill and creativity, and thus also offered tremendous autonomy and flexibility.

Everyone I worked with had multiple college degrees it seemed like, they were all engineers, and things like that typically. And actually they worked with me to let me finish up school [a bachelor's degree in computer science]. I tried to schedule courses that were less disruptive, but effectively I was drawing a salary and sometimes only working twenty hours a week. A lot of that from home. A *lot* of flexibility there, a whole lot. A lot of autonomy.

The coding could be monotonous, particularly toward the end of a project, but it also offered intellectual challenges.

I always kinda looked at it like a brainteaser or something, because you're given a task and you've got the tools as far as how to approach it, but the path that you take is completely dictated by you. It was almost like having a problem and then you're told to solve that problem essentially and you have to come up with the algorithm to accomplish that. So, there's a lot of latitude in how you go about doin' it. To me it was like a brainteaser, or a chess game or something like that.

Jeff made it clear that in terms of work environment, he preferred the collegiality of the small surveying firm. At the software job, as the "person behind the scenes," he was often stuck in a basement office without windows. The commute to Lexington was onerous. Nonetheless, the software job had substantial benefits in terms of its scope for self-development over time and a sense of accomplishment. In summing up his experience there, Jeff said that one of the most important aspects was that "It was very much like a self-improvement sort of thing for me. The whole process. Getting to that

point.” In stark contrast to the low-quality jobs he worked at, “It was very beneficial; it was time well spent.”

As I write, I am working at the highest-quality job I have experienced: I am employed as a “visiting assistant professor” at Berea College, a private liberal arts college. Teaching at a college is one of the most common high-quality jobs in the MERJ area; between Berea College and Eastern Kentucky University, Madison County provides over 800 faculty positions. Berea College is a non-profit corporation, so this is not a capitalist job. (Like any large economic institution, Berea College has unfair inequalities, but these are generated mostly by the different levels of power associated with different positions within the complex division of labor within the institution, rather than through capitalist exploitation.) I am paid a salary of \$49,000 for teaching six courses, including benefits such as a retirement plan and health insurance for my family.

Even more striking than the pay is the nature of the labor itself and the character of the workplace. As with Jeff Payne’s experience at his professional job, the level of autonomy is completely different from that in most lower-status jobs. Within very broad constraints, I am free to develop my courses however I see fit. Aside from several hours of class time each week, I am free to organize my time. I can work at home or in my office. As a parent with a young child, this flexibility can make life much more manageable. If I have to stay home with my son while he is sick, for example, I can still perform many of my job duties. While the overall governance of the college is not entirely democratic, the workplace that I directly experience has remarkably little authoritarianism. Unlike at Tomiko, where workers were ordered about as a matter of course, I have never been given a single command. In addition to flexibility during the school year, the job provides pay during a three-week Christmas break and over a two-month summer vacation. I generally work on research and writing during those times, so it’s not pure vacation – but again, I can organize my time and my effort as I see fit.

The work itself is meaningful, engaging, challenging, and provides an astonishing scope for gaining or honing a wide range of skills and knowledge. I am getting paid for intensively developing my ideas about the world, for practicing effective public speaking, for learning to read and write more efficiently, and for figuring out how to perform well in the complex interpersonal relationships that are required for successful mentoring. I am actively maturing, on the job, skills that help me in a wide array of settings and against a wide array of challenges. In contrast to Tomiko, or even carpentry, I never watch the clock and count money. My paycheck seems disconnected from my labor in a way that never happened with industrial or manual labor.

Another important aspect of this job is that it is generally regarded as high-status. Perhaps because I have moved between so many different jobs, I have never identified myself strongly with a particular kind of work. I was the same person when I cleaned toilets at a restaurant as I am now as a professor, and so it’s obvious that the huge difference in the statuses assigned to those two jobs is unwarranted. Nonetheless, even though I know that the different social statuses associated with different jobs are generally unwarranted, I can also tell that the high status of my current job helps me feel a pride and confidence and sense of accomplishment that would be hard to sustain if I were still clocking in at Tomiko every morning.

But many workers do not have access to this comparative perspective. Some, because they are not well educated or from a privileged background, never have the opportunity to change to a job of radically higher status; others, because they are privileged, never choose to pursue a job of radically lower status. Even if we seldom acknowledge the relative status of the labor we do, it is difficult not to let it effect how you think about yourself. If you are a college professor, or a doctor, or an investment banker, one of the intangible benefits of the job is that you are able to move through life seeing yourself – warranted or not – as a relatively high-quality individual. And if you work in a factory or a fast food kitchen all your life? What can you conclude about yourself? It is a challenge not to see yourself as somehow a lesser person.

To be sure, working as a college professor has its downsides – some of them serious. The first few years of full-time teaching are genuinely difficult. In many positions, there is a long-term pressure to teach well at the same time one is continuing to perform research and publish original work. Most importantly, roughly seventy percent of faculty today are non-tenure track (June 2012). Many of these people teach as adjuncts, paid by the class, with no benefits, and no long-term job security. One of my first teaching jobs was as an adjunct at Eastern Kentucky University, where I was paid \$6,000 for a semester of full-time teaching – the same amount of work that I am now paid \$25,000 to perform. When I added up my hours, this turned out to be a lower hourly wage than I made at Tomiko – which is ironic, since I was still working as a college faculty member, which is perceived as a high status job.

But if we compare my current job – one of the highest-quality jobs in the MERJ area – with a typical MERJ area working-class job, such as working on the line at Tomiko, the differences are striking. At one of those jobs, it is possible to thrive; at the other, you're doing well just to survive.

4. Clusters of shared features

Although all of the jobs described above are modern wage-labor jobs, that's about the only shared feature. What we see are particular features that tend to cluster together, particularly at the extreme ends of the spectrum of job quality.

The lowest-quality jobs share a number of common traits. The work is typically repetitive and dull. This is no accident. There are entire laboratories dedicated to scouring a corporation and looking for tasks that can be made even more repetitive and dull, and, ideally, can be made so repetitive that they can be done by machine. This is not intrinsically or automatically a bad thing. It is the single most important technique for boosting the productivity of labor, and thus for making a generalized material affluence possible. But, in a class-bound economy, it is also a major technique for reducing the power of labor. If a labor process requiring skill and judgment can be replaced by one that can be done competently by someone who just walked in off the street, then it probably will be.

The work environment is usually authoritarian, where top-down decision-making renders all but a few without any role in shaping the labor process. Workers face the same two choices in responding to authority that (in many cases) they faced in authoritarian schools and families: meek obedience or costly individual rebellion. The

workweek is generally long, in particular in relation to the repetitive nature of the job tasks. Forty or more hours a week, week after week, is an awful lot of time to spend doing the same few things over and over. There is often a lack of flexibility. If your shift takes place when your kids are home from school, then they better be good at feeding themselves and not burning the house down.

Low-quality jobs also tend to have low pay – even, in the absence of labor organizing, when the jobs are high-productivity, the workers are cranking out a lot of stuff, and they deserve higher pay. Workers thus often need to work more than forty hours to make ends meet; the main reason the factory work pays so well is because of the tendency to work lots of overtime. In the case of couples with children, both partners generally need to find work; for single parents, working two jobs – or hoping to – is not uncommon.

The overall theme of these low-status jobs is an *overwhelming lack of scope for self-development*. This lack of scope is nearly absolute during work hours, where the worker, as Karl Marx wrote, “does not even reckon labour as part of his life, it is rather a sacrifice of his life” (Marx and McLellan 1977: 250). But because those hours are long and draining, the foreclosing of self-development comes to characterize one’s entire life.

Let me be clear. I am not arguing that working-class jobs require no skill or intelligence and offer no challenges. Being a factory worker is hard, just like being an elementary school teacher or a nurse or a dean at a research university. All jobs have their challenges. *All* jobs require skill, despite the best efforts of work-motion engineers and crafty managers. What is usually called unskilled labor may require less expertise than skilled labor, but it still demands intelligence and attention. At a place like Tomiko, you have to learn how to do the same physical task over and over while minimizing the damage to your body. You have to discipline your mind or you’ll go crazy. Just getting up again every morning and doing the work, over and over and over again, is a heroic accomplishment. It is nevertheless accurate to say that the scope for long-term realization of new skills and knowledge, in many lower-status jobs, is dramatically limited.

High-status jobs offer a sharp contrast on most of these points. The pay is not always better – although in most cases, it is (Mishel et al. 2009) – and the hours are not necessarily shorter. Nonetheless, the work schedule often has a degree of flexibility and autonomy. But most importantly, the work itself offers tremendous, open-ended scope for the further development of important skills and knowledge. As you gain these skills, you get to apply them; as you apply them, you consolidate them, in a kind of virtuous cycle that can provide a deep sense of existential progress and satisfaction.

The net effect of these contrasting themes is that the labor people do as adults tends to reinforce their initial childhood educational experience. It drives a further differentiation between those who initially enter the job market possessed of literate intellectuality and those who do not. If you don’t have a good book education coming out of high school, you’re much more likely to end up at a place like Tomiko, which not only does not require literacy or book learning, it actively prevents you from gaining them if you did not already have them. By contrast, the possession of such skills gives you access to jobs that over time cultivate the further development of those same skills. The formal job market thus entrenches differences that, for a given individual, are initially produced

through the different childhood and adolescent experiences of family, friendship, schooling, churching, and so on. But because these childhood experiences are themselves heavily influenced by the position of one's parents in the division of labor, these divergences in pedagogical experience and opportunity are somewhat stable across generations.

As we saw in chapter four, kids from different backgrounds often experience dramatically different kinds of classroom. But those differences, striking as they are, pale in comparison with the range of differences that await those kids when they enter the workforce. Many people will spend forty or fifty years of their lives at work, either in the same job or in different jobs of roughly equivalent character and quality, particularly in terms of the degree to which those jobs foster or preclude literate intellectuality. These cumulative labor experiences are so different that we might as well be living in different civilizations. As the economic historian Gregory Clark noted, in regard to global differences in wealth and poverty, "There walk the earth now both the richest people who have ever lived and the poorest" (Clark 2007: 3). Something similar could be argued about quality of life within industrial societies. There now live, in eastern Kentucky, people who enjoy the full benefits of industrial production and post-Enlightenment knowledge, and people who bear the full cost of these things but receive few of the benefits.

Another important aspect is that all of this has the appearance, particularly from the perspective of someone in a higher-status position, of a meritocracy. Even if you grow up in an affluent, professional family and attended the best schools, for the most part – with exceptions – you don't land a high-quality job without doing a lot of work. If you never attended a make-believe school or worked in a low-status, low-quality job, it's easy to think that you attained your position because you deserved it, and that factory workers and janitors and fast-food workers and office clerks attained their lowly position for the same reason: they deserved it. Everyone has a shot at every job, and people with talent, discipline, and ambition rise to the top. For those at the bottom, this equation of status and individual quality is often partly rejected. But if you've never worked as a doctor or professor, or been inside a good college classroom, or had supper with a single person in a high-status professional job, how can you be sure? Maybe – you begin to wonder – those people *are* a smarter, better kind of folk. Maybe, as Brenda concluded, "I'm just not that intelligent." Maybe the US is a fair, decent, open society, where everyone reaps, through the impartial justice of the market, what they merit.

5. Manufacturing crappy jobs

So some jobs make it hard for people to develop their intellects. But isn't this just a necessary trade-off for having a highly-productive economy? Because of the industrialization of agriculture, manufacturing, and even services, people in the contemporary US enjoy unprecedented material wealth. Aren't those repetitive assembly line jobs, in all their profusion, the main thing that separates us from the short, destitute, stunted life of the medieval serf – who also toiled, but with an output hundreds of times less?

Isn't the current division of labor, in which some people make cars and other people take care of the infirm and other people teach kindergarten, basically a reflection of practical necessity? Not everyone can be a scholar or an artist and get paid for being creative; most of us have to do production work, like growing wheat and building roads. Perhaps the arguments above suggest that we need a revitalized – and democratized – union movement to help raise wages. But we're not going to be able to drastically shift everyone into new, more convivial lines of work. Right?

In this section I will argue that these claims are wrong. There are no good reasons to have so many crappy jobs. Are we going to get rid of factories and factory workers? No. But the burdensome aspects of factory work – the repetitiveness, the autocracy, the low pay, and especially the long hours – none of these things are intrinsic to factory work. We could enjoy the material benefits of high-productivity industrial labor without placing these burdens on workers. (Note that I am using *industrial* here to refer not just to manufacturing per se, but to agricultural and service jobs as well – in short, to the whole gamut of jobs in which a good or service, whether it's broccoli or barium enemas, has been mass produced.) The existing array of jobs is not just a practically necessary splitting up of tasks. It also is also a detailed expression of the balance of power between capitalist elites and workers in various particular positions. The lower-quality jobs and the workers who fill them have been subjected to relatively unrestrained attempts to maximize exploitation, and to secure that exploitation through domination. Rather than boosting productivity and innovation, these strategies often damage them.

Thus, the damage and the foreclosed potential that Melinda Jackson suffers at Tomiko are representative products of capitalist class relationships in the contemporary US and in the MERJ area. Which is to say – in response to some critiques from the left – they are not synonymous with, or necessary elements of, market coordination, industrial production, modern technology, or even the corporation, which, after all, comes in non-capitalist variants. Nor are they – in response to certain claims from the right – unfortunate side-effects of a what is otherwise an optimally-efficient market economy in which power plays no role. Melinda could do the same job – industrial, assembly-line production of a high-tech good produced for sale on a market – under more humane conditions, with shorter hours, higher pay, and greater control over the labor process, if you took class exploitation out of the picture. There are many different lines of evidence that support this argument. Let's review some of the most important ones.

5.1. Artificially low wages

One line of evidence supporting the claim that many of the most onerous characteristics of low-quality jobs is a product of class, rather than a practical necessity, is the historical divergence between productivity and wages. The fundamental index of overall feasible real wage levels is the productivity of labor (Krugman 1997). Given steady productivity gains in the US over the past several decades, which compound into a massive increase in total output per worker, there should have been a constant opening up of new possibilities for working people. To gain a sense of the magnitude of these possibilities, consider that if the US minimum wage had increased over the past forty years at the same rate as overall worker productivity, it would have been \$16.55 an hour

in 2004, nearly three times its actual value at that time (UC Berkeley Labor Center 2004). With such a substantial productivity dividend, it should have been possible for workers to either maintain a certain material standard of living while working shorter hours, to significantly increase their standard of living while working the same hours, or some combination thereof (Schor 1993). For the most part, none of these three possibilities has come to pass – in particular for workers in rapidly-growing lower-status occupations such as manufacturing (in the South) and retail (Greenhouse and Leonhardt 2006; Mishel et al. 2009).

American workers are producing more total wealth, and more wealth per hour of labor, than ever before, but this wealth has been taken out of their hands. It has gone, instead, into the pockets of overlapping owning and managing classes – rather than, say, into increased research and development, real investment, or tax revenue. As we would expect, this lag in wages is reflected in the further deterioration of an already extraordinarily lopsided distribution of wealth. In 1962, the wealthiest one percent in the US held 125 times more assets than the median household; by 2004, the top percentile held 190 times the assets of the median (Mishel et al. 2009: 269). This distribution is a direct reflection of the concentrated ownership of the means of production, with financial assets such as corporate stocks representing its largest, and most skewed, component. In 2004, the top one percent of households held 36.9 percent of all stocks, while the bottom eighty percent of households owned only 9.4 percent (Mishel et al. 2009: 273).

In sum, many workers are earning artificially low wages because of exploitation. Recall, however, that this is both capitalist exploitation, in the form of dividends paid to individuals in their role as owners, and exploitation based on a privileged position within a complex, in-firm division of labor, in the form of unfairly high wages paid to individuals in their role as salaried managers and overseers (Galbraith 2008; Sayer 1995).

Low wages may also represent a strategy of domination. As we saw above, workers at Tomiko and other MERJ area factories are hired initially by a temp agency. When I worked at Tomiko, temp workers were paid seven dollars an hour and received no benefits. If a temp worker does his or her job well, after a period of months or, in some cases, years, he or she might be “hired on direct” by Tomiko. Does this arrangement cut labor costs for Tomiko? They probably paid Key Services a full ten dollars an hour or more for a temp worker who only saw seven; Tomiko’s only direct savings were by not offering any health coverage or other benefits. Perhaps the main attraction of such a heavy reliance on temp agencies is that it places workers in a vulnerable position, and serves as a constant reminder that things could be worse than they are (Piven 2004): how hard would it be to hire every worker as a *permanent* temp?

These artificially low wages have tremendous and ramifying effects, both on individual lives and throughout society. As I mentioned above, many people earning low wages must work more than one job; in families with kids, both parents must work outside the home. At Tomiko, long work hours are often *sought* by workers, because the overtime pay is necessary to raise their income to a decent standard. In other words, there is a close, organic relationship between real wages and the feasible minimum length of the workweek. Another consequence of low wages is that such workers often qualify for public assistance; this results in yet another hidden subsidy to private investors by state

and federal governments. Wal-Mart, the single largest employer in the US, reaps tremendous profits through low wages which are partially offset by taxpayer support for health care, food stamps, and so on (Dube and Jacobs 2004).

But most importantly, artificially low wages represent the taking of fundamental resources away from those who generate them, and thus serve as a foundation upon which other inequalities grow. The uneven funding of schools, uneven access to literacy, the unevenly distributed capacity to engage in social critique and activism – in short, all of the complex inequalities that ramify through society and express themselves eventually as a stable hegemony of the elite, are to a large extent reflections of the unfairly unequal compensation of labor.

5.2. Damaging productivity to preserve class

One of the best ways to see the specific role of class in shaping the character of particular workplaces is to note instances in which a particular aspect of a job helps intensify or secure exploitation *at the expense of labor productivity*. In some cases, a particular job feature will simultaneously boost productivity *and* intensify exploitation. The premier example of this dual role is the use of technology to deskill a job. In such cases, it is difficult to untangle the two motivations, boosting labor efficiency and securing a class relationship. By contrast, cases where a practice secures class but reduces productivity are diagnostic: they demonstrate that elites are willing to damage the overall efficiency of a productive process in order to preserve their own position. They show that class relationships, in addition to being immoral, represent a drag on production, a fact that undermines one of the few honest intellectual arguments in favor of capitalism – namely, that interfering with the class relationships at the heart of capitalism damages productivity.

One large category of actions that damage productivity is the imposition of a strict authoritarian hierarchy in the workplace, which is seen as key to maintaining the worker quiescence necessary to continued exploitation. In many capitalist firms, a great deal of effort and attention is taken up by “guard labor,” in which supervisors monitor the efforts of workers. Remember the worker-owned co-ops that I mentioned earlier in the chapter, in the discussion on modes of production? In worker-owned coops, all of the effort that goes into guard labor is freed for more useful tasks, as workers tend to monitor themselves and each other as a matter of course. According to one study, “when one conventional firm converted to a co-op, the number of supervisors was reduced to a quarter of its previous level” (Bowles et al. 2005: 137).

Another common example of a practice that impairs productivity is restricting the right of workers to assign work tasks among themselves. Melinda is assigned by the floor manager to work all day, every day, at the E-coat station, instead of rotating tasks throughout the day or having a say, along with other workers, in how tasks are distributed. This is a clear assertion of strict hierarchical discipline in the workplace, but it also increases the risk of fatigue and repetitive stress injuries, increases employee turnover, and in many other ways hinders productivity (Bowles et al. 2005).

Authoritarian management also impacts productivity by separating people with relevant knowledge of the production process from any substantial role in shaping that

process. People who actually do the labor command detailed knowledge that the folks in suits will never possess. One older woman at Tomiko was constantly fixing, on the fly, the machine that cleaned the struts by blowing compressed air through them. She kept the machine going despite the fact that it did not work like it was supposed to. Upper management had no idea that worker expertise kept the broken machine going: they probably assumed it was the other way around.

Examples of bad governance impairing production are legion. One study traced the deadly flaws in Firestone tires in 2000 to labor strife at a plant in Decatur Illinois (Bowles et al. 2005: 327). Another study found that automated machinery was adopted in canning factories, even though it was less efficient than workers, because it displaced skilled workers who had commanded relatively high wages (Bowles et al. 2005: 337). When factories move to a new location in search of cheaper, more pliant labor, they leave behind skilled workers and must expend substantial resources to set up a new plant, hire new workers, train them, and so on – probably to move yet again when those workers begin to gain a measure of power through experience (Adler 2000; Silver 2003).

5.3. The long work week

A defining feature of a job is the length of the work week. What decides the length of the work week? If Americans are working longer and longer hours, is this simply a reflection of practical necessity, an unavoidable price to pay for material affluence? Or the impartial, innocent dynamics of markets? Not at all. Again we find that the character of our labor has been heavily shaped through the intentional application of class power.

There are very good arguments in favor of having a short work week – shorter than the forty hours that still stand as a legal, if tattered and loopholed, norm. Shorter work weeks spread labor out more evenly across the population, reducing unemployment. This has a number of widespread benefits: it tends to raise wages, and higher wages, although risking inflation, reduce the scope for crises of overproduction, in which there are too few buyers for the goods that are being produced. This is the essential character of the Great Recession and the “jobless recovery” that has followed it (Reich 2010). Higher wages restrain the concentration of wealth in the hands of the elite, which also reduces the opportunity for speculative bubbles to capsize the real economy – another central feature of the Great Recession. Shorter work weeks can raise productivity, because people aren’t so burnt out. Shorter work weeks generate a number of important collective economic benefits, as well as benefits that accrue particularly to workers with low-quality jobs and those who can’t find a job. For those caught in boring, repetitive jobs, being able to work thirty hours a week earning a decent wage instead of forty, fifty, or sixty, is the difference between a decent quality of life and a waking hell, in which the only rewarded virtue is stoic endurance. So if a short work week is so great, why don’t we have it?

During the century before WWII, workers in the US fought for shorter work hours with a passion that few other issues generated (Aronowitz and Cutler 1998; Hunnicut 1988; Roediger and Foner 1989). The struggle “had all the appearances of a vital social movement, including rallies, pamphlets, parades, marches, and strikes,” and was key to worker recruitment by the AFL and other unions (Aronowitz and Cutler 1998: 18).

During the Great Depression, a major effort to secure a thirty-hour week – the “30 for 40” movement – was narrowly defeated. Immediately after WWII, under concerted pressure from corporate management, union leaders abandoned such demands in favor of negotiating for wage hikes and other concessions. Half a century later, with union density in the US having eroded precipitously, and with work hours creeping back up, the “30 for 40” movement seems a historical curiosity (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Mishel et al. 1999; Schor 1993). Today, many workers will not even register a preference for a shorter work week in an interview or survey, because it seems unimaginable (Freeman and Rogers 1999). You might as well fantasize instead about winning the lottery, which is at least in the realm of possibility.

Even though it has so many collective virtues, a shorter work week has one crucial vice, from the perspective of the elite: it dramatically and sustainably strengthens the bargaining power of labor vis-à-vis capital. Corporate capital fought against it with all their power and won, in yet another example of damaging overall economic performance in favor of preserving their privileged position.

5.4. Comparing worker-owned coops with capitalist firms

But isn't this all a bit pie-in-the-sky? It's nice to daydream about these possibilities – democracy in the workplace, high wages, short work weeks – but isn't it a bit naïve? If firms weren't ruthless, how could they compete? If there were no bosses, why would workers work? Fortunately, we don't have to look only to fantasy novels in order to find comparisons with class-based production. Around the world, tens of thousands of worker-owned cooperatives compete in the same markets with capitalist firms. Italy alone has nearly 40,000 worker-owned co-ops (Bowles et al. 2005: 137). Many co-ops are small and local, like Berkeley's famous Cheese Board, but others are quite large, such as Okonite Cable, the grocery retailer Publix, the publisher W. W. Norton, or the Basque industrial conglomerate known as the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation. Although comparing capitalist and cooperative firms can be tricky, worker-owned co-ops seem to be able to compete successfully with traditionally-owned firms, mainly by achieving higher worker productivity (Bowles et al. 2005; Pencavel 2001; Whyte and Whyte 1991). As Bowles, Edwards, and Roosevelt conclude, “the economic advantages of a worker-owned and democratically run firm are clear” (Bowles et al. 2005: 339).

Worker-owned co-ops are not Elysian Fields where life is grand and everything is perfect. They can be difficult to set up, which is one reason for their relative paucity. Over time, largely because of the inherent challenges of democratic governance, they show a tendency to revert to a more traditional ownership structure, as happened with the household appliance manufacturer Amana. Because worker-owners have their entire livelihood tied up in the co-op, they can be more averse to taking risks than capitalist firms – and such risk-taking, especially the development of novel products and process, has been an important source of material progress (Pencavel 2001). The Berkeley co-ops notwithstanding, they are not all bastions of progressive zeal. One of the largest worker-owned co-ops, Science Applications International, is a multi-billion dollar contractor with

the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security that participated enthusiastically in the swindler's gold rush of the post-war "reconstruction" of Iraq (Chandrasekaran 2007).

A particularly telling limitation on worker-owned co-ops is that in order to fully realize the benefits of worker-ownership, they cannot simply overthrow capitalist class relationships. They also have to overthrow traditional, top-down corporate management and institute robust forms of democratic governance (Pencavel 2001). One of the largest manufacturing co-ops in the US is Okonite Cable, which has a plant in Madison County. It is completely worker-owned, but retains a traditional, authoritarian management structure. Okonite thus has, ironically, a labor union and some of the same contentious labor-management issues that are hallmarks of capitalist firms. However, at the same time, Okonite is well known for paying much better wages than other local factories. In addition, when the Great Recession began, many factories in the MERJ area began laying off workers in droves, at a time when other jobs were simply not to be had. Okonite, by contrast, cut everyone's work hours and pay equally, and was able to avoid mass layoffs.

It is clear that in comparing worker-owned co-ops with capitalist firms, we are not comparing real institutions with paper utopias – neither with a leftist fantasy of harmonious communism or a rightist one of perfect markets in frictionless optimality. We are comparing two kinds of actually existing productive institution. And one of those institutions, the co-op, reliably behaves in a more humane manner, while doing the same work as its capitalist competitors.

In conclusion, the verdict is clear: we can have a highly productive industrial economy without consigning millions of human beings to a waking hell in satanic mills. To be sure, many people must do repetitive labor. But they could do it with more self-determination and dignity; they could do it for higher pay; they could minimize the drudgery and risk of injury by rotating jobs and by getting trained to work at many different tasks within a firm; they could do it without having gangs of human parasites fattening off of their labor. And, perhaps most importantly, they could do much less repetitive labor, and still make a living. They could do it thirty hours a week instead of sixty. In terms of quality of life, that alone would be revolutionary.

One of the few intellectual justifications for class is that it's efficient; or at least, that messing with it is inefficient. But the arguments above suggest that class makes everyone poorer. Class is retained not because it makes everyone better off, but because it makes a few a whole lot better off – so much better off that they can beat the rest of us at most of our attempts to get them to behave. On this point, Karl Marx was precisely correct: capitalism, by revolutionizing production, provided the material basis for people to live flourishing lives. But then capitalism, through exploitation, prevents that possibility from coming to pass.

CHAPTER 6

CAPITALIST ETHNOGENESIS

There's a lot of folks from Jackson County [where I work], that I just don't have anything in common with. You know, you get to know 'em, and the first thing they start talking about oftentimes is deer season, or when's the next hunting season. I've never hunted in my life. And these guys'll stand around and talk, using terms that I don't even understand – and I can't sit there and talk about C++ with them, either. And it carries down to all aspects of your social life. They have a different culture. Our politics are different. Our interests are different. The way we think is completely different. I've learned over the years how to present myself in a way to them that we can carry on a conversation, essentially. But, like I said, I'm not going to be hanging out with them after work. Cause we don't have anything in common.

– Jeff Payne

1. A cultural schism in the MERJ area

Let's take a quick look at where we've been so far. This dissertation attempts to answer two questions: why are people in the MERJ area still homesteading? And, why do these contemporary homesteaders come in two groups? In the preceding chapters, I laid a groundwork for answering those questions. For both questions, that groundwork requires examining the way that capitalist class influences the distribution of basic resources like income and time free from toil. In particular, it influences the distribution of a set of resources that can be more difficult to see than wealth or status, and thus is often overlooked: the pedagogical resources that are necessary for an individual to develop vigorous literacy. In turn, the distribution of literate intellectuality, among other things, shapes where an individual ends up in a grossly unequal job market. At a collective level, the lopsided distribution of literacy and book learning also helps determine the capacity of elites to impose low-quality, high-exploitation jobs upon workers; it helps determine, in other words, how vulnerable different groups of workers are.

At this point, we are close to being able to answer the original two questions, about *why homesteading* and *why two groups of homesteaders*. In this chapter, I will build on the material summarized above to present an explanation of why homesteaders come in two groups, and why these two groups find it difficult to interact. (In the next and final chapter, we will address the question, *why homestead?*) In short, the class-driven processes summarized above, which result in very different relationships to knowledge, tend to produce contrasting – and to some extent even opposed – ideas, theories, and world views. These opposed ideas in turn support opposing practices, in terms of diet, religion, child rearing, gender relations, and so on. It is these opposed ideas and practices that make it genuinely difficult for people to interact. Which is to say, it is not differences in income, or occupation, or status, or urban-rural background. In the MERJ area, people interact freely across all of those lines. Where they struggle to interact is where they embrace opposing ideas about some important aspect of the world: fundamentalist Christianity versus secular humanism, for example. Ultimately, it's class that drives the distribution of literacy, but it's the literacy that most directly drives the separation of class culture.

The process of cultural differentiation that I am describing here is not specific to the MERJ area or to MERJ homesteaders. It is a general process that occurs throughout the US, and probably, in somewhat distinct iterations, throughout the capitalist modernity that now spans the globe. Because it is driven, ultimately, by capitalist class, and because it results in such profound cultural differences, I call it *capitalist ethnogenesis*.

Group-level social strife in the contemporary MERJ area occurs across a line defined above all by opposing ideas about fundamental issues. (I say *group-level* because there is also, of course, friction between individuals as well; ironically, the most intense and violent forms of friction at this scale are often between people who are culturally similar and interact intimately, like spouses or siblings.) In order to examine these conflicts, we can't just look at the interactions between bohemian homesteaders and country homesteaders, because the two groups of homesteaders participate in these conflicts as members of two larger groups. Like the two groups of homesteaders, these two larger groups are defined above all by their degree of literate knowledge.

The normal shorthand for these two larger groups would be “working class” and “middle class.” Those labels have a certain verisimilitude, in that in the MERJ area, most long-term factory workers (which is clearly a working-class job), would fall into one group, and most college professors (which is clearly a middle-class job), would fall into the other. But labeling the groups according to their occupation and income would be misleading, because it is not occupation or income per se that divides them. Factory workers and college professors don't avoid hanging out together because one earns more money than the other; in the MERJ area, their incomes are often not all that different. What divides them is educational differences and all of the other profound differences in outlook and practice that result from educational differences. The simplest way to see this is that, in the MERJ area, people with low incomes or working-class jobs who are well educated generally hang out with and are culturally similar to people who are well educated and have higher incomes and professional jobs. People with higher incomes and higher-status jobs who are not well educated generally hang out with and are culturally

similar to people who are not well educated and have low incomes or working-class jobs. I suspect that this is often the case throughout the US: the *ultimate* cause of cultural differentiation between people of different classes is different degrees of exploitation and domination. But the *proximate* cause – one whose power is generally overlooked or minimized by scholars – is radical differences in educational outcomes, driven indirectly but strongly by economic exploitation.

The most accurate shorthand for these two groups thus would be something like “the less book educated group” and “the more book educated group,” phrases that are too unwieldy to serve as labels. Instead, I’ll refer to these two groups by the imperfect but short terms, “locals” and “liberals.” As with “hicks” and “hippies,” these are colloquial terms that the groups sometimes use to refer to each other. I don’t really like these labels, but they suck less than any of the alternatives. Developing a detailed description of these two larger groups is beyond the scope of this dissertation; rather, I want to offer two quick, qualitative sketches before focusing on the character of the intellectual and cultural oppositions between them.

The locals form the majority in the MERJ area, particularly in the rural parts. With individual exceptions, this group is characterized by a pronounced general lack of *literate* intellectuality, although many of them are what I referred to as practical intellectuals, who enjoy puzzling things out and using their minds to work better with their hands. Many of them are also skilled storytellers and wits. They are not distinguished, in short, by lack of intelligence or acuity. But they are largely separated, through their dependence upon oral mass media (such as television and radio), from written bodies of science, scholarship, and critique. As mentioned in chapter three, a college degree is uncommon: only about seven percent of rural residents of the MERJ area have graduated from college. Indeed, only about half of adults hold a high school diploma (United States Bureau of the Census 2000).

In terms of income, this larger group is somewhat diverse, and does include families and individuals who enjoy middle-class affluence. These non-poverty-level incomes are sometimes earned through skilled “manual” labor like building homes, running heavy equipment, fixing cars, or shoeing horses. They are also earned, however, through working long weeks at jobs that don’t pay so well, like clocking sixty hours at Tomiko or working more than one job. As a whole, however, this group has limited access to “professional” middle-class jobs, and most of them have limited access to jobs that provide the equivalent of a middle-class hourly wage.

There are specific circumstances common among the lower-status working class in the MERJ area which make it hard to develop relatively coherent, well-developed social and natural theories that are supported by modern scholarship; as Antonio Gramsci wrote, “working-class” thought, on the whole, is a “chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions” (Forgacs 1988: 345). Under these conditions, one’s thought, theories, and worldview are more of a jumbled mess than they otherwise might be. Everyone’s thought is unfinished and incoherent to some extent, of course, but as we have seen, socio-economic position has a profound effect on the *degree* to which a given person can work against that condition.

The bohemian homesteaders are drawn from a larger group which is a minority in the MERJ area, defined and differentiated by an unusual degree of intellectuality and literacy, as well as by substantial involvement with various left-wing intellectual and activist traditions. Through reading and/or through close relationships with other readers, they are versed in a variety of sophisticated, written social critiques. Like any human knowledge, these critiques, even at their best, do not represent absolute, inerrant truth, but they are – again, at their best – drawn from and consistent with empirically-grounded, closely-reasoned scholarship. Through actively reading and working with such critiques, this group has become alienated from much of what passes as mainstream culture and politics.

Many liberals are not from high-income backgrounds and many do not have high incomes themselves, but in being college-educated they have enjoyed one of the main privileges an affluent society has to offer, and in doing so have secured an important life-long tool that helps them dodge the worst forms of contemporary capitalist exploitation. Some of them dodge upward: members of this group have much more access to higher-quality professional jobs than most locals. But it would not make sense to refer to this group as simply “the middle class” or “the educated middle class.” Some earn middle-class incomes, while some are cash poor. Some are higher-status professionals like college professors or doctors, while others are carpenters or farmers, and others are in hard-to-place occupations like starving artist or full-time social activist. Note, however, that they do tend to avoid the worst jobs. There are few liberals who work in factories or fast food or big box retail, and almost none who do it long-term. Also, as noted above, not everyone who has a middle-class income is literate and intellectual. There are many affluent families and individuals in the MERJ area who are strongly a-intellectual or even anti-intellectual, who are often not socially or politically liberal, and may indeed be actively hostile to left-wing ideas.

2. Literate and oral mass media

How can degree of literacy be such a powerful influence on people’s ideas about the world? How can dependence upon oral mass media, like television, leave one divorced from modern science and scholarship? The television has the Discovery Channel, after all. To answer these questions, we have to take a look at some of the crucial differences between oral and written mass media in the contemporary US. That’s the task of this section.

A hallmark of modernity is that we are increasingly reliant on mediated information. One of the defining characteristics of modern life is that it is no longer “face-to-face,” which is one of the phrases used to contrast the experience of human beings who lived before (or outside) the rise of agriculture and civilization with that of our own. We not only live among strangers but our lives are shaped, increasingly, by the actions of strangers and by social processes that transcend locality. As the importance of these non-local processes increases, we become more reliant upon mediated information to understand the world we live in. As John Zaller says, in a classic work on the formation of public opinion, “Citizens in large societies are dependent on unseen and

usually unknown others for most of their information about the larger world in which they live” (Zaller 1992: 6).

In this context, the mode that an individual uses to obtain information becomes increasingly important. Do you rely on personal observation and conversation? Do you rely on the television and radio? Do you read the newspaper? Do you read non-fiction books? Each of these modes tends to provide information of different quality and character. Oral modes of mass media – television and radio – are, in the contemporary US, much more subject to censorship, simplification, and trivialization than literary modes of mass media.

There are a number of broad historical reasons – the rise of post-Enlightenment science and scholarship, the increasing complexity of society, the increased scope of choice, et cetera – why literate intellectuality has become an increasingly crucial arbiter of the quality of one’s natural and social theories. Without literate intellectuality, it is difficult to access existing traditions of science and scholarship. Even more broadly, albeit more speculatively, without using reading and writing as tools for learning and self-critique, it’s hard to build into your brain relatively coherent theories of complicated social processes which can only be understood through abstraction.

But there is another, more context-specific reason why the lopsided distribution of fluent, active literacy is important. Without it, you are reliant on oral sources of information and knowledge for learning about anything that is not accessible to direct experience. This means that, in addition to direct experience, you are reliant upon two modes for acquiring the basic ingredients of your social and natural theories.

The first mode is personal interaction with other people. That’s nothing new; it’s been that way for as long as humans have used language. But, as we have seen, people in the contemporary US tend to be segregated – in school, at work, and in general – based in part upon the quality and quantity of their formal, bookish education. So if you don’t have direct access to written materials through your own reading, you are not particularly likely to have substantial *indirect* access from participation in a network of kin and friends who read. This kind of segregation is tremendously important, and we’ll return to it later in this chapter.

The second mode of acquiring information for those who do not or cannot read is oral – as opposed to written – mass media, namely television and radio. Because limited literacy is largely a product of the class processes that operate through differential schooling and differential job quality, the people who are most in need of radical social change are also, ironically, those most likely to be solely dependent on radio and television for information and interpretation. The socially-driven dependence on oral mass media that many people experience matters for two major reasons: first, because of the inherent qualities of these media, particularly television, in contrast to print media; and second, because nearly all of the considerable efforts at censorship in the contemporary US are focused on radio and television, not print. Let’s take a closer look at these two factors, beginning with the inherent qualities of oral mass media – especially television.

If I walk down my street in the evening – a quiet working-class block at the foot of the first Appalachian hills – the street is empty, except perhaps for a few kids circling

on their bikes. In every house, virtually without exception, I can glimpse the flickering blue glow of televisions as a lambency on the curtains. The entire neighborhood, every evening, year after year, is inside their homes, watching TV. In this regard, it's a representative neighborhood. "The amount of time people spend watching television is astonishing," concludes one overview. "On average, individuals in the industrialized world devote three hours a day to the pursuit – fully half of their leisure time, and more than on any single activity save work and sleep" (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). We spend, in other words, more time watching television than playing with our children, visiting with friends, exercising, gardening, reading, or traveling. Researchers differ over why television is so addicting, but that it is addicting is clear (McIlwraith et al 1991).

Heavy television viewing is by no means confined to any one segment of the US population. But as with most modern burdens, it is not equally distributed. One of the single most striking differences I have encountered between well-educated, "middle-class" homes and "working-class" homes is that in the latter the television is front and center and almost always on. In my stepfather's house on the Yurok Reservation, the TV was usually on, regardless of who was visiting or what else was going on. In the middle-class homes I have been in, the television is turned off when guests are present, and is usually off in general when other activities are being pursued. In the homes of members of the leftist counterculture, who are particularly well educated, this contrast is even more marked: the television is likely to be stored away in a closet or absent altogether, by conscious design. With only a handful of exceptions, I have never seen a television in the bedroom of a young child except in the households where the adult or adults had less than a college education. The same pattern shows up, often unremarked, in the ethnographic literature on class culture. In Annette Lareau's study, for example, television is lurking in the background: a constant presence in the working-class households, it is left on even while children are trying to do their homework (Lareau 2003). Middle-class households, by contrast, were actively on guard against it, as with Mrs. Williams, whose "vehement opposition to television is based on her view of what [her son] Alexander needs to grow and thrive. She objects to the passivity of television and to the fact that 'most of the programs that come on Saturday morning really don't contribute anything to your intellect'" (Lareau 2003: 112).

The invasive, addictive qualities of TV bring us to the second reason why it matters if you are dependent upon oral mass media for your information: censorship. When we consider the way that television viewing colonizes people's free time against the fact that only a small percentage of Americans read serious non-fiction, we come to a conclusion that US elites have apparently already hit upon: you can go a long way toward suppressing effective social critique just by keeping it off the tube. There is a solid body of research and investigative journalism that shows just how this censorship works (e.g. Bagdikian 2004; Chomsky 1989; Domhoff 2002; Greenwald et al. 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Phillips 2007; Solomon 1999; Solomon 2005).

Although it's a bit dated now, one of the best books in this genre is still Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent: A Political Economy of the Mass Media*. They demonstrate that mass media in the US – in which they include television, radio, and newspapers – functions as a propaganda system in which powerful domestic

interests, such as large corporations and the military, are able to control the content and framing on issues that matter to them. According to Chomsky, “The media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly” (Chomsky 1989: 10). Many people in the US would find this an incredible claim. After all, the mass media is not overtly controlled by the state, as in Soviet Russia, and you can find all sorts of viewpoints represented across the television dial. Producers and journalists often insist that they are professionals who exercise independent judgment about what topics should be covered and how. Moreover, there’s plenty of griping on the right about the “liberal media,” just as there is on the left about the “corporate media.”

Herman and Chomsky argue that, as a means of setting the parameters of debate and controlling the flow of information, the mass media in the contemporary US works very differently than the overt sorts of censorship common in despotic societies. Put simply, just about anything and everything is allowed, except outright obscenity – unless you’ve got cable, then obscenity is a go, too. These days, on just about any topic, you can find a genuine diversity of opinion. Pro-gay? Anti-gay? Hard-core religion? Secularism? Evolutionary biology? Creationism? Pro-life? Pro-choice? Drug use? Sex? Abstinence? It’s all there – albeit, on the television and radio, flashing by in an unrelenting stream. This is partly why many ordinary people who are socially and religiously conservative are persuaded by the claim that the media has a liberal bias, because it allows content that many churches and families find offensive, from depictions of sex, drug use, and the increasing presence of openly-gay characters, to the secular, irreligious cast of most programming.

Within this welter of images and ideas, it is hard to notice the near-complete absence of one particular kind of content: well-developed critiques of political economic issues, such as an analysis of the class structure of society and the strategies by which that class structure is sustained. On many issues, the capitalist elite in the US does not have a united stance. Abortion? Some of them, as individuals, are pro-choice and some are not, which is to say that, *as a group*, they don’t care. It is not an issue that is relevant to them *as elites*. Gay marriage? They don’t care. Miscegenation? These days, they don’t care. Prayer in schools? They don’t care. As a group, there’s only one issue of real concern to them: where the money goes (Domhoff 2002). Because the flow of money is such a fundamental issue, it turns up in many places, from military procurement policies to the passage of international trade agreements to labor policy. It is in regard to these kinds of political economic issues, according to Herman and Chomsky, that elites carefully monitor what is fit to air.

Despite its subtlety, the effects of this complex censorship are striking. Consider the current economic crisis. At root, the crisis is the culmination of a forty-year trend, in the US, of growing income inequality. It was clear before the “crisis” that income inequality was growing, and that this growth could not continue indefinitely without dire macroeconomic consequences – but these basic economic findings were not widely reported. It is even clearer in retrospect that economic inequality was the cause of the crisis, but still, this is not widely reported in the oral mass media. Could you get a clear

explanation of the economic crisis from television? I don't think so. You could find snippets of the correct explanation, when some show lets Paul Krugman talk for 47 seconds, but these snippets are – no accident – lost amidst the shouting and noise, where they offer little threat. Could you get a clear explanation from print? Absolutely. Even in *mainstream* print sources. Even in magazines that I could buy at my local Wal-Mart. Matt Taibbi has written a series of investigative pieces in *Rolling Stone* that reveal, in some detail, the nasty maneuvers of corrupt banks and politicians that laid the groundwork for the crisis (e.g. Taibbi 2010). Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz wrote an excellent essay for *Vanity Fair* (Stiglitz 2011). Paul Krugman, mentioned above, is another Nobel laureate who has tracked the crisis, from before it became a crisis, on the editorial pages of *The New York Times*. Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor under Clinton, published *Aftershock*, a short book that gives the reader a crash course in the course of the crash (Reich 2010). The problem is that, on the line at Tomiko and at the cash registers at the Berea Wal-Mart – among those most affected by the Great Recession – nobody has heard of any of these authors, let alone read their work.

With some of the changes in television programming and with the rise of the Internet, this discussion may seem outdated. TV personalities like John Stewart and Rachel Maddow offer vigorous social critique, and progressive, activist websites like Dailykos.com and MoveOn.org proliferate. Do these new developments represent the end of mass media-based propaganda in the US? While no one knows for sure how this will play out in the future, I suspect that the answer for the present is a restrained *no*. While the rise of something like the *Daily Show* is refreshing, it is counterbalanced by the agitprop of Fox News (Greenwald 2004). But more importantly, on TV, the medium is still largely the message. In an unusual study, Anne Cunningham and Keith Stanovich demonstrate that an individual's reading volume is strongly correlated with greater "declarative knowledge" on all sorts of topics. Frequent readers were more knowledgeable not just about high-brow subjects, but "knew more about how a carburetor worked, were more likely to know who their United States senators were, more likely to know how many teaspoons are equivalent to one tablespoon, were more likely to know what a stroke was, and what a closed shop in a factory was, etc." By contrast, more frequent television viewing was strongly correlated with *misinformation*, not only about class processes, but again about a wide range of subjects, from WWII to world religions (Cunningham and Stanovich 1998: 5-6). The more TV you watch, the less you know.

Regarding the ready availability of dissenting critiques on the Internet, the difficulty is that those critiques, for the most part, are *written*. Substantial written critiques of political economy have always been available, in the pages of *The Nation* and *Mother Jones*, in the writings of Karl Marx or Michael Harrington or Howard Zinn, and in works like *Manufacturing Consent* and *Who Rules America*. These are mainstream publications, available in any public library. They have had limited impact in the past not because they were hard to find, but because they were written. Stalin thought you had to burn books to keep people from reading them. Turns out, as long as most citizens aren't fired up about reading, all you have to do is leave the books in the library.

3. Working class ideas and response instability

Let's sum up a bit. Many people in the MERJ area grow up in families that don't value – and don't know how or why to value – intellectual endeavors, especially the development of abstract thought based in reading and writing. They attend schools that, for the most part, reinforce this indifference to the intellect by ordering them to engage in insipid and meaningless busywork, which is liable to be their main experience with “book learning.” When they graduate, or drop out, the jobs available to them offer little if any scope for developing literacy or intellectual prowess. On top of all this, scattered throughout their homes are televisions, which are addicting, which are always on, which actively preclude intellectual development, and which are subject to strenuous but subtle censorship on, above all, one issue: the economic injustice that produced the social situation that I just summed up in this paragraph.

What does all this mean for how less privileged people think about the world? What does it mean for how people explain the social and natural processes that create and shape their lives? More specifically, what does it mean for the concept of ideological hegemony – the idea that elites secure their unjust status not through violence but through the manipulation of popular ideas? Does hegemony work by using mass media to convince people to embrace all sorts of facts and interpretations that persuade them to “willingly acquiesce” to their subordinate status? Does television propaganda manufacture consent? Or (here's a second, similar possibility) are elites able to create and distribute “discourses” – particular ways of thinking and talking – that render systematic inequality as “taken-for-granted,” “natural,” and thus sort of invisible or beyond critique?

Although they are not absolutely contradicted, these two theories of how hegemony works are not strongly born out. The dominant quality of working-class thought and discourse is not any particular ideological content or slant, but lack of systematic development, which results in variation across individuals, instability over time, fragmentation, contradiction, thinness, and so on.

Surveys of public opinion overwhelmingly back up this claim. This is ironic, because a standard effect of such surveys, as they are typically presented, is to make it seem as if people's ideas are more stable and well established than they are. Surveys iron out sharp differences in the quality of ideas and opinions: they put a casual answer in the same category as an answer into which a person has put a great deal of effort. For example, there was a recent survey in Kentucky about the effects of the federal stimulus package of 2009 (Cheves 2010). The formal results of the survey were that most Kentuckians did not believe that the stimulus plan worked. But this result – that Kentuckians have arrived at some sort of stable, thought-out conclusion about the effects of this particular legislation – is simply an artifact of a misused data collection technique. The survey creates an image of solidity and coherence on the part of public opinion that does not in fact exist.

If we read survey evidence more carefully, what we see is that public opinion is incredibly shallow and labile. This shows up in a number of different ways, which together are referred to as “response instability” (Zaller 1992). If the sequence of questions in a survey is changed, the results will differ. If the same survey is given with slightly different wording, the results will differ, sometimes dramatically. In one instance,

different versions of the same poll, asking about a freeze in nuclear weapons production, found that support “varied between 18 percent and 83 percent, depending on how the issue was framed” (ibid: 29).

If the same individuals are given the same survey twice, their answers shift dramatically. Of course, isn’t it possible that they become more informed and thoughtful about a given issue, and changed their opinion as result? It would be nice. Unfortunately, if they’re given the same survey a third time, Zaller writes, “one can typically predict their opinion on the third interview as well from the first interview as the second. If changes between the first and second interviews represented systematic opinion change, this would not be possible” (ibid: 30).

In one of my favorite examples, people were asked about their level of interest in politics, and only 22 percent indicated that they had a low level of interest. However, in a different version of the survey, respondents were first asked if they could remember “any legislative bill that has come up in the House of Representatives, on which you remember how your congressman has voted in the last couple of years.” Only “twelve percent could think of anything.” Confronted with their own ignorance, 45 percent responded, in this modified survey, that they had a low level of interest in politics – “which was one of the lowest reported levels of interest ever recorded in a general population survey in the United States” (ibid: 76).

Zaller concludes that perhaps the single most important finding of public opinion surveys – when designed and read carefully – is that “large portions of an electorate simply do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time” (Zaller 1992: 31; quoting Converse 1964: 245). Respondents to surveys are confronted with questions about issues to which they have given little if any systematic thought and upon which they have little if any factual background. They respond by “making it up as they go along” (Zaller 1992: 76). Zaller concludes that “the consequences of asking uninformed people to state opinions on topics to which they have given little if any previous thought are quite predictable: Their opinion statements give every indication of being rough and superficial” (ibid: 28). And, as we should expect, while response instability is widespread, characterizing the majority of people in the US, it is most pronounced for those who, for whatever reason, give the least attention to public affairs. Professional intellectuals, such as college professors or lawyers, show very little response instability.

John Zaller comes at this from a mainstream quantitative social science perspective; he is not a “critical scholar” as that term is commonly used. In his chapter on “The social cohesion of liberal democracy,” Michael Mann arrives at similar conclusions from an avowedly leftist perspective. He asks the question, is the relative political and social stability of liberal democracies produced through ideological consensus? This is the claim at the heart of many theories of hegemony, where an unjust status quo is secured not so much through violence or the threat of violence but through discourse. Based on an examination of existing survey evidence, he describes four trends, all of which are consistent with Zaller and with my ethnographic work in Kentucky:

1. value consensus does not exist to any significant extent; 2. there is a greater degree of consensus among the middle-class than among the working class; 3. the working class is more likely to support deviant [e.g. anti-status quo] values if those values relate either to concrete every day life or to vague populist concepts than if they relate to an abstract political philosophy; 4. working-class individuals also exhibit less internal consistency in their values than middle-class people. (Mann 1982: 388)

4. Opposed ideas in the MERJ area

As an expression of this relatively shallow and inchoate character, the “locals” show much more diversity in their social and political views than the “liberals,” who are almost universally left wing. Among the weakly literate, I have heard political and social opinions ranging across the entire ideological spectrum. On the invasion of Iraq, one man I spoke with argued that “We ought to pave the goddamn place,” and that the Arabs would regret attacking us because “You *don’t* mess with the Baptists.” By contrast, an elderly rural woman argued, “It’s just so wrong what we’re doing to all those people over there. It makes me feel sick in my heart.” Another man, unlettered, was appalled by the war in Iraq: “I’d rather eat corn bread and drink water before sendin them boys over there to die.” I’ve heard working-class folks argue that homosexuality is “of the devil,” and others argue that it’s just fine and it ain’t nobody’s business anyway. Most locals are strongly religious, but even within this category there is genuine variation. One fellow spoke up in a trailer full of his drunk, deeply religious friends, exclaiming, “There ain’t no God! That Bible’s just a bunch of fairy tales!”

This welter of conflicting opinions exists not only across the population, but characterizes the thought of most individuals. In the same conversation, I have heard a person claim that America is a free country and if you work hard, you’ll make it big – and that politicians are crooks who work for the rich, and they’ve got the whole game rigged against everyone else. One bohemian homesteader, who is lesbian, spoke ruefully about the contradictions in her Appalachian grandfather’s thought:

He’s socially conservative in lot of typical aspects – racially, sexual identity – however he has been against every Iraq war, he voted for George Bush but cannot stand him now...He gets tears in his eyes when he talks about all the innocent people dying in Iraq or Afghanistan or wherever because he has seen it firsthand, and he has a very emotional and angry, let say it’s heartbroken anger about “Why are we doing this to ourselves? Why are doing this to those people?” Even though I have heard him saying things like “We should take all homosexuals and put them on an island and nuke ‘em.”

At the same time that the thought of the locals as a group is a “chaotic aggregate,” many locals hold hard-right ideas such as racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Such ideas are not universal, but they are common. These conservative elements reflect, in part, past efforts by one elite group or another to persuade people to think a certain way:

hard-core American exceptionalism, for example, which is a belief that the US is a uniquely moral and advanced nation, has been heavily pushed on television and radio for many decades. The same goes for anti-communism, which reached its zenith during the Cold War, but still exists as a widespread misunderstanding and suspicion of “socialism,” actively fostered by the punditry and from the pulpit. Like anti-communism, racism has weakened but is still with us. Homophobia. The rejection of global warming. The idea the Barack Obama is a foreign-born Muslim. All of these themes, and many more like them, have been flogged relentlessly by elites from their various bully pulpits. And the less access you have to written scholarship, the less defense you have against such elite-generated framings.

It may appear contradictory to claim that the ideas of the weakly literate tend to be shallow and chaotic, and then claim that they also tend to have specific content. It’s not a contradiction because of the character of this content: popular right-wing stances exist as emotionally-resonant epigrams and slogans, not as well-developed positions tested by critique and supported by evidence. None of the examples in the preceding paragraph of right-wing ideas survive even the most cursory encounter with contemporary scholarship and science; they can survive *only* as part of a chaotic, jumbled, poorly-developed aggregate.

I am not comparing people without book education whose ideas are all wrong with college graduates whose ideas are all correct. Not even the most bookish can keep up with all fields of knowledge, or hunt down all the inconsistencies and unfinished elements in their thought. Rather, there are only degrees of epistemological vulnerability: to put it crudely, we all get suckered in our own way. The locals are vulnerable to a preacher who says that homosexuality is an abomination because the Bible says so; the liberals are not. The locals are vulnerable to Republican politicians claiming that the economy has been damaged because rich “job creators” pay too much in taxes; the liberals are not. But liberals in the MERJ area are vulnerable to other forms of misinterpretation. While they are, as a group, extremely well-schooled compared with the national average, they are not on the whole particularly well-educated about science and they are not able to really keep up with professional scholarship – after all, most of them are not paid scholars. Many of them are thus vulnerable to pseudo-scholarship that masquerades as serious natural or social science. A whole variety of New Age ideas are extremely common, from claims that indigenous peoples have supernatural powers and blood type diets, to crystal healing and UFOlogy. Most of the people I know who embrace these claims are not doing so as an active, considered rejection of the contemporary scientific cosmology, a measured choice between two different paradigms – they just are not familiar enough with that scientific cosmology to realize that many New Age ideas are, as much as any idea can be, demonstrably untrue or implausible.

A salient aspect of New Age beliefs, however, is that these beliefs are *written in books*. These are literate bodies of thought, and their authors add legitimacy to their work by casting their claims in the form of modern, professional scholarship, complete with long bibliographies, higher-education credentials, and cover-blurbs from other well-known New Age authors. Some of the most popular works in the New Age canon are masterpieces of pseudoscience and pseudo-anthropology, such as *The Secret Life of*

Plants, Eat Right 4 Your Type, Mutant Message Down Under, and the Carlos Castaneda books (respectively Tompkins 1973; D'Adamo 1996; Morgan 1994; Castaneda 1968). These are books that appear, even to someone who is familiar with books, as authoritative; unless you are an expert in the relevant field, it is really hard to identify them as, intended or not, rife with falsehood. The point here is that New Age belief, so common among the bohemian counterculture in the MERJ area (and the US more broadly), finds its occasion in a mass audience of people who look to books as sources of authoritative knowledge, who actively seek that knowledge, but who are not well-read enough to be able to defend themselves against accomplished pseudo-scholarship. Note also that some of the intellectual undergirding of New Ageism is similar to the anti-realism and strong cultural relativism popular among certain academic disciplines: a sense of the narrowness of western knowledge; a sense that other valid ways of knowing have been overrun by supposedly western ways; and a sense that there are trenchant social critiques to be made of science (Pike 2004). In other words, some strands of New Age belief are closely related to strands of theory among postmodern academics, who may be the most bookish lot of all.

In sum, the two groups sketched here, locals and liberals, are 1) a majority group which is substantially less-book-educated, which is characterized intellectually by individual diversity, instability, lack of systematic development, and lack of contact with written scholarship and science, but which also tends toward social and political conservatism; and 2) a minority group which is substantially more book-educated, which is characterized intellectually by a consistent embrace of liberal and radical leftist stances (although individually diverse within that ambit), and which tend to be at least somewhat informed by contact with written scholarship and science (although this can include written works that present themselves as serious scholarship but are not).

One obvious question here is, what about well-educated conservatives? Is there a large group of well-educated conservatives in the MERJ area? Or am I saying that the well-book-educated lean left? This is a complicated question that would take too much time to answer here, but the short answer is yes, the book-educated do seem to lean left. In the MERJ area, I have seen little evidence of substantial numbers of well-educated conservatives. On the national level, if you look at those who are affluent and college educated (like The Pew Research Center does, for example), you see right and left positions taken, particularly on questions of political economy – for example, on the question of what role the government should play in the economy. However, hard *social* conservatism, characteristic of rural Kentucky, is clustered among the less educated. In addition, if we look at a population that is perhaps the most “literately intellectual” as a group in the US, college professors, they overwhelmingly lean left; various studies suggest that less than ten percent consider themselves “conservative” (Jacoby 2004).

Perhaps most importantly, if we look at the *content* of contemporary scholarship, it overwhelmingly rejects most popular conservative positions. For example, among the relevant scholars, there is a consensus that the earth is four billion years old, not four thousand. Darwinian evolution is real and is the process through which humans came into being. There is no solid evidence that human races differ in character or intellectual capacity; rather, the expert consensus is that human race as a biological concept is

incoherent and does not map onto the real complexity of human genetic diversity. Women are not inferior to men or uniquely suited to domestic labor. The term *socialism* refers to a complex set of political economic arrangements, which are too diverse in character and in outcome to be judged with simple, sweeping statements. US foreign policy has a complicated history, but a detailed accounting does not support the claim that the US has been, on the whole, a force for freedom and democracy around the globe. And so on, and on, and on: on issue after issue, the consensus position among scholars does not support popular right-wing claims. I have little doubt that well-informed conservative positions exist on many issues; but *popular* right-wing ideas in the US are grossly at odds with established, evidence-based knowledge.

4.1. Opposing views on race and sexuality

The public collision of “locals” and “liberals,” based in part on holding incompatible answers to basic questions about life and the universe, is a recurrent theme in the MERJ area. It comprises a set of related conflicts that have ranged across a whole range of issues, from mountaintop removal coal mining to issues of war and peace. In this section I’ll examine opposing views on two topics, race and sexuality. This public conflict is a good place to see the divide that runs between the two groups of homesteaders, because their disagreements often remain somewhat understated – “muted,” in John Stephenson’s phrasing (1968). If rural neighbors harbor incompatible sentiments – or suspect each other of doing so – they will generally just avoid close contact. Thus, moments when such incompatibilities rise into actual conflict reveal a great deal about what everyone was thinking all along.

While overt conflict over race was much more prevalent in the past, race remains a dividing issue in the MERJ area today. The liberals unequivocally and vehemently reject racism. (This is not to say that there is no racism among, for example, the Berea College faculty. But it is, relatively speaking, uncommon.) Among the locals, however, there is a range of attitudes, including strong, widespread elements of racism. For example, one older rural man that I knew, who has since passed away, liked to boast that if he ever saw a “nigger” in his holler, he’d shoot him and drape his body over the fence as a warning to others. One country homesteader that I interviewed tried to present some empirical evidence for his racism:

You go to prison, what do you see? Ninety-percent niggers. They’re there for drug-related charges or whatever. It doesn’t hurt me, because I’m not going to be there, but it’s just the idea of...you go out here on the street, you check all your drug dealers – how many of ‘ems white?

The main street in Berea passes through the college, and thus the pedestrian crosswalks are one of the few points in which college students come into even limited contact with locals. Black college students frequently get harassed at these crosswalks by passing motorists: it’s an unfortunate theme of life at the college. Black faculty members are harassed as well. One black professor was approached by a local man in the parking lot of Wal-Mart, who asked her, “How much do you charge for cleaning houses?” This

was probably not even meant to be harassment. When noted black scholar and author bell hooks moved to Berea a few years ago, she formed close friendships with a number of the bohemian homesteaders. At the same time, she said that she couldn't live out in the country, because she would not feel safe. hooks, who is originally from small-town Kentucky, knows, alas, whereof she speaks. Elijah Amaro, one of the homesteaders who worked at a local factory, and who is black, said that most of his coworkers would not interact with him at all. "People didn't even look at me, wouldn't even acknowledge me, you know."

For several decades the kids at Madison Southern, a local high school, have held a "Rebel Run," where they decorate their trucks with Confederate flags before a football game with a local rival, and drive through town honking and hollering. Defenders of the Rebel Run say that it's an expression of "heritage, not hate." But when critics try to point to the offensive qualities of such a display, they are met with statements such as this:

My children will eventually attend Madison Southern High School and I will be there helping them put the flags on their vehicles. This a tradition get over it! We have to celebrate black history month every year. Where is white history month? Talk about race issues! It offends me that we don't have a white history month... We have BET [Black Entertainment Television]. Why cant we have WET? Because black people would have a fit, that's why! (Topix.com 2012)

As I wrote in chapter two, there are country folks who are genuinely not racist, but for them racism still forms a kind of cultural background, against which they experience their own tolerance as a kind of exception or dissent.

Racism is one of several important points of ideological friction between liberals and locals. Many bohemian homesteaders mention racism specifically as a reason that they distance themselves from their country neighbors, such as this homesteader in his mid-forties, Ethan Morse, who established an on-again, off-again friendship with a relatively cosmopolitan local:

An awful lot of the folks on this road and in this neighborhood are incredibly racist. Not something that appeals to me. Not something I care to be around. Even, you know, Matt, will not consider himself racist, but he will tell a nigger joke quick as anything. And laugh – and he knows that I don't care for that kind of thing and for the most part doesn't really bother telling me them anymore.

Most recently, the town-versus-gown strife has turned upon opposing ideas about sexuality. In 2004, by a margin of three to one, Kentucky voters passed an amendment to the state constitution outlawing gay marriage, which read: "Only a marriage between one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in Kentucky. A legal status identical or substantially similar to that of marriage for unmarried individuals shall not be valid or recognized." Support for the amendment was especially strong in rural

Kentucky; in Jackson County, fully 90 percent of voters favored the amendment (CNN 2004).

In addition, Kentucky lacks any statutory protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation. In response, in 2011, activists introduced a Fairness Ordinance before the Berea City Council, which would outlaw discrimination against homosexual and transgender individuals in jobs, housing, and so on. Even though the proposed statute only outlaws discrimination – it doesn't actively support or condone homosexuality – many of the locals vigorously opposed it. Caught in the middle, the city council called a series of public hearings, at which hundreds of people turned out to speak both for and against the proposed law.

The fault line between locals and liberals could not have been drawn more starkly. At the first such hearing, only a couple of those who spoke against the ordinance had a college degree. Of those who spoke in favor, about the only one without a college degree was a teenager still in high school; the majority held advanced degrees. These different levels of book learning were clearly reflected in the testimony. Those who spoke against the ordinance persistently misunderstood or misrepresented the meaning of the ordinance, for example claiming that the ordinance would put local companies out of business. Anti-ordinance speakers likewise misinterpreted the meaning of existing Kentucky discrimination statutes, with a couple of them claiming that existing laws already covered sexual orientation (they cover gender, but not sexual orientation). But the most striking element of the arguments against the ordinance was their grounding in the Bible – or, rather, a particular reading of the Bible. One speaker, a local pastor named Dale Holman, argued:

Any time you vote for a politician, or make a vote for anything, you must ask yourself, "What does God have to say?" Many people that have spoken tonight have talked about business. Well I came on business for the King. [Amens from the audience.]...Sweet and bitter water does not flow from the same fountain. And I just came to say to you tonight that God calls homosexual activity, in his Word, an abomination. God will not [pauses to wait for applause to die down] – God will not take to heaven what he has called in his Word, abomination. ["That's right!"] Get that in your spirit tonight, if you don't get anything else that I say. He has called it in his Word unholy, unclean, unnatural, and he will not take to heaven what he has called those things. God Bless you, I love you every one. [Loud applause.]

Another minister who spoke, Clyde Miller, was equally blunt:

I don't hate no one. I'm a Baptist minister here too. God tells me not to hate them, but God tells me to hate the sin. Because I'm trying to pull you out of a car that's on fire, burning. I do it because I love you, not because I hate you. But that is the truth of the matter. But you will never legislate all the problems that we have. God can fix the problems that we have.

In one particular way, these pastors are not representative of the less-educated population: they have substantial practice at public speaking, and as pastors develop a facility with a particular set of written materials. In most other regards, however, they represent genuine spokesmen for local opinion. They are generally from the area, are socially and culturally members of the “locals,” and have similar levels of formal education – usually a high school diploma at most – as their congregations.

By contrast, those who spoke in favor of the ordinance grounded their comments in a wide range of arguments and evidence: they cited, for example, the egalitarian history of Berea College, the necessity of anti-discrimination laws during the civil rights movement, and the evolutionary biology of homosexuality and eusocial behavior. Many who spoke in favor tried to illustrate the illogical and hypocritical character of the opposition’s arguments. Jim Scheff, who is a bohemian homesteader and a graduate student working on his second MA, in biology, took this approach, taking on each anti-ordinance talking point in turn. Here’s how he responded to some of the Biblical arguments:

I didn’t want to get into the abomination thing, but since it’s there, and a lot of people here obviously feel that way, Leviticus says that shellfish – well, the Lord said in Leviticus, that shellfish is an abomination. So I look forward – because I know nobody here is a hypocrite, driven by fear – I know you’ll all be down, protesting Long John Silver’s [a seafood restaurant] and making sure Berea passes an ordinance to get that abomination out of our town. Because I know you’re not cherry picking the Bible to fit your own personal views...I’m sorry if I sound kind of angry, but that’s the reality. A lot of the opposition here tends to be based on fear, and a misguided sense of the biology of things.

Another bohemian homesteader who spoke, Mark Thiessen, grew up in a conservative, fundamentalist family, but had his views changed during college. “I used to believe homosexuality was an abomination,” he said at the microphone, but then “I got educated at Berea College...The bottom line is, to be a Christian, it’s very simple. There’s one rule. Love your neighbor. And it’s funny how people can’t do it.”

The debate here is fundamentally about whether homosexuality is a perversion, a sickness, and a sin, or whether it’s a healthy, normal expression of human sexuality. As with the conflict over race, contemporary empirical scholarship is unequivocally on one side of this debate: homosexuality is healthy, it’s normal, it’s a human universal, and it’s found throughout the animal kingdom in just about every species that has been closely observed. I don’t even need citations here: these findings have been widely reported – or, I should say, they’ve been widely reported *in print*. They are, among the well educated, common knowledge. But for the majority in the MERJ area, these discoveries are not discoveries; they’re merely suspicious rumors spread by people they don’t know.

Unfortunately, this debate isn’t just abstract. The idea that homosexuality is an abomination drives real discrimination. Homosexual couples in the MERJ area are

insulted, refused services, fired. A local mechanic who serves many of the bohemian homesteaders refused to work on one couple's vehicles when he learned that they were gay. A country homesteader, who is generally a gentle and considerate person, won't talk to or even look at her gay nephew, who, like so many rural and small-town homosexuals in eastern Kentucky, moved away to Lexington.

The same cultural fault line shows up over and over. It shapes electoral politics. Southern Appalachia and the rural Bible belt were the only regions that voted more heavily against Barack Obama in 2008 than against John Kerry in 2004 – because people were bothered by Obama's race, because they believed he was Muslim, and because they believed he was foreign. When the US was preparing to invade Iraq in 2003, hundreds of MERJ-area locals – almost all of them well-educated – protested at the Bluegrass Army Depot, concerned with the long history of US imperialism and the weak, shifting justifications offered by the Bush administration. Among the locals, opinion was mixed, but there were strong strains of militant nationalism, based on a passionate but unstudied belief in the essential righteousness of the US, and a lack of significant knowledge of US foreign policy in the third world. A common reaction on the part of those driving by was to scream insults or flip off the protestors.

And, perhaps most importantly of all – because it represents a particularly central set of interpretations – this cultural fault line shows up in religion.

4.2. Religion and cosmology

Religious ideas are, almost by definition, attempts to build a somewhat coherent worldview – involving, centrally, a model of the cosmos – that provides answers to the deepest questions of human existence and suffering. Religious worldviews, according to Benedict Anderson, are our “imaginative response to the overwhelming burden of human suffering – disease, mutilation, grief, age, death. Why was I born blind? Why is my best friend paralyzed? Why is my daughter retarded?” (Anderson 1983: 10). Religious ideas also stand out in the MERJ area, because many people who are not otherwise motivated to build abstract theory will work to master religious claims. It is not uncommon for working-class individuals who have no general penchant for serious reading or systematic abstract theorizing to study the Bible carefully, argue with friends and family over textual interpretations, and in general exert themselves in a sustained way to try to develop a detailed Christian cosmology. At the low-status jobs I've worked I never once saw a worker open a book during breaks – with the exception of the men at Tomiko who read the Bible every day at lunch. This individual effort is mirrored by those of the churches themselves, which do not hide their intention: they are explicitly, passionately trying to persuade congregants to embrace detailed, specific, emotionally-potent ideas about the structure of the universe and everything within it. Devout, studious Christians who are otherwise weakly intellectual often possess a thick, detailed, and relatively stable abstract Christian cosmology that contrasts sharply with their theories on other matters.

A crucial aspect of traditional religious worldviews is that, to a large extent, they were, and are, opposed to the understanding of the world that has arisen through scientific inquiry. Religious ideas have traditionally been based in explicit, sweeping cosmological claims, many of which have been conclusively rejected by science – like the existence,

for example, in any literal sense, of a Garden of Eden or the divine creation, *de novo*, of an original pair of human beings. Other traditional religious claims, while not definitively overturned, have become less and less plausible in the light of scientific findings. For example, the idea that humans were created in the image of God – again, in any literal sense – becomes less convincing the more we learn about the size of the universe and the likelihood that life has arisen innumerable times on other planets.

Before the rise of modern science, embracing a religious cosmology and religious interpretations of events large and small did not put an individual into tension with existing scholarship. Today, however, there is a basic conflict between science and traditional religious claims; in the present case, this means between science and many of the various claims made in Christian scripture. This conflict shows up clearly in the General Social Survey (GSS), which is a vast, long-term survey of basic attributes of the US population. The GSS demonstrates a strong correlation between *basic* scientific literacy and religious fundamentalism. One of the most striking examples of this shows up in the responses to a question about lasers. Among respondents who believe that the Bible is the “word of God,” forty-five percent thought “lasers work by focusing sound waves.” In other words, they answered this true-false question more or less randomly. Among those who believe that the Bible is “inspired word,” twenty-five percent incorrectly answered the question about lasers, and among those who think the Bible is a “book of fables,” less than fifteen percent answered incorrectly (Smith et al. 2011).

The above question is an important measure of the relationship between general scientific literacy and religious belief because there is no *overt* conflict between lasers and the Bible. I say “no *overt* conflict” because the scientific understanding of lasers draws on concepts, such as quantum mechanics, which are organically linked to other scientific claims, such as the antiquity of the Earth and the universe, which are in direct conflict with fundamentalist readings of the Bible. However, fundamentalist pastors and church members in the MERJ area, as throughout the US, are generally not scientifically literate enough to be aware of the myriad ways in which the entire, consilient edifice of modern science opposes a literal Biblical cosmology (Noll 1995). Rather, they have selected two or three relatively narrow issues as rallying points around which to vilify science: primarily, evolutionary biology, the antiquity of the universe, and more recently, global warming. If we look at one of the scientific theories on which fundamentalist churches do take a stance, the active conflict between science and religion shows up starkly. When the question is “true or false, humans evolved from other animals,” out of those who hold that the Bible is the word of God, less than twenty percent choose “true.” But out of those who see the Bible as a book of fables, *ninety percent* choose true. We can see the conflict between science and religion as well in the resounding rejection of religion by professional scientists. While overt atheists make up less than five percent of the population in the US, among members of the National Academy of Sciences, 72 percent are atheists, and another twenty percent are skeptical; only seven percent “believe in a personal God” (Larson and Witham 1998).

Although there is a clear conflict between certain religious claims and certain scientific claims, most people in the US, as we just saw, are not atheists. In the MERJ area, the vast majority, bookish or not, are not only religious, but Christian. How, then,

can religion exemplify the way in which there are opposing worldviews in the MERJ area, driven by differential literacy?

The answer is that there are radically different *kinds* of Christianity. There are strains of Christianity that are compatible with post-Enlightenment scholarship and science, and strains which are not – and the differences between the two are striking.

At churches in the MERJ area that do not have well-educated congregations, which are the overwhelming majority, explicit cosmological claims from the pulpit are central. There is a hell and a heaven. These are real places. There is an afterlife, and some individuals will spend eternity, literally, in paradise, while others will be tortured forever because they didn't believe in God or couldn't repent their sodomy or in some other way didn't follow the rules. God and his angels are here all around us, Satan whispers in our ears, and none of this is intended metaphorically. These are descriptions of reality, and if reading too many books leads you to claim otherwise, may the Lord have mercy upon your soul.

Both the literal quality of this kind of religion and the passion that it generates were apparent in interviews with country homesteaders, most of whom were fundamentalist Christians. Naomi Hayward, who was born and raised in Jackson County, spoke about the importance of the Bible:

I've lived in Florida, I've lived in Grant County, Garret County, Madison County. Every home I've ever lived in – I was married when I was fifteen years old – my Bible went to my home. Friend of mine that I grew up with, grew up just like sisters, just before she married a couple of years ago, I was at her house. Her mother asked her, says "Where's your Bible at?" She said, "I don't have one." This girl was raised in the church, but when she got away from the church, away from her family, she got away from it all. Has no Bible in her home. No pictures of Christ. And she acts like He's just another person.

Naomi was proud of her son, Thomas, for his commitment to faith:

He'll be sixteen next month. Some kid at school had took a Holy Bible and just tore it up. Ah, that made him so mad, he like to died, and a bunch of his friends, they went to that boy. And they got on him over it, and they said, "You're nothin." You know, tear up God's word, you know, the Book, that's...nothin. And they's a lot of kids after him at school over that. And Thomas, when he sees somebody that's a non-believer, he'll kind of get away from 'em. Like I told him, I said "Thomas," I said, "I'll tell you like my grandma told me. Don't hate 'em, hate their ways but pray for 'em." I said, "Maybe they'll change."

Among country homesteaders, belief in miracles and the healing power of the Lord is widespread. A local woman, Mary Arnett, spoke about being healed:

We believe in the Holy Ghost, and prayin to get through to the Lord, who saved me on my deathbed almost 56 years ago. I took sick and thought I was gonna die, my mother and my husband knelt down by my bed to pray and the power of the Lord lifted my head in the air and the Lord spoke to me in tongues and when he did there was a peace come and He healed my body.

When I would ask bohemian homesteaders what they thought the difference was between the “hicks and the hippies,” they almost always pointed to education. When I asked James Hamilton that question, he thought the main difference was religion:

James: Yeah, smokin pot or partying, you know, or the way they dress, and everything. Just, Mom and them’s – that would have been again’ [against] their, what they believe religiously, you know.

Jason: That might be the most important aspect?

James: Yeah, that’d probably be the biggest difference there.

By contrast, let’s look at one of the most well-educated congregations in the MERJ area, Union Church, one of the churches that both bohemian homesteaders and Berea College faculty members are most likely to attend. In terms of occupation, the congregation is fairly diverse, but leans toward professionals; just about the only members of the church without higher education are the kids. Nonetheless, this is still a Christian church, which preaches the divinity of Jesus and the power of the Holy Ghost. But explicit cosmological claims from the pulpit are rare; the focus is on Christian morals, and specifically on moral action in an unjust world. Which is to say, social activism. And since the congregation is relatively well informed about world events, this means leftist social activism. Union Church has played a key role in protests and actions against the military incineration of nerve gas, the invasion of Iraq, the role of Wall Street in the financial crisis, and many other issues.

The theology of the pastor, Kent Gilbert, looks nothing like that of local fundamentalist preachers, like Dale Holman, Clyde Miller, or Mark Sarver at one of the area megachurches, Church on the Rock. Gilbert, with a bachelor’s from Whittier College, and advanced degrees from the University of Chicago and the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, has – no surprise – developed a scholarly, bookish theology; Sarver, like many of this brethren pastors and preachers in the MERJ area, has a high school degree from Berea Community School, and has developed an impassioned, fundamentalist theology. There is almost no conflict between Gilbert’s theological views and secular scholarship, because he embraces a theology that has actively tried to harmonize itself with the evidence of science and history. Consider, for example, Gilbert’s stance on the question of theodicy, which is the problem of reconciling (ostensible) divine goodness with the existence of evil, or, to phrase it in more modern terms, with the existence of unjust suffering. Drawing on a body of scholarship known as process theology, he recognizes that there are (at least) two incompatible scenarios: either there is an omnipotent deity who is not loving, or there is a loving deity, who is not

omnipotent and thus cannot prevent all injustice. He concurs with process theologians in concluding that perhaps God is not omnipotent – a view that would be blasphemous to most preachers in the area. In this version of Christianity, the usual cosmological mainstays are missing or muted. There is not any afterlife per se, as it is usually portrayed. There is no hell, no heaven, no second coming, no bearded God, and no winged angels.

Interviews with bohemian homesteaders show a marked diversity of religious belief, including higher rates of atheism and agnosticism than the national norm, and a complete, unanimous rejection of Christian fundamentalism. Many of the atheists grew up in strongly religious homes, and went through a conscious process of rejecting the doctrines on offer, often as an effect of deliberation and reading. Isabel Faust, a homesteader in her mid-twenties, was raised in the country by evangelical parents:

Isabel: It's kind of funny, I never consciously adopted any of the [religious ideas] that I was taught from ever since I can remember, anything. But there are times, like I think at one point I was in a community and there was a female pastor and I just had this instantaneous like "that's not right." So there's stuff like that that continues to come up that I absorbed but don't really believe. But no I never like adopted it as my own.

Jason: But this was despite – I mean, your parents probably preferred for you to adopt these ideas?

Isabel: Yeah, I got really good at pretending that I had.

Jason: Do you have any idea how that happened that there was such a break between your parents' values and worldview and yours?

Isabel: Oh I think it's complete reaction on the one hand, and it just doesn't make sense to me. I actually read all these books – cause at one time being told that this is the only way to be, I felt really guilty for not even being able to go there. So I read all these books and basically people who are more emotionally detached or don't form attachments as well – and I definitely don't – tend not to be religious people. Because it's just something that you don't feel you need, it doesn't make sense, it's not logical, and you really just can't go there.

As noted above, book-based, pseudoscientific New Age beliefs are also common among bohemian homesteaders, which we'll return to in chapter seven. Equally common – and often overlapping in rough syncretism with New Age ideas and Anglicized versions of other religious traditions – is a non-doctrinaire Christianity, in which Biblical claims are read in a moral or allegorical, rather than strictly cosmological, vein. "There was room," said one bohemian homesteader about her family's religious beliefs, "to share Christian ideology as well as a scientific view of the world. And no feeling like that was a contradiction."

Here's a passage from a homesteader in his mid-forties, Cody Shuler, who grew up in the rural outskirts of Lexington, with well-educated parents. It's worth quoting at length because Cody's religious beliefs – a loose syncretism between a wide range of

different traditions – is typical of the bohemian homesteaders. Likewise, the path by which he arrived at his beliefs, while not necessarily typical in all its details, contains common themes: the experience of diversity at college or while traveling, the prominence of reflection driven by reading, and the sense of having to cobble something together because nothing could just be accepted wholesale.

Growing up I had been kept amazingly religion-free; given the culture I grew up in, it still amazes me how effectively my parents were able to shelter me from any religious influence. Which made going into college interesting. For instance, I remember the first school year or two people started talking about going home for Easter, like it was a big deal, it was like Thanksgiving or something. I'd never thought of Easter as anything other than, you know, huntin chocolate eggs in the Unitarian church yard – you know, literally, that's what Easter represented to me. I mean I knew it had something to do with Jesus and the biblical thing you know, but because I wasn't into that it wasn't relevant. But families getting together to celebrate it somehow, that was a completely foreign concept to me. And Judaism, when I got to college, I hadn't a clue. I never thought of Jews, or Jewish people as some other group, you know, that like lived in our culture but were separate, I mean I don't know if I even knew any people growing up that were Jewish, or was around them – but in college and all of a sudden everybody was talkin like they were some other group, you know. I didn't have a clue. So I started, you know, realizing there were aspects of every faith we studied that had in one way or another been incorporated into my personal world view, which was really very much formulated just by me in the natural course of my lifetime. And I saw things in each of them that were exactly how I felt about things. But the ones that most closely paralleled – the individual religions or whatever – that most closely paralleled the world view that I had kind of created for myself in a way, were Buddhism and Native American, which fell into the primitive religions category in there, in the class. I found a lot of familiar things in those two. Those two I could relate to very strongly, both of them. Yeah.

I don't know of a single instance of a bohemian homesteader who is a fundamentalist Christian or attends a fundamentalist church. When fundamentalist Christianity came up in interviews, it took the form of stories about uncomfortable interactions, such as this one from Elijah Amaro:

I was pretty much an atheist growing up – I started reading and got into Eastern religions later. So yeah, there's definitely a conflict between local Christians and stuff like that cause I just don't think that way you know, I don't believe – I believe in Jesus of course, but I don't believe a lot of the way Christianity is being portrayed you know, 'n I just don't hang with it

at all, so yeah, I find myself in conflict a lot. When I was working at the factory, I got into this big argument with this Pentecostal lady, I mean she just kept on tellin me I was goin to hell, ‘n I was jus like *man*, ‘n we jus kept goin on and on and on. That don’t make no sense whatsoever.

Although most people in the MERJ area, as throughout the US, are Christians, there are contrasting versions of Christianity in the area that conflict so much that they are, frankly, offensive to each other. This is not a trivial or easily-healed schism, and it is primarily a schism generated by the possession of different degrees of literate knowledge, rather than differences in income or occupation. There is nothing that will make the fundamentalist Christian worldview palatable or convincing to local college-educated bohemian homesteaders and liberal intellectuals. And short of several years of serious reading and sustained questioning, there is nothing most fundamentalist Christians could do to understand why their worldview seems so daft and out-of-touch to their bookish neighbors. As the Union Church pastor, Kent Gilbert is sometimes invited to visit other congregations in the area, and thus is one of the few people in the area who actually crosses these religious boundaries. He describes it as “seeing a whole other Berea than the one that I and the people I know live in.”

5. Bohemians and old-timers

It would be easy to assume that the differences in ideas and worldviews that I have been describing are driven by high exposure to modern institutions on the part of liberals, and relative lack of exposure on the part of locals. This would fit a stereotypical dismissal of “rednecks” as backwards and out-of-date. If this was the case, the homesteaders who would be most distant from each other would be the most book-educated bohemians – for example, the college professors – and the least book-educated country folks, especially the “old-timers,” who grew up in a time when leaving school after the seventh or eighth grade was normal. But this is not the case; the bohemians have generally had stronger relationships with older country homesteaders than with country folks of their own age or younger. The division created by capitalist ethnogenesis is not driven by a relative engagement with contemporary institutions, on the one hand, and a relative lack of engagement, on the other. It is driven by a high degree of engagement with contemporary institutions – schools, workplaces, churches, mass media – which differ radically in their character and quality.

The initial bohemian back-to-the-landers, in the 1970s, were choosing to move into, or remain in, the mountains at a time when many young people who had grown up in the mountains were looking for ways to avoid living like their parents and grandparents had. As one interviewee put it, “the perception on the side of the locals was, here our own children are wanting to leave the mountains and these other people’s children are coming to the mountain, and think we have this great – so there was like that appreciation. And they liked it that we were interested in the skills that they had. And their history and the way they lived.”

This is a strong theme among the first generation of back-to-the-landers, like for Craig Williams, who learned how to work mules from an elderly country neighbor,

Mitchell Abrams. Emma Burress was another participant in the first wave of the back-to-the-land movement. She was born in Berea and spent her early childhood in the area, but then attended high school in southern California. In 1969, she dropped out of her freshman year at UC Berkeley, threw her stuff in a VW, and drove east with her husband.

Emma: I had a little VW bug, and just drove around [Jackson County] looking for a place for us to live. And I found this old farmhouse, *beautiful* old farmhouse on a *beautiful* farm, over on the state road. And I just went next door, knocked on the door, and said this house is empty and I'm looking for a place to live and it ended up being the landlord, the man who owned it. He was eighty years old, Green Bowman, and he was a farmer from here, and we got to talking, and you know I was just so fascinated – he had an eighty-year history of living here, that just, I mean, my mouth hung open. Well he loved it, you know, that I thought his life was wonderful, and he had this beautiful old-time farm wife, just you know, a very sweet, very soft-spoken, beautiful, totally not-neurotic-in-any-way-whatsoever person. So I fell in love with her too. So they rented it to me, they hadn't even met my husband you know, and I was this crazy hippie thing. They were curious about me too. They would ask all about my life. Jason: Cause you just came off like a city girl, right?

Emma: Yeah, like, they'd heard about that city life and they'd seen stuff on TV, but here's a real live one, you know. [Laughs.] Let's see what she has to say.

The way that the interactions between bohemian homesteaders and their country neighbors differed according to generation was noticed by back-to-the-landers:

Joseph Rivard: We were aware [in the early 1970s] that there was this older local generation that had certain attitudes about how to live that really jibed with our thinking, and their children weren't that way. They were all wanting to have whatever, the fast car, the running water, the washin machine in the house and all this stuff, and we could see that there was this generational, there was this belief system or whatever you wanna call it, this cultural whole thing that was passing away. And we were kinda wanting to hang onto that, so we got along great with older folks. And the younger folks you know, they just seemed to us like they were like throw the beer can out the window, smart-alecky, and had more redneckyness about 'em. The older folks, they didn't know enough about sort of political stuff to be really rednecks.

Jason: Say a little more what you mean by that.

Joseph: Well let's see. They would just like take you at face value, and they didn't have some belief system about us-versus-them kinda stuff, that some of the younger generation might have.

Jason: So they wouldn't think, like some of the younger generation, ok, I'm a conservative, I'm a Republican, and then these hippies I know about them, they're left wing?

Joseph: Right. Or – you know, it's like all that stuff in country music. You know, “when you're running down a country man you're walking on the fightin side of me,” and all that stuff. The younger generation had absorbed a lot more of that than the older generation. And the young generation is in some ways goin to hell in a hand basket, in ways that their elders never did – just like the whole you know, divorce 'n cheatin and all the rest of the stuff you hear in country music [laughs].

These stories help drive home an important point about the cultural division between the two groups of homesteaders. Rural people in the MERJ area who had grown up before the 1950s had done so with limited exposure to the make-believe schooling described in chapter four, or to pop culture, or to explicitly anti-liberal and anti-science religion, or even to the kind of low-quality jobs described in chapter five. Wage labor, at that time, was still largely episodic and mixed with other kinds of economic activity. If you have had only limited exposure to these kinds of institutions, you may be relatively unlettered, but you are not so likely to have developed an oppositional identity toward bookish knowledge, to have become self-consciously anti-intellectual.

With many older rural Appalachians, like William and Ethel Hamilton, there is a pronounced love of learning. These are not bookish people but they enjoy and value learning and smarts and figuring things out, because – I would argue – they did not spend their formative childhood and early adult years being alienated from books and the life of the mind in make-believe schools and low-quality jobs. But many of their children and grandchildren, growing up as a vulnerable rural proletariat, have lost contact with these older pedagogical traditions, while at the same time having little access to post-Enlightenment bookish ones. They are pedagogically destitute, in a way that seems to me likely to be historically unprecedented. By contrast, some members of this younger generation do make contact with post-Enlightenment written knowledge – and thereby are pushed across the cultural divide, becoming members of the local liberal intelligentsia. As Patrick Finn joked, “my mother did not want me to go to college because she was afraid I would become an atheist and a communist, and so I went to college and became an atheist and a communist so as not to disappoint her” (Finn 2009: 72).

Pat Cleary, the homesteader with conservative Appalachian parents and siblings, who described herself as “off the charts liberal,” felt this historical turning of culture keenly in her own family history:

Pat: The whole counterculture movement is very similar to those people [rural Appalachians several generations ago], I mean those people weren't religious people, the people who are all now, all religious in my family, their ancestors weren't religious.

Jason: So they weren't Bible thumpers?

Pat: No. The people that came before my grandparents weren't religious at all, they were mountain people, they ran moonshine. [Laughs.] You know. So they were a liberal people, and they were very counter to the government, and they wanted their own land and they wanted to – they didn't need anything from anybody. And they were really happy people, they could go months, all they needed was cornmeal, and coffee. I did not know him, but my great, great, great grandfather, *him* [points at a picture on the wall], he knew all the herbs and stuff, took care of his whole family with herbs and all his animals with herbs. And so they were very counterculture, they were connected. And then everybody took off north [to the factories for jobs], and I think that's what happened. I think if everybody hadn't of taken off north I wouldn't be so uncommon. I would be just one of everybody else.

6. Opposing practices

Another important aspect of the above processes is that these differences in access to particular epistemological resources, and the different knowledges, critiques, and worldviews that result, come to be instantiated in culture not merely in terms of people's thoughts, but in terms of the physical practices and preferences that they become accustomed to. As a result, people are not only estranged from each other in terms of what they think, but also in terms of what they *do*. This takes place across a range of behaviors, but one of the most striking – and important – is diet, which I will focus on in this section.

These contrasting practices play an important role in driving social distance, in part because once we become intimately accustomed to certain behaviors, it can be very difficult to change them. We encountered this briefly at the end of chapter three, with Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu 1984). We all become intimately accustomed, for example, to eating certain foods, and are often uncomfortable eating other foods.

Diet mirrors the other differences that I have discussed in this chapter, such as religious belief and attitudes toward sexuality: first, because diet is sharply bifurcated between the two groups of homesteaders (as well as between the "locals" and the "liberals" more broadly). The food choices of the two groups overlap, to be sure, and there is substantial individual and family-level variation. Nonetheless, there are major group-level differences. Second, these differences are driven directly by degree of awareness of written critiques of our contemporary industrial food system, not by differences in income or occupation (although, as we have seen, such class differences are the underlying ground upon which the distribution of literate intellectuality plays out). To put it bluntly, weakly literate MERJ-area residents eat low-quality foods because they don't know better; book educated locals eat higher-quality foods because they – or someone in their immediate family – has read critiques of the food industry. This difference is just one more thing that makes it hard to be intimate across this cultural border. And the results of this difference are harsh: the so-called obesity epidemic, with all of its attendant health and lifespan impacts, falls heavily upon the locals, and largely passes over the liberals.

In the local Wal-Mart supercenter, where almost everyone shops, the contents of the shopping carts are strikingly different. Most carts have a smattering of whole foods like fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, but very few shopping carts show an intentional focus on nutrition and an active avoidance of junk foods. If I see a cart at the Wal-Mart in Berea with little or no junk food, chances are I know the shopper, because she is probably a member of the relatively small community of highly-educated people based around the college and in the back-to-the-land movement. By contrast with this minority, well over half of the carts are filled with highly-processed foods: cases of Mountain Dew, Red Baron Deep Dish Mini Pepperoni Pizzas, Stouffer's Mac and Cheese, State Fair Mini Corn Dogs, Wild Grape Pop Tarts, Wonder Bread, Little Debbie Banana Pudding Rolls, and half-gallon tubs of Cool Whip. The shoppers with those carts – well over half of the local population – carry the effects of those foods visibly on their bodies, as serious obesity. While statistics specific to the MERJ area are not available, Jill Day did doctoral research in nearby Clay County, which borders Jackson County to the south and is very similar demographically. The national obesity rate for adults is 24 percent; in Clay County, Day found, the rate was 52 percent (Haygood 2010).

Are people in the US, across class lines, aware that junk food is bad for you? Sure. But for many people this “knowledge” doesn't go far beyond that – “junk food is bad for you” – while for others the same knowledge is instantiated as a detailed awareness of different ingredients and what they mean for your health. In courses that cover the food industry, I have taken poor Appalachian college students on field trips to Wal-Mart, as a way for them to find out how well they are able to navigate the bewildering array of food choices in a contemporary American supermarket. As a rule, they fundamentally lack the knowledge that would allow them to choose healthy foods. They do not know what a whole grain is nor why whole grains are desirable; nor could they parse the ingredient list to locate the handful of genuine whole wheat breads on the shelf. They do not know the difference on an ingredient label between something like “100% wheat flour” and “whole wheat flour.” They are not aware that ingredients are listed in order of predominance. They do not know the differences between different kinds of fats. For example, they are not aware of the added saturated fats in mainstream peanut butters, or that there is any nutritional difference between a peanut butter without added saturated fat and one with; they are only aware that the “natural” peanut butters, with the oil floating on top, are “kinda nasty.” They know that something like candy or potato chips are junk food, but they do not recognize that processed meals, like TV dinners, are also junk food. They don't recognize sweet breakfast cereals as junk food. They do not know that filtered fruit juices and soda pops are not that different. And so on and on. When, at the end of the field trip, we go through a shopping cart of different food products together and I point all of these distinctions out, it comes as a revelation.

Am I saying that you can only learn this stuff by reading? It is impossible to learn, by talking with other people or listening to oral mass media, that partially hydrogenated oils are bad for you? Of course not. But reading is one of the few ways to encounter really well-developed critiques of something like the food industry. Traditional cultures and oral knowledge cannot provide the same kind of detailed guidance in a modern supermarket that is available in books. In the MERJ area, rural oral traditions may

support sweeping injunctions against bought foods, and they may provide some basis for distinguishing between whole and processed, artificial foods. But when there is little alternative but to enter the supermarket, verbal knowledge cannot on its own provide people with an informed critique of the overwhelming array of concoctions that confronts them. Many rural Appalachians are uneasy with industrial foods, like this working-class homesteader – but, as we can see here, the critique is rough and unnuanced:

These people in these big cities, over half of ‘em has some kind of cancer. You raise your own garden, you can your own stuff – how many old people had cancer, back before 1960? I’ll put it that way. The country people. There was no such thing as cancer. They raised their own food. You eat out of a can, you’re gonna have cancer of some sort, down the road. It’s a guarantee. You think I’m joking but I’m not.

I can hear some readers begging to differ with the claim that even lower-income people can exercise substantial control over their diet. Probably the main argument against this claim is that high quality foods, like fresh produce, are more expensive, and that low-income families eat what they do because it’s cheap and quick. The assumption here is that poor families would prefer to eat healthy food, and know which foods are healthy; they just can’t afford it. These observations are not wrong, but it would be wrong to read them as leaving low-income people with no room for choice. Gourmet health food aside, there are cheap healthy alternatives to processed foods, on the same shelves, right there in the Wal-Marts and Save-a-Lots where lower-income people shop for groceries in eastern Kentucky. In Mark Bittman’s words,

The alternative to soda is water, and the alternative to junk food is not grass-fed beef and greens from a trendy farmers’ market, but *anything other than junk food*: rice, grains, pasta, beans, fresh vegetables, canned vegetables, frozen vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, bread, peanut butter, a thousand other things cooked at home – in almost every case a far superior alternative [emphasis mine].

It is possible to eat wholesome food for the same money and time that one can eat white flour, corn syrup, cottonseed oil, and MSG – without ever stepping into Whole Foods. But you might have to step into the local library.

Differences in diet are a good place to see the operation of literacy and knowledge, because in order to change many aspects of their lives, working-class and poor people would have to mount serious, sustained social movements against the concerted, even violent, opposition of powerful elites. This is what it would take to create more democratic workplaces, to bring the wages of lower-status workers in line with productivity, or to even-out gross disparities in educational opportunity. But in order to eat healthier food, most people don’t need to confront the reaction of an aroused elite. All they have to do is put different stuff in their shopping cart.

The process by which an individual develops a habitual diet is similar to the processes by which people develop other practices that influence their health: One's social theories and critiques come to be instantiated in unconscious or semi-conscious embodied preferences which are then difficult to change on the basis of informed rational critique. If you are accustomed to eating certain foods since your childhood, it probably would take a tremendous effort to become accustomed to a substantially different diet. If you are not accustomed as an adult to riding a bike, it will initially feel odd and uncomfortable, even if you know that it's a smart thing to do. If you are used to watching TV, dropping it off at Goodwill will leave you restless, bored, and itching. Your abstract social theories shape your habitus, which means that your degree of literacy may influence such non-intellectual traits as the kinds of foods you can stomach or whether you would ever voluntarily walk a mile to the store.

These same arguments can be extended to many other aspects of culture. It is cheaper to breastfeed than buy formula. Throughout the southeastern US, however, breastfeeding is generally frowned upon among the working class; formula is the default choice even for stay-at-home mothers. Why? Some of the reasons I have heard in the MERJ area are that breastfeeding is gross, "it makes your tits floppy," it's a sin, and that breastfeeding "a girl baby will make her gay." It is also cheaper, of course, to skip cigarettes – something that is done much more frequently by the educated and affluent. In 2006, 21 percent of the US population smoked, while of those with only a GED, 46 percent smoked – a rate more than twice the national average. The rate among those with a graduate degree? Just over six percent (Rock et al 2007). In their overview article on health and class, Stephen Isaacs and Steven Schroeder note similar statistics: "In the United States, people without a high-school diploma, as compared with college graduates, are three times as likely to smoke and are nearly three times as likely not to engage in leisure-time physical exercise." Based on a wide array of findings like these, they conclude that "obesity and the diseases it fosters now characterize lower-class life" (2004).

For those who have not experienced it firsthand, it is difficult to imagine the degree to which poverty in a contemporary context can leave a person without basic knowledge, without basic skills for handling knowledge, and – perhaps even more damaging – without any sense of their own capacity for certain kinds of learning or any sense of the importance of doing so. (And for those who have experienced this epistemological dispossession, it is hard to imagine what epistemological privilege would be like.)

Let me give one more example of how lack of certain kinds of knowledge impacts people. Many poorly-educated rural families in the MERJ area dispose of their trash by burning it. This is a long-standing rural tradition that continues to remain attractive in part because it's free. But while the tradition has remained the same, the trash has not. On a dry weekend evening, the valley we live in fills up with toxic smoke from poorly-combusted plastic. Open rural burning of plastic refuse is now the leading source of environmental dioxin in the US. According to a recent study, "A family of four burning trash in a barrel in their backyard – still a common practice in many rural areas – can potentially put as much dioxin and furan into the air as a well-controlled municipal waste

incinerator serving tens of thousands of households” (Science Daily 2000). Trash burning is so normal that it’s not uncommon for people in eastern Kentucky to dispose of entire mobile homes by setting fire to them. In one rough-living rural neighborhood in Madison County, Bear Waller, residents burned an entire semi-trailer full of plastic gloves, which smoldered for weeks.

While there has not always been garbage pickup available in these areas, there is now, and it is pretty cheap – about eight dollars a month. For some families, that’s not a trivial expense. But it’s cheap compared with the toll of asthma or the cost of cancer. People don’t burn trash because it actually saves them money. They burn trash because they *think* it saves them money. They burn trash because the fact that combusting plastics release poisonous fumes is not something you or I or anyone else knows instinctively. Like nearly every other thing in the modern social world, it has to be learned. But if you grew up in a book-learned family, you’ve known it so long it doesn’t feel like something you had to learn; it just feels like common sense.

What’s the biggest single predictor of longevity in the US? Even knowing the importance of literacy, I probably would have guessed that it’s your income. Or, knowing the incredible impact of cigarettes, I might have guessed that it was whether or not you smoked. I would have been wrong both times. Whether you have health insurance or not? Nope. Whether you exercise regularly? Nope. What you eat? Nope. Turns out that the single best predictor of how long you will live is the number of years you have gone to school (Kolata 2007).

7. Microspatial segregation

In the MERJ area, as in much of the US, working-class and middle-class people often share the same space. They are, nonetheless, despite such proximity, strongly segregated from one another. It is rare, for example, for the poorly-book-educated working-class families that live on our street to have a well-educated professional family over to dinner. And vice versa. If I attend a gathering of affluent professionals, I will seldom see any of my working-class neighbors there, or see a-literate working-class people in general. If I attend a working-class gathering, I will see few well-educated middle-class people.

In local schools, students are tracked into different classes that largely reflect the class backgrounds of their families. Similar patterns hold at work. At Eastern Kentucky University, the janitors and the professors work in the same buildings as each other. They may know each other enough to say hello or share a quick joke now and then, but I have never seen any sustained social interaction of the kind that is normal amongst professors and amongst janitors. The same pattern has existed in almost every workplace I have experienced where staff of widely different education levels and statuses were both present. It held at UC Berkeley, at the University of Kentucky, at Berea College, at Tomiko (where the few engineers and other high-status workers held themselves overtly aloof), in legal firms I saw while working with a non-profit group, and so on. In college and university settings, this segregation is complicated by the presence of professional staff, like departmental secretaries, who are often included to some extent in social

gatherings. But if we move further down in status, to the non-professional staff – the janitors and grounds crew and maintenance guys – the segregation is nearly unbroken.

There are several important points to make here about this class segregation. Even though it is not based on large-scale spatial separation, it does tend to have a subtle spatial expression. Members of a working-class family and a middle-class family that live beside one another may never see the inside of each other's homes, or – more likely – never see it in a relaxed, intimate social situation, like a shared meal. I went to the same grade school as working-class kids, in Berea, but during much of the school day we sat in different classes within the same building. At EKU and Berea College, professors, graduate students, and professional staff have offices that are clearly their territory. Custodians and other workers may set foot in those offices, but the offices are not their space; likewise, faculty may now and then have occasion to step into the janitors' closets or utility rooms – but those spaces are not *their* turf. Class segregation thus has what we might call a “microspatial” character, where people share almost, but not quite, the same space with one another. It's like China Miéville's fantasy novel, *The City & The City*, where two different cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma, exist in the same physical location, but citizens of one city are not allowed to interact with or even acknowledge citizens of the other (Miéville 2009). For many individuals in the contemporary US, this fantastic scenario is lived reality: they are surrounded by members of another group with whom they may never have more than a passing interaction.

Class segregation is one of the most important expressions of the processes that drive class differentiation. Radical differences in schooling and literacy, for example, make it hard for young people to relate to one another, and so they don't. They assort themselves into distinct groups. But this segregation, in turn, drives further differentiation. Two groups of people who do not interact intimately will, over time, accumulate further differences that make it even harder to interact. A member of one group will find ever more reasons to feel out of place in the presence of the other group, and vice versa. Segregation amplifies the other processes of class differentiation that I have discussed here, and grants them more power than they would otherwise possess. If literacy were unevenly distributed across individuals, for example, but readers and non-readers mixed freely together, it wouldn't matter so much. The literate and the a-literate would not confront each other across colliding cosmologies.

8. Capitalist ethnogenesis

The word *ethnicity* indicates profound cultural difference. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, it refers to “the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition.” As it is commonly used, the term embodies an assumption that the most profound cultural differences are generated through distance and isolation. Thus, Kenyan, Japanese, Ukrainian, and Irish natives would be recognized as belonging to different ethnicities, and they qualify for that categorization based largely on the fact that they come from groups who for millennia have been separated from each other by thousands of miles. It is this isolation, moreover, which is the basic ground out of which their cultural differentiation arose. Isolation did not determine the shape each culture would take, but it did mean that a cultural change

occurring in one group would not be readily transmitted to another. European colonialism and other long-distance interactions complicate this picture, of course, but the basic point is sound: a great deal of existing and historic cultural difference is predicated on spatial distance and isolation. The word ethnicity tends to be reserved for this kind of cultural difference. Thus, Polish Americans and German Americans would be considered as different ethnic groups, or at least stemming from different ethnic groups, whereas ultra-wealthy old-money families, who are also culturally distinct, would not be considered an ethnic group.¹⁰

In these chapters, I have described processes of cultural differentiation that do not take place through large-scale spatial separation, like the separation between the Kurds in Asia and the Yuroks in North America. It takes place within a single civilization. It takes place not through isolation, but, ultimately, through various interconnections, the most fundamental of which is exploitation, where some individuals unfairly take resources produced by the labor of others.

In evolutionary biology there is a distinction between “allopatric” and “sympatric” speciation. In the former process, a parent species splits when two or more populations are geographically separated – when an island is colonized, for example, creating a new, isolated population. In the latter process, speciation takes place even though the parent species has not been geographically divided. In sympatric speciation, reproductive isolation is often achieved through one form or another of microspatial segregation. For example, within a particular insect species different individuals may begin to focus on slightly different food sources – some lice may prefer crotches, while others prefer scalps. If such a preference creates even a slight isolation, and cuts down on the chances of interbreeding, then eventually the two groups will become two species, in this case, crab lice and head lice.

I am not bringing up evolutionary biology to argue that different classes are biologically different or will ever become biologically different, or that cultural change and genetic change occur in the same ways. I only want to borrow a couple of handy terms. As I noted, the word ethnicity is used in a way that presumes that *distance* generates the most profound cultural differences – that presumes, in other words, that they are created allopatrically. What I am describing here is a set of processes that create profound cultural differences in a single place, *sympatrically*, within what is ostensibly a single cultural group. The cultural differentiation involved here is so encompassing and has such a profound effect on those who experience it that we may fairly describe it as an ethnic difference. And because of the role played by capitalist class processes in driving this differentiation, we could describe the overall process as one of *capitalist ethnogenesis*.¹¹

¹⁰ There are exceptions to this pattern of usage. Jews in Europe, for example, are often considered an ethnic group, even though there is no simple history of large-scale spatial separation from other European populations. The word ethnicity tends to be used in certain, somewhat consistent ways, but when you examine the usage more closely, it’s a mess.

¹¹ Sympatric ethnogenesis has no doubt occurred in other places and other times. There have probably been many instances, for example, of sympatric ethnogenesis occurring under feudalism, or state socialism.

One allopatric ethnic group may speak a language that is strange to another, worship strange gods, wear odd undies, eat gross food, and in general exhibit intensely different ways of life. How could sympatric cultural differences possibly be as strong? The key is that while strictly allopatric ethnogenesis produces people who are strange to each other, sympatric ethnogenesis produces people who are estranged from each other. This estrangement may, for some individuals, pick up a certain arrogance or active denigration. An affluent, professional parent may not want their child hanging out with the working-class kids around the corner because they don't want their child to use working-class slang or develop a taste for BB guns. A working-class parent may not want their kid to turn into a little pussy from hanging out with the eggheads. The bumper sticker captures the sentiment: *My kid beat up your honor student!* So there is a certain degree of hard othering that occurs between classes that is not always present between allopatric ethnicities. But more importantly, as I argued above, the poorly literate and the highly literate tend to develop worldviews that are genuinely at odds with one another. There is no easy way around this. It can't be ignored. It can't be tiptoed around. It doesn't matter if you decide that class divisions should be done away with – it will still be difficult to relate to someone from a substantially different class background from your own. It may, indeed, be much easier to relate to someone from a similar class background, with a similar level of education, whose family is from the other side of the planet and is from an entirely different “ethnicity,” than with someone who grew up beside you, separated not in space, but by capitalist ethnogenesis.

9. Is this a culture-of-poverty argument?

I am coming treacherously close here to a type of explanation, “culture-of-poverty,” that left-leaning scholars tend to reject. There is a long history of explaining poverty as a consequence of certain characteristics particular to the impoverished. Poor people are poor, according to these theories, because they are lazy, undisciplined, racially inferior, unable to delay gratification, and so on. Such culture-of-poverty explanations have been produced reliably by affluent observers looking at poverty from the outside: by English gentry observing the laboring poor, by western European imperialists observing Native American “hunter-gatherer” tribes with limited material wealth, by white southerners in the US looking at African slaves, by television pundits expressing concern over the effects of welfare on the national character. The examples are legion. Culture-of-poverty ideas have a special place in the history of Appalachia: up until the 1970s or so, outside observers explained Appalachian poverty by referring to what they saw as particular cultural characteristics of Appalachian people. This was true of most outside observers, regardless of whether they were academics, journalists, romantic novelists, missionaries, nurses, or big capitalists investing in mines and railroads (Shapiro 1978; Pudup et al. 1995). Appalachians were isolated and therefore ignorant; deep mountain valleys narrowed the mind.

For mostly good reasons, culture-of-poverty arguments have become unpopular among academics. Most of these explanations throughout history have been, quite simply, ethnocentric bunk. Against the kind of bigoted judgments that were standard in

the late 1800s and early 1900s, the approach of the anthropologist Franz Boas and others, which came to be known as “cultural relativism,” represented a kind of intellectual and ethical revolution – a Copernican reversal of a hubristic cultural cosmos. Cultural relativism has thus become enshrined as a basic principle of social and cultural analysis in certain academic disciplines.

Because of the ethnocentrism that it worked against, the embrace of cultural relativism represents, for the most part, a clear example of social scientific progress. But it has generated its own problems. When Franz Boas was writing a century ago, Eurocentrism and classism and racism and a myriad other forms of cultural bigotry were so prevalent and so ingrained that you could virtually rule out cross-cultural judgments without getting rid of much of worth. There was very little baby in the bathwater. Outside of academia, many people still use such bigoted judgments in their everyday lives: for them, a dose of Boas would still be warranted. But among many academics, Boas’ insights have done their work, and are now ruling out explanations that are needed.

In focusing on the lack of literate intellectuality among the working class, and the ways in which this leaves them more vulnerable to class exploitation and domination, I am invoking a particular kind of culture-of-poverty explanation, associated with Marxist thought, known as “false consciousness.” False consciousness arguments come in different flavors, but the gist is a claim that some group, generally the working class, has failed to figure out their situation, or some crucial aspect of it. Like culture-of-poverty theories more broadly, false consciousness theories have become suspect among critical social scholars. In a graduate seminar at Berkeley, for example, when a student passionately and categorically denounced false consciousness arguments, and said, with relief, “I’m glad we’re beyond all that now,” the rest of us just nodded sagaciously in agreement.

But let’s be frank: the only way that the basic, underlying claim of false consciousness theories – that some group of people has failed to sufficiently understand social processes of consequence for them – would be categorically invalid is if we were all omniscient (Sayer 2000: 48). We’re not. All of us are walking around with incorrect and simplistic ideas in our heads. Any *particular* claim of false consciousness may itself be false. But any accurate description of how real people think – of the cognitive wellsprings of human action – must include a recognition of and understanding of false consciousness as a key phenomenon. It is a basic aspect of the human condition. Furthermore, in a class civilization, with an extremely lopsided and unjust distribution of resources, different kinds and degrees of false consciousness will be, to some extent, distributed according to class.

Culture-of-poverty theories, which are largely rejected currently among critical social scholars, are embraced by just about everyone else (Wright 1994: chapter 2). As Annette Lareau notes, most people in the US buy one version or another of culture-of-poverty arguments: for instance, that wealthy people are wealthy because of their personal attributes and poor people are poor because of theirs. “Studies show that Americans generally believe that responsibility for their accomplishments rests on their individual efforts.” According to a study quoted by Lareau, less than one-fifth of Americans see “race, gender, religion, or class as very important for ‘getting ahead in

life” (Lareau 2003: 7; quoting Ladd 1993: 11-12). Among the working class, it is common to invoke laziness and dissipation as cardinal sins that separate those who prosper from those who do not. This was the refrain expressed by Tomiko workers in chapter five, when they wrote things like, “At least these people are working and not sitting back drawing a check.” This presents a relativist academic with a conundrum: if culture-of-poverty explanations are invalid, and if ordinary people embrace them, isn’t this an example of false consciousness?

To some extent this popular belief – that people get ahead or fail to get ahead through their own efforts – is demonstrably incorrect, as when it ignores the long history of crushing racism in the US. But ordinary people embrace culture-of-poverty theories mostly because they contain an important kernel of truth: Do people bear a measure of direct control and responsibility over their economic situation? You bet. The working poor in particular can see this work out around them in alarming detail. Lower-status families and individuals suffer real, often rapid consequences if they are lazy or if they can’t remember to set the alarm clock or if they love bourbon a little too much or if they can’t endure the line at Tomiko and so on and on. In working-class neighborhoods around the country, there are many well-trod paths into “hard living” – a Gordian knot of destitution, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and injury and illness, and broken relationships (Howell 1972). I cannot count on hands and feet the number of young people I know, almost all of them from lower-income, working-class backgrounds, who died in a drunken wreck, or disappeared into prison, or were mauled forever in a brawl, or got hooked on pills. One of my stepbrothers on the Yurok reservation made friends with the wrong guy, and ended up stabbed to death in a nightmare of intoxicated machismo. Another stepbrother, after a nasty argument with his girlfriend, had her brothers bust into his bedroom and beat him nearly to death with a baseball bat. He lost an eye. These aren’t just reservation stories. In Berea, I drove up to Wal-Mart one time to buy groceries – and peek at the food in other people’s carts – and saw the strobing red flash of an ambulance parked outside. Hell of a place to die, I thought. But no one was dying. It was another stepbrother, who’d grown up in a hard-living Appalachian neighborhood, passed out on his back in the aisle on an overdose of black-market pills.

In lower-status communities, people who avoid destitution and drug abuse and violence often have to work to do so. If you live in a disciplined, well-behaved way, constantly exercising good judgment, you are likely to achieve a measure of security and comfort that you cannot if you live a dissolute, undisciplined life. These are the most immediate options facing many lower-income working families, and which route a particular family takes is a function largely of their own behavior. Class structures do not, all by themselves, force a man to sit on his couch all day and drink beer. Hank Paulson does not force Jackson County teens to snort meth. These are lessons that lower-status people have driven home over and over. Culture-of-poverty theories aren’t an academic debate here; they’re a matter of daily life and death.

So while many specific culture-of-poverty theories are bunk, there is a kernel of truth contained within the genre as a whole: how people behave does have a huge effect on their quality of life and their material wellbeing. And it probably has the biggest effect on the most marginalized individuals, who have to work the hardest just to keep their

heads above water. Of course, the educated middle-class is not immune from things like drug abuse, violence, depression, and laziness. But the hard living I have seen in rural Appalachia and on the Yurok reservation forms a kind of bedrock, just beneath the thin soil of working-class America, that everyone is aware of (see also Howell 1972). It has no real parallel among the professional middle-class.

Culture-of-poverty theories are necessary. When the academic or activist left, in order to avoid “blaming the victim,” focuses on structural causes of poverty *to the exclusion of the role played by personal behavior*, they render their claims much less convincing. Such explanations fail to pass a basic verisimilitude test. Moreover, structural explanations emphasize large-scale, non-local, difficult-to-conceptualize processes – you know, the kind that are hard to figure out without reading a bunch of books – while neglecting the determinants of poverty that are most immediate and concrete, and that are front and center in the minds of those who are actually struggling with poverty.

On the other hand, right-wing culture-of-poverty theories that explain hardship as solely or even primarily a result of individual responsibility are fundamentally misleading. In some cases, as when they accuse the poor of sweeping personality deficits like a “psychological inability to provide for the future,” culture-of-poverty theories are mostly just wrong (Banfield 1970: 126). But even the best culture-of-poverty explanations are, by themselves, limited. They leave out the systematic exploitation and disempowerment that are the fundamental driving conditions of deprivation in a high-productivity class society.

These two kinds of theory are not incompatible. Emphasizing social inequality does not necessitate minimizing the effects of individual behaviors, nor vice versa. The key linkage between these two kinds of theory is that systematic socio-economic inequalities exert their effects in part by limiting and damaging people. If such inequalities did not impact people, they would not be serious problems. These impacts, in turn, are a key element of the powerlessness that allows unjust inequality to endure, even when the lion’s share of the benefits of that inequality is enjoyed only by a tiny minority.

In short, capitalism wounds people and then grows in the wounds.

CHAPTER 7

HOMESTEADING AS DIFFERENTIATED RESISTANCE



Figure 7.1. Way, way off-the-grid home, built of lumber logged off the land.

1. Resistance against everything

Now that we've examined why there are two different, culturally distinct back-to-the-land movements in the MERJ area, rather than one, or many, let's return to the other initial question: Why are there still all these people out in the woods acting like peasants? An important point that I emphasized in the opening chapters is that contemporary homesteading is a choice. This is true for some more than others, but for everyone there is a strong degree of conscious volition involved. But why choose it?

In the MERJ area, those who engage in homesteading today see it as a successful, or potentially successful, strategy for meeting a wide range of goals. These goals are varied and profound, touching on many issues of fundamental importance to one's quality of life. People homestead as a means to put some distance and flexibility between

themselves and the labor market. They do it in pursuit of less alienating labor. For some, that means labor that uses the whole self, rather than just the mind or just the body. For others, that means self-directed labor, not under constant scrutiny from supervisors. With few exceptions, homesteaders see rural subsistence as a form of spiritual practice, a way of living closer to God or to the divine. Many of them see the natural world as a kind of antithesis of our modern, urbanized, technologized society. People also spoke of an aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, of the beauty of living things. Another genre of homesteading goal was preparing, in one way or another, for the end of the world. Almost everyone expressed worry about the possibility of economic collapse and pointed to the security they felt was offered by being able to produce things for oneself or one's own family – and of being part of a local network of such producers. For quite a few, the end of the world took a more literal form: the end times, the time of tribulation before the second coming of Jesus Christ. Or the apocalypse supposedly predicted by the Mayans. Or runaway global warming. Or nuclear holocaust. There's plenty of apocalypse to go around these days.

That is a remarkable array of goals to imagine for a single kind of activism or resistance. In this regard, that one activity – making your own stuff – stands out from many other kinds of activism. A protest march may be seen, by participants, as a means towards more than one goal: not only changing a policy, say, but energizing the base. A labor strike may be a chance for workers to educate themselves, as well as a fight for better working conditions. But these more traditional – or traditionally recognized – forms of activism cannot easily be thought of as something like *a different way of life*, which is how people tend to see homesteading. Perhaps because it involves alternative production, homesteading gains a kind of protean applicability: it comes to be seen as a form of resistance against just about anything.

In this chapter, I will look at each of several different genres of homesteading goal in turn. I should note, however, that participants do not see these goals as belonging in distinct categories. When homesteaders speak, these goals overlap and flow together into organic visions of what some of them refer to as “right livelihood.” Another important aspect of these goals is that they are strongly shaped by one's worldview, by the natural and social theories that a person uses to make sense of things. As we have seen, worldview is in turn strongly shaped by one's degree of literate intellectuality. All of the goals that I will discuss in this chapter are shared by both groups of homesteaders – but each one comes in (roughly speaking) two different forms, inflected by worldview. For example, both groups worry about the end of the world, but country homesteaders think of this in Biblical terms, and bohemian homesteaders do not. Bohemian homesteaders think either in terms of pseudo-scientific, book-based New Age claims, such as the doomsday prophecies supposedly found in the Mayan calendar, or in terms of a scientifically-literate concern with something like global warming and ecosystem collapse. (Or, most commonly, a pastiche of both.) Thus, the *purposes* of homesteading are variable. The same activity – raising a flock of chickens, planting a vegetable garden – can have profoundly different purposes for different people. A diversity of functions are masked by a convergence of form.

2. Meta-strategies that encompass subsistence

2.1. A common means to all ends: frugality

For many of the goals imagined by homesteaders, reducing one's need for cash is crucial. Want to use homesteading to reduce your need to work for a wage? You have to spend less money. Want to use homesteading to reduce your carbon footprint? Spend less money. Want to use homesteading so you have more free time? Less money! For these and many other goals, homesteading succeeds to the degree that it reduces the throughput, in an individual or family's life, of money.

There are many determinants of the degree to which a family succeeds, or not, in reducing their need for cash through homesteading, but several factors stand out. It might appear simple: you just reduce expenditure through producing the things you need with your own labor. But the degree to which subsistence actually reduces your demand for income is not straightforward. It depends on what subsistence practices you choose to pursue; some projects have the potential to save you much more money than others. It also depends a great deal on the skill level you bring to those practices.

In addition to emphasizing the right projects, and tackling them with skill, there is a third factor that is hard to see: the degree to which you are willing and able to forgo unnecessary amenities and forms of consumption. In a word, your commitment to frugality. Producing things you need is obviously an important component of homesteading. But without frugality, subsistence production – while still possible and still an interesting social phenomenon – cannot plausibly be imagined as a means to the various goals listed above. For example, owner-built homes come in many varieties, and, more importantly, sizes. Someone who builds their own house, but builds to the size standards of the contemporary US – well over 2,000 square feet for 2.5 occupants – has without question engaged in a major exercise in self-provisioning. But regardless of how you build it, such a large home costs a lot of money.

These three factors are what we might call “meta-strategies,” practices or attributes that encompass all other homesteading activities and help determine their effect. I will discuss each of them in turn in this section, before taking a look at some of the different kinds of goal homesteaders hope to realize through their efforts on the land. Let's start with the meta-strategy that's easiest to overlook: frugality.

Homesteaders in both groups are well aware of the crucial role of frugality in leveraging subsistence production into a strategy that can genuinely change how they live, and for the most part, they translate this awareness into action. Among contemporary homesteaders in the MERJ area, there are families who engage in serious subsistence production – gardening, usually – without substantially reducing their expenditures otherwise. But most live quite cheaply, compared to mainstream norms – some of them radically so.



Figure 7.2. A frugal kitchen.

We have already encountered several examples of this. Recall Theresa Schroeder, the permaculture farmer introduced in chapter one, who lives on about \$5,000 a year. In chapter three, on the back-to-the-land movement, I wrote about Jacob Millan, who bought five acres, built a cordwood cabin, and for \$2,500 was “out on the land.” I also mentioned Ben Carvajal and Gwendolyn Pine, who live on even less. They find a landowner willing to let them pitch their teepee out in the woods, and the only income they need is for food and for gas and parts to keep their small pickup running. Elijah Amaro, the high school dropout from chapter four, has even beat that: he lived for four or five years without any cash income at all, “squatting” in the woods and dumpster diving.

Craig Williams got by with very little cash income for a couple of years in Jackson County in the late 1970s, living in a “shack” that was so run down it didn’t even cost him rent. For him, as a Vietnam veteran, it was a necessary retreat from mainstream society for a period of time that would not have been financially possible without radical frugality.

There was a spring that I would get my water out of. And I had these big buckets and I tied a belt to them and I’d go down to the spring with things over the horse and go down there and fill up the buckets and bring ‘em back to the house and that’s what I’d use to wash with and cook with. I cooked on a fireplace for about a year. Just get a bunch of aluminum foil, sweet potatoes and onions, stuff like that, wrap ‘em up and throw them in

the fire. Come back in half an hour and eat them. It was great. Not fancy. Had a woodburning stove to keep warm. I didn't have anything out there. I did have a little portable radio. But you know without electricity things really are different. They're very, very different without electricity.

Such a degree of frugality is extreme, even by the standards of homesteaders. But it is possible, for many families in the contemporary US, to sharply cut expenditures without making real sacrifices like going hungry or doing your own dental work. In chapter three, I gave the example of Anna and Dave Dungan, who built a 900 square foot strawbale house for about a tenth of what their home in town would have cost. This is a home that could be on the cover of *Fine Homebuilding* magazine – but, because it's small and because it's built from local materials like timber and mud, it is also frugal. They are not huddled in a shack or surviving without electricity or living some heroically spartan life. Nonetheless, they have reduced their cash needs – as James Hamilton would say – dramatically.

When I interviewed Harm Smallwood, a few months before he died, he led a markedly frugal life. He lived in a tiny house that he had built – two or three hundred square feet – beside a large garden, on a couple of acres of cheap mountain land. He didn't like spending money for things that didn't make sense, or getting overcharged. “I fix my own automobiles, and always have,” he said.

You take your car to a shop, they don't care. Charge you four hundred dollars. I'm getting' close to dying here, got my headstone, got my box built. But yet, just to keep me in the funeral home for twenty-hour hours – and they ain't gonna do nothin to me, 'cept put some powder on my face, put me in my box, and bring me back out here – and it's nine hunderd something dollars. That don't make good sense. Nine hunderd something dollars just to ride in an old hearse.

“That's the most expensive ride you'll ever take,” I exclaimed, to which he replied:

If I take it – not plannin on taking it. I don't have to take it. Get somebody to put me in my box right here and carry me down there [a few hundred feet to the grave site]. Put me on a pickup truck right here and roll me down there. Why should I want to go to from a funeral home? It don't make no sense. Everybody's out to make a quarter. Even make a quarter off a dead person.

That's exactly what he did. He built his own coffin, right there in his little house in the woods, and they put his body in the coffin and carried it across the porch into the back of a pickup truck, and buried him in the ground he loved beside his garden.

It is difficult to overemphasize how effective frugality is as a critique of capitalist modernity in the US. In the above examples, families and individuals, through deliberation, have stepped around overconsumption, one of the major pitfalls of modern

life in affluent nations. Harm could easily have spent, at the end of his life, several thousand dollars on products and services that literally had no value to him whatsoever. Ironically, even though frugality involves *not* taking an action – shopping – it is a difficult accomplishment in a social setting that has been aggressively tilted in favor of consumption. How many people pull it off? How many of us reliably, consistently, do not buy things that we do not need? Televisions. Wedding rings. Large houses. New clothes. Orthodontics. Riding mowers. Gortex. iPods. Espresso makers. Mortuary services. That sounds like a rhetorical question, but it's not. How many people in the contemporary US are successfully frugal? How does it affect their quality of life? There are a whole series of basic questions about frugality that are unanswered, because it has been ignored by scholars. As little research as there is on contemporary homesteading, there is even less on frugality.

2.2. Selecting subsistence practices

The household-level economic effects of homesteading are distinct for different homesteading practices. This sounds obvious, but I don't think it's taken seriously enough. It's not taken seriously by researchers, since so few of them look at first-world homesteading at all. So more importantly, it's not taken seriously enough by homesteading advocates. Some of the more celebrated strategies may not produce much in the way of net reduction in the need for cash income. Photovoltaics is a good example of this. The main example, however, is gardening.

As I mentioned in previous chapters, it is common to think of homesteading in terms of food production. But it is the provision of cheap, often debt-free or debt-limited housing that gives subsistence production its major financial traction here in the US, not food. Spending on food only accounted for 14.6 percent of household spending in the US in 2009, well below the 26.3 percent spent on housing; it even came in behind the 17.5 percent shelled out for transportation (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). I might be able to grow heirloom tomatoes and butternut squashes cheaper than I can buy them at the store, but many staple food items – oats, wheat, beans, corn, even meat – are so cheap now that there is no way that a home gardener can produce them cheaper than they could be bought except by pricing their own labor substantially lower than they would ever sell it in the labor market. Wal-Mart sells chicken meat cheaper than it costs a homesteader to produce, even if the homesteader were to price her labor close to zero – because you probably have to buy at least some feed, you have to build at least a minimal coop, you have to have a feeder and a waterer, you have to process and store the meat, and so on. In other words, unless a homesteader is very careful in how they approach it, homestead-produced chicken meat is likely to cost them more money than just buying chicken at the store.



Figure 7.3. Subsistence chickens. (Jean Perry)

Of course, most homesteaders are producing their own food for other reasons aside from cost. I can already hear them saying things like “I love it when I know where my food comes from,” and reminding me that the monetary price you pay at Wal-Mart does not reflect the real social and natural cost of producing industrial chicken. True enough. But my point here is simply that when a family builds their own home, they often save hundreds of thousands of dollars, at the same time that they realize other, non-monetary benefits, such as gaining new skills or physical confidence. When they grow their own food, in most cases it has a substantially smaller monetary impact.

I’ve already given some examples of the cheapness of owner-built housing, such as Anna and Dave with their strawbale home, and Jacob with his dirt-cheap cordwood. Other examples abound. One of James Hamilton’s siblings built a beautiful two-level house for four people, complete with a stone cellar and fireplace, for about \$3,000. Isabel Faust, a bohemian homesteader in her mid-twenties, put up a yurt for about \$2,000.

Maria Lenhart is a potter and a bohemian homesteader in her early sixties who grew up in a rural Appalachian family. For years, she has lived in a lovely pottery studio and home that she built herself. It’s not tiny, and it wasn’t nearly as cheap to build as some of the examples above. However, for what it is – a fully operational professional art studio and residence – it was much cheaper to build than buy, and the savings have allowed Maria financial and worklife freedoms she would not otherwise have enjoyed.

Yeah, it was incredibly cheap. I think I have about – including the new sleeping room over the kitchen, I think I have about fifteen hundred square feet, altogether, maybe fourteen hundred. And I have one nice porch on the east end, and plans for a bigger porch on the west end, which really adds to the living space in this climate. And I think the building has cost me just less than forty thousand. But of course, it’s also taken fourteen years to build. I started it in the last few weeks of nineteen ninety-four, and here it is twenty oh-eight. [Laughs.] And I just got hot and cold

running water last year. [Laughs.] But then – it was never my highest priority, you know, it didn't bother me. It drove my kids crazy, but it didn't bother me that I didn't have hot and cold running water.

The monetary savings Maria realized were not just an automatic side effect of doing the construction herself. The design of the home and the way she uses it reflect careful thinking about conservation and frugality.

Maria: You can choose not to put in central heat and air, which this does not have. It's a passive solar building primarily, that functions pretty well. Like today, we're here pretty comfortable, no air conditioning, and it's ninety degrees outside. But that's because I've been here and every night at about nine o'clock I open up all the windows and let the house absorb that night air and close it up first thing every morning, and that's the key. And then in the winter, I supplement with a wood stove right in the middle of the building, and all this masonry takes a while to change temperature no matter what the temperature is. So it's not going to ever fluctuate dramatically from day to day. But the fact that it's – the big expenses in modern homes come from plumbing and electricity and heating and cooling systems. Well, I had no plumbing here until last year, and even now it's the absolute simplest of plumbing. With basically two kitchen sinks, one of them is cold water only, and the other has hot water, but the hot water is only in a little on-demand electric heater that's mounted under the counter. So I don't have a big electric water heater somewhere sucking up power and taking up space.

Jason: So you have the composting outhouse, but what about showers and bathing?

Maria: I have an outdoor solar shower stall out there with a black plastic barrel full of water – rainwater that comes directly off the roof. And all these rain barrels, and I have a cistern. So the cistern holds plenty of nice clean water. But I still use my rain barrels which I got in the habit of doing, so I still carry buckets of water into the house and use them, and I'm really really good at not wasting water. I use water for two or three things before it ever hits the ground again.

Under contemporary conditions, the monetary benefits of homesteading differ markedly across different subsistence activities. As a result, contemporary homesteading has become modular. It used to be that homesteading in the MERJ area was fairly organic, meaning that it tended to occur as a whole, as an integrated set of strategies. A family that engaged in one kind of substantial subsistence production – growing a big garden, say – probably engaged in the full array of such activities. Because of this, among other factors, homesteads were closely related to the landscape. A good homestead had a minimum size, some bottomland, some timber, and a year round source of water. As a result of the current modularity, the relationship between landscape and homestead has

been broken. Now people homestead on all sorts of properties, and they pick and choose all sorts of combinations of homesteading activities.



Figure 7.4. An economically successful homestead: cheap house, poor soil, no garden.

However, in part because of the financial advantages of building a home, compared to gardening, there is a pattern of contemporary homesteaders focusing more on construction than horticulture. This is a major difference from the homesteading that characterized the MERJ area prior to the post-WWII boom, in which families, out of necessity, spent much of their time on food production. After more than a decade on the land, Maria is just getting around to gardening, and the intent is to add quality to her diet, not replace the grocery store.

It's fun to have a bigger garden. I've sort of missed that. The reason I've not gardened more here on this property is partly because I've been preoccupied with the building and other projects, and earning money et cetera. But also when I did try to garden here – when we first bought this property I did try to do bigger gardens, and the deer ate everything. That's why I have these raised beds right outside my window, so I can keep an eye on 'em and keep the animals out a little better – although the rabbits are still a problem. And I've really enjoyed getting the food out of it – and being able to enjoy more fresh produce.

2.3. Subsistence production demands skill

One of the dismissive stereotypes of subsistence production – and one of the reasons mainstream economists see it as a thing of the past – is that it is uneconomic in terms of labor productivity. According to this view, it takes subsistence producers a tremendous amount of labor to produce a good that could have been produced with a tiny

fraction of that labor in a factory or on an industrialized farm. If this were true, it would be a good critique of homesteading: subsistence activities have to produce goods and services with a reasonable amount of effort, compared to how much effort it would take to produce them using industrial techniques; otherwise, at some point, it becomes too much of a sacrifice of time and effort to not purchase the cheaper industrial product. This is why jokes that critics make about the non-economic character of the back-to-the-land movement appear so damning: “Check out this awesome, organic blueberry tort I made! I grew all the ingredients. And it only took me eighty hours of work!” If this were the general case for subsistence production, it would not offer a viable alternative to mainstream production, even in a limited way.

There is some truth to the claim that large-scale production is more labor efficient than subsistence production, and that this is the main reason why subsistence production around the world has declined. Contemporary yarn spinning and cloth weaving techniques, for example, are literally thousands of times more labor-efficient than traditional methods. A hectare of industrialized rice in Louisiana requires a hundred times less labor than a hectare of peasant rice in Dawa, China (Netting 1993). Moreover, there are many useful products that cannot be produced on a homestead: cars, antibiotics, chainsaws, the Internets – not to mention the books that I’ve made such a big deal out of. These are reasons why subsistence production cannot serve as a realistic replacement for industry.

However, the idea that small-scale and/or subsistence production automatically means low labor productivity is flawed. One reason it’s flawed is that contemporary subsistence producers use technology to boost their labor productivity. When they build a house, for example, they use mostly the same tools that professional contractors would use: electric rotary saws, electric drills, gasoline-powered concrete mixers, pneumatic nail-guns, and so on. Some of these tools are affordable (like a skill saw); others are rented or borrowed. They process firewood with chainsaws, not axes. They sew clothes with electric sewing machines. They store food in freezers. The difference between industrial production and contemporary homesteading in the MERJ area is a difference of scale and social relations, not of modern technology versus outdated technology.



Figure 7.5. Cutting firewood with a chainsaw.

Another reason that this image of subsistence production as labor-inefficient doesn't hold water is because there are so many different production tasks, and each one differs in terms of how well it scales up (or scales down). That's pretty abstract, so let me give a concrete example: it takes much less labor to produce a bushel of corn on a gigantic Iowa corn farm than it does to produce a bushel of corn in a garden, because corn lends itself to large-scale industrial production. But the same thing is not true of tomato production. It may well require *less* labor to produce a tomato in a garden than it does to produce it on a giant tomato farm outside of Fresno – particularly when we include the labor of shipping the tomato, which in the case of the garden is a stroll from the garden into the kitchen. Tomatoes do not lend themselves to large-scale production the same way that corn does: they have to be picked by hand, treated gently, kept cool, shipped quickly. To the extent that they can be handled mechanically, it is largely because they have been modified into a tougher but otherwise radically inferior product. If we were to look at all of the productive activities on a typical MERJ area homestead, each one would compare differently to its industrial competition, and there is no reason to assume that industrial production would be more labor-efficient across the board.

One more piece of evidence against the idea that subsistence production is labor inefficient is the continued prevalence of domestic production in the US, noted in earlier chapters, which continues to account for one-third to one-half of all economic activity in the US. Is there some factory-based alternative to me caring for my son in the evening? Or washing the oatmeal pot? Or brushing my teeth? I may use industrial goods to help in

these activities – the pot, the sink, the toothbrush – but by the same token they retain an irreducible subsistence element. (Until perhaps someday intelligent robots are developed.) Subsistence production has a place in modern economies, even judged solely on the basis of its efficiency in terms of labor.

In considering homesteading from the perspective of labor productivity, the more trenchant insight is that most rural subsistence tasks require a high level of skill and knowledge to be done efficiently. Can homesteaders, for instance, build houses using a reasonable amount of labor? Absolutely. But whether they do so or not depends largely upon their house-building skills. Can homesteaders produce food economically? Again, it's possible, but it depends on their skill with gardening, husbandry, or silviculture. It is entirely possible to attempt a subsistence project and fail to accomplish it cost-effectively. At its worst, subsistence can indeed look like the joke: at the end of weeks of labor, you get a couple of pounds of dubious-looking tofu. In short, the possibilities of homesteading, as a strategy of resistance, are limited by the skill of its practitioners.

As a result, the two groups of contemporary homesteaders in the MERJ area differ somewhat in their readiness to successfully homestead. Country homesteaders are more likely to have gained considerable experience and knowledge in their childhood and early adult years, before embarking on major projects of their own, or casting their family's fortune onto their ability to reliably and efficiently produce goods. (Although the specific skills that youngsters are exposed to are still generally segmented by gender.)

Caleb Hayward, a country homesteader who grew up in Jackson County in the fifties, only attended school for eight years, but got a different kind of education on the job:

Well, there's not much I haven't done. Seventeen, I went into carpentry. Welded. Went to work paintin houses. And any kinda wood working thing, I got a turnin lathe, anything you want. A car in the garage...I worked on a log house, built all the cabinets, doors, everything. There's not much that I can't do with anything, plumbin, 'lectric, heatin. I do it all. But, like I say, it's hands-on experience. It's not from goin to school. Hands-on experience you learn quicker and more than you do going to school. When I was 21 I was a foreman on a job. We was buildin apartments and houses. And I was working college students. They really wantin to learn. And they learned quite a bit. At 21, I'd already learned all this stuff. Readin a blueprint, I didn't go to school for it. I learned hands on.

I'd like to take a moment to note how valuable these skills and knowledges are. Rural people are widely denigrated as ignorant and backward, yet many of them are in possession of wide-ranging practical knowledge more intrinsically valuable than much of what passes for knowledge among the urban. One of the unintended side effects of industrial production and modernization is to separate young people from such practical knowledge, and from any context in which it might appear worthwhile. Urban and suburban Americans often look down on it – but they do so, ironically, from a position of

ignorance and dumbed-down dependency. When I teach college students from the cities and suburbs, they are generally more literate than someone like Caleb, and – as I have argued – that literacy represents an important skill in itself. At the same time, however, they have generally not used their ability to read to become vigorously well educated in the kind of knowledge available in books. What they know about, rather, is pop culture. In spades. I often give my college classes a quiz that assesses their command of different kinds of knowledge, as a way to get them to reflect upon their educational experience and where it has left them. Instead of knowing how plants grow in the woods and what their uses are, students know *Grand Theft Auto*. Instead of knowing how engines work and how to repair them, they know which celebrities have broken up this week. Seen in light of such observations, the perception of urban life as more modern and advanced than rural life is, ironically, a kind of parochial ignorance.

By contrast with their country neighbors, the bohemian homesteaders are often less skilled, at least when they initially embark on homesteading. In some cases, this is because they grew up without substantial exposure to practical skills – like Craig Williams, planting his first garden in the shade. In other cases, even though they grew up in the country and gained some skills as children, they spent substantial time attending college in their early adult years, when country homesteaders like Caleb were consolidating practical skills both at work and at home.

This lack of skills can cause problems. For one thing, it can be dangerous. One early back-to-the-lander tried farming steep land with a lowland tractor – which has a narrow wheel base and is more likely to tip over – and almost got crushed. Jacob Millan, the college student who built a cordwood cabin in the early 1990s, had to learn basic lessons about workplace safety, such as “don’t drink on the job.”

Yeah, one kid almost got killed. That’s when we learned, that’s when it got serious. Well, you know, the first work parties, it was the keg of beer tapped at the beginning of the work party. You know it sounds so stupid now, but when you’re a college kid – and I’m one of those that I like to make people happy, especially if they’re helping me out ‘n shit – so you have people, kind of being like “Can’t we drink a beer, we’re just sitting hot out here, sweatin, we’re hauling this log, let’s just have a couple of beers on the get-go.” Or like drinking a fifth of Wild Turkey in the rain, slopping this mud up and smacking the firewood chunks in there, and then we planted it right in the wall as we were going, you know, the whiskey bottle went right in there and the cap went on it, I can still show you the bottle. But the rain pourin on us and the slop and it was just like a mud wrestling kinda atmosphere you know. So we did a little of that and we had the one guy that wasn’t paying attention while everybody was shoving on the log [on the roof] and it was caught up on a knot, and then the knot broke, and it slid really fast across the top of the house, and caught the dude and knocked him off the top of the house and he went right over where I had a whole bunch of broken glass and rakes and shovels and iron diggers – and a mattress. And he landed right on the mattress.

The possession of limited skills also has a major impact on the economic performance of subsistence, and thus the degree to which it may be harnessed as a means to an alternative economic footing. Ethan Morse is a bohemian homesteader who grew up on the outskirts of a small town in Virginia with conservative parents. He was a fervent, “born-again Christian” in his late adolescence, in the mid-1980s, but became a participant in the leftist counterculture first through participation in Grateful Dead concerts and then through friendships with bohemian peers in college. Partway through college, he began to build an improvised house on cheap land, a house that he ended up living in for several years. However, because of flaws in the design and construction, it subsequently had to be torn down. Like many homesteaders, he learned from his mistakes, and was able to recognize his naiveté and lack of skill in retrospect:

I always had that dream of building a log cabin – these days I realize that a log cabin is not nearly as energy efficient as it could be, so that dream has gotten varied considerably. But, something about living in the woods, I just loved the idea of living in the woods. But I never was sure how that dream came about. Probably more to do with reading than anything. I can’t say that I really talked to that many people who had a log cabin, who lived in a log cabin – I liked the idea that anybody with an axe can go out there and build a log cabin. I don’t even need to know anything about construction. *Wrong*. [Laughs.] Duh. Yeah, this house was definitely a learning experience here. There’s an awful lot of things I know better than to do now, that I didn’t know better than to do, then. For example, don’t stick poles in the ground and try to build a house to those poles, because poles don’t go straight.

Bohemian homesteaders are also more likely to get bogged down in projects as a result of making choices for non-economic reasons, like ethics or aesthetics. The best example of this is a near-universal penchant for building funky homes. When country homesteaders build a home, they usually do it simple and quick, using standard frame construction. When bohemian homesteaders build a home, they want it to be a statement of dissent from mainstream values, a work of artistic self-expression, impose zero impact on the environment, and so on. They build homes out of straw bales and mud. They build earth ships, with arching walls made of sand bags tamped into place and covered with earthen plaster. They build cordwood homes out of mortared firewood (with the occasional whiskey bottle). They build homes with double walls, for a maximally-insulating envelope. They build hand-dug underground homes. All of these methods produce gorgeous homes – and they are all magnificent sinks of labor. (I know whereof I speak: I tried to build an underground house when I was nineteen. By hand.)



Figure 7.6. An “earth ship,” a home built of sandbags tamped into place, which are then plastered. Gorgeous, energy efficient – and demanding a huge amount of labor.

Grace Melson and her partner Pat Cleary are both from rural Appalachian families, and were exposed to rural subsistence practices growing up; once they embarked on their own homesteading projects as adults, they were not starting from scratch in terms of skills. Nonetheless, their approach to house building was typical of bohemian homesteaders, in the care and forethought given to design, and in the emphasis on aesthetic, environmental, and spiritual criteria over economic ones. Grace’s grandfather is a rural Appalachian, and his approach would have emphasized ease of construction. As Grace recalled,

We actually have a collection of house designs for different locations that we played around with. So we have a house design that would have been built at my grandparent’s land, kind of a shed-roof style board and batten, very simple, very along the lines of what my grandfather knows about, in terms of his construction experience.

But Grace and Pat had a number of additional design concerns:

Grace: And then when we first bought our land one of the ideas that we had entertained was a cordwood house. It would have been bermed in and kind of squared in where it was bermed and kind of rounded on the cordwood edge, so kind of bullet-shaped maybe. And so we have drawings for all this, you know.

Jason: You and Pat would sit down and work on these together?

Grace: Yeah, daydream and just draw, you know, figure out, you know we want to use natural materials, we want to use our own labor, we want to –

but eventually we settled on a dome design for several different reasons. One of which was, well cordwood is very labor intensive. But we definitely were very attached to the idea of round, a round house or round features. And cordwood obviously is very conducive to that. But the dome was something too that we had some interest in. We borrowed a book from a friend which was like *The Pacific Dome*, of the original *Dome Book*, from like the sixties or seventies, and we were just fascinated, very enamored of the whole Buckminster Fuller concept, and the way it had been applied in different ways. The efficiency of the use of materials, in terms of the size of the house that you get as well as the efficiency of the way the energy and air flows in it.

Grace and Pat decided to build a dome, which is nearly complete and which they have lived in for nearly a decade now. It cost about forty thousand to build, which includes a substantial amount for a photovoltaic system. Neither of them expressed remorse at the decision to build a dome, but they recognize that a different house design could have been much cheaper and faster. As Pat summed it up, “If I were doin it again I wouldn’t spend a tenth, I wouldn’t have to, I would use native materials – I mean again, it was a process of learning. I will do it again, I’ll build a guest house over there for under five thousand dollars.”

Such stories are ubiquitous. Just to give a short example, another homesteading family recently began by building an elaborate outhouse with a curving roof – placing aesthetics over labor efficiency. Luckily, they learned the lesson on a small project, and for their house used a simple, shed-roof design. Because of that choice, according to the husband, Ron Estel, they were able to build a complete house in “less time than it took for that damned outhouse.”

Does this discussion belong in a section on skills? Yes. The choice of house design and construction technique is a skill. Experienced builders know how much work it takes to complete even a labor-efficient house, and are more likely to shy away from techniques, like hand-mixing earthen plaster, which require heroic efforts.

A related decision that bohemian homesteaders are liable to make is growing gardens without tillage or pesticides. There are defensible reasons to choose such a strategy, but once chosen, you have upped the amount of skill and knowledge and expertise you need – particularly in terms of crop selection and Integrated Pest Management. There are now many crops that you cannot grow, in Kentucky, without a ridiculous outlay of labor and trouble: You’ll be hand-picking Japanese beetles off your sweet cherries. Flea beetles will stunt your eggplants. Squash vine borers will kill your summer squash; the non-poison remedies involve slicing open the stems and manually removing the larvae, and other hassles. Pests and weed seeds accumulate and overwinter in mulch. Straw mulch is liable to produce an outbreak of snails and slugs. And so on. Organic gardening is difficult, and can easily become a sink of time and effort. Again, the hicks are more likely to be able to put up a minimally successful garden, inasmuch as the economic production of food is the criterion of success. Till it, plant it in rows, till again for weeds, use pesticides if necessary. Don’t mess with mulch. Don’t mess with no-till.

Don't bet your supper on unproven crops or strange hippie plants like strawberry spinach; go for a few reliable things.

In this section I have argued that while homesteading can make sense, even in narrow economic terms, whether or not it does so depends on the skill of the practitioner. The more skill one has, the more efficient one is. In addition, country homesteaders often enter into adult homesteading with more skill than their bohemian neighbors. However, it is important to note here that both groups of homesteaders continue to gain knowledge through further homesteading experience: for many, this acquisition of new skills is one of the main benefits of homesteading. Thus, skills are not only a *means* to successful homesteading, but also one of the explicit *ends*. The lack of skills that some homesteaders wrestle with initially is seen by them not as a reason why they should abandon homesteading, but as yet another reason why they should embrace it.

When I asked Craig Williams if he could explain why he had become a homesteader, he had this to say:

It wasn't so much a rebellion against the status quo as a feeling of self-sustainability, at least for me. You know? I took pride in what I had learned that had translated into my ability to sustain myself. You know I can grow – and I could have but I didn't – I could have grown enough to live on. Although it wasn't a critique exactly of the system, it was kind of my way of saying "Look, I really don't need you motherfuckers." Alright, I can come out here with a little walking stick and a horse and say fuck you, I don't need you. Alright? And I think that that was something I needed to do on the heels of what I had been through [the Vietnam War] and all that shit, you know I didn't want to be part of the mainstream. And now [thirty years later] I am much more a part of it. But I guess now if I had to I could be like "I've done it, I've lived without Wal-Mart." Okay? I've actually survived without Wal-Mart.

3. Labor resistance by other means

Now let's turn to some of the specific goals that people are hoping to achieve through homesteading. One of the most important goals is changing one's relationship to the wage-labor market, which many homesteaders, as we shall see, are able to do. If an individual or family substantially reduces their need for monetary income, they gain flexibility – sometimes tremendous flexibility – over their involvement in wage labor. They may be able to work fewer hours per week or switch a different job entirely. They may be able to choose wage labor based on criteria aside from "what job is available right now," or "how much will I make?"

However, the reasons why people desire this flexibility differ according to what kind of wage labor is available to them – which means that these reasons are somewhat different for the two groups of homesteaders. Country homesteaders are often trying to shield themselves from the lower end of the job market: a successful homestead may allow them to step out of the factory or away from other low-status, low-wage jobs. In those cases, they are looking for an alternative to the tedium, deskilling, and lack of

autonomy characteristic of such jobs. They are trying to escape from exploitation and domination.

With their college diplomas, bohemian homesteaders as a group have access to better jobs – although a college diploma, by itself, no longer guarantees access to a higher-status job. They are generally not running from a factory or fast-food or a job on the Wal-Mart checkout line; they are not, in most cases, trying to escape from the more brutal forms of wage-labor exploitation that take place in the MERJ area. They are looking, rather, for a more “balanced” mix of labor, where they work not only with their heads but with their bodies as well. They seek to resist, in other words, the physical deskilling specific to white collar jobs. They also often seek wage labor that they feel is ethical or supports progressive social change – like working for an NGO or making artwork – which often pays less than other professional careers.

While the details differ in important ways, in both cases homesteaders are attempting to shift their economic footing toward a less alienating mix of labor, toward more diversity of work task, and toward more autonomy, flexibility, and freedom. They hope to compose their workday according to their own interests and preferences, rather than being stuck, day in and day out, performing the same narrowing set of maneuvers determined for them by someone else. For both groups, moreover, a key is the reduction of the amount of time spent in wage labor.

Successfully using homesteading as a strategy of labor resistance is a challenge, and there are several factors that get in the way. First, as I argued above, the *economic* use of subsistence production requires tremendous skill. It’s easy to fail to build a house cheaply and quickly enough, or fail to produce enough food, to substantially offset the need for cash. To some extent, this factor favors country homesteaders with greater mastery of basic rural production skills.

There are also factors that make it hardest for those most in need of a change in wage labor to harness homesteading. Even if subsistence production can offset expenditures in the long run, many forms of subsistence require an initial cash investment: money to buy land or building supplies. Tools. Seeds. A farm truck (cf. Nelson and Smith 1999). In eastern Kentucky, with a history of cheap land and lax, weakly enforced, or non-existent building codes, this start-up cost can be pretty minimal: as Jacob said, “Yeah I had about twenty-five hundred bucks on the whole deal and I was out on the land.” But incomes can be pretty minimal, too. A closely related barrier is that lower-quality jobs offer less flexibility – that’s one aspect of that cluster of onerous features that defines them as low-quality jobs. At a factory, for instance, you either work when they tell you, or not at all. There’s no dropping to three days a week, or working four hours before lunch. Those with access to a greater variety of jobs, and to higher quality jobs, already enjoy a kind of flexibility not available to those on the bottom. To a large extent, this factor favors bohemian homesteaders – but recall that there are country homesteaders who, despite the lack of higher “book” education, have access to well-paying and skilled jobs with some flexibility, like working as a contractor or electrician.

There has been substantial success on both sides. William and Ethel Hamilton have not worked a “public” job in decades. They live modestly and produce almost everything they need: they built their own house using mostly materials off the land; the

house is completely off the grid; they grow a two or three acre garden every year, and put food up for the winter; they raise chickens and beef for meat. William even works with leather and iron to make much of the gear they use on the homestead. They own a four-wheeler to travel around the trails and country roads that surround the property they live on, but do not own a vehicle otherwise. To meet their minimal cash needs, William occasionally engages in skilled labor; for years, he made and sold handcrafted rocking chairs with woven-bark bottoms.

James Hamilton was explicit about using homesteading to reduce his need for wage labor – his need for, as he put it, “running that blacktop.” He envisioned using his land for both increased subsistence production and for generating income:

I'd like to pull that way more, you know. Because the economy's not real good. Gasoline's out of control, and so my dream right now is to set up some kinda positive income at that farm, whether it be a wood shop, sawmill business, or all of the above. Grow produce, anything. Where I can be with my kids around that farm and not be on that blacktop road because it causes your life to change so fast, you know, you get into that go go go and I don't like that for a minute. And I would advise anybody, *anybody*, to pull away from that. If they are able or know how or figure it out, pull from that. Cause life – if you're happy and your family can enjoy life – you don't want to fast forward it. You know, cut it down and make it count. Every bit you can.

Some country homesteaders are skilled enough and committed enough that they are able to radically distance themselves from the formal job market. They are able to live profoundly different lives than mainstream Americans. Quite a few bohemian homesteaders also succeed in using subsistence production as a means of changing their relationship with the job market – a theme that ran through the interviews and conversations.

In chapter three, and above, I have written about Anna and Dave Dungan, the couple who sold their house in town, built a strawbale house, and were able to change the content of their labor. Anna was able to quit her paying job as an editor for a university press, working instead on their home and land, and Dave dropped from full to part-time work. Anna spoke about this change as unambiguously positive.

I don't think I'm someone who's going to ever be able to do a forty-hour-a-week job. Cause I just, I need a lot of freedom, I need a lot of space. I used to think a lot about, “Well someday I'm gonna go out and make money and I'll prove my worth in the public sphere,” and I think I've kind of gotten over that hump to like, “Valuable work is not necessarily work that you get paid for.” And sort of dropping that link – cause I love all the stuff we've had to learn. I mean, it's been daunting. We didn't know anything when we started. But it's been great, you know. I feel a lot more

capable, knowledgeable. I think both of us in some ways are growing up around this project [the strawbale house]. So it's just very fulfilling.

Another aspect that Anna and Dave appreciated about the change in their labor was that they are able to include their son and daughter in the subsistence work that they do, unlike in a paid workplace, from which children are usually barred.

Instead of working say more hours out in the formal workplace, where one aspect is that the kids are completely divorced from it, now the way you've got your lives set up, you've got a lot of labor here, brought it in from the formal workplace, it's here, you have more control over it, and you can involve your kids in it.

In the late 1990s, Cody Shuler and Ann Edmunds bought a hundred acres of mountain land. At the time, Cody worked as editor and co-owner of a professional journal for chimney sweeps, making a steady but modest income. He dreamed of making a living off the land, but wasn't sure it was possible.

It was not particularly clear at that point how [leaving the magazine] was going to financially allow us to sustain our scene. But as time has gone by that has become more and more apparent, as the resources that are surrounding us all the time have a chance to settle into our perception and our understanding. As we gain in understanding of what's available to us, it's become easier and easier to recognize that it's not an issue.

Like most homesteaders who successfully change their wage labor, Cody and Ann did so through a mixture of subsistence production and frugality. They were also fortunate in being able to pay off their land, through the sale of the trade journal and the sale of a house that Ann had built with her first husband, who had passed away. They make their living now through an amazing variety of pursuits: Ann works part time as a masseuse; they run a micro-CSA¹²; they produce mushrooms for the local restaurant market; they run workshops and retreats on their property, teaching a number of different homesteading and wildcrafting skills. A key to making this work is that their need for cash income is limited: "We're probably spending close to \$20,000 a year, on everything...So we can afford not to work full-time jobs." Cody felt that their approach had allowed them to avoid a set of sacrifices common amongst professionals in the contemporary US.

¹² CSA is the acronym for Community Supported Agriculture. It's a local-farming model where consumers purchase subscriptions up front for a season or a year's worth of produce, which the farm then delivers once or twice a week. The consumer is insured a steady supply of fresh, local seasonal produce, and the farm is both paid up front and knows in advance what the demand for its goods will be.

Most people, to own their own property, both partners have to work full time – for years. Which is a shame, but it's also resulted in people thinking that they had to have certain kinds of property, or property in certain spots. We've gotten away from the tradition of inheriting the family property and making do with it, you know, we're moving across the country and across the world to pursue a job. Yeah, well, that kind of guarantees that you have to have a job, just to sustain – much less invest in – your future. I think things have gotten really really backwards when people are willing to give up their community to pursue a career or a job. I think there's something inherently flawed in that. People too caught up in the need to have more stuff, basically.

Most bohemian interviewees shared similar experiences of being able to use rural subsistence production and frugality as a foundation, upon which they could pick and choose between formal jobs. Grace and Pat lived for several years in a dirt-cheap rental about ten miles outside of Berea. Instead of paying to hook up utilities, they gathered firewood, hauled water, and lived without electricity for a while before setting up a minimal photovoltaic system.

Grace: Certainly the money we had to put out was minimal. And therefore we were both able to work part time...At the time I worked part time, finishing chair parts and weaving seat bottoms, and Pat was primarily doing oral histories with [a local non-profit], which she had been doing – I think she had been doing that for a couple of years. So we had very part time, but very rewarding and relevant kinds of jobs to the things we were wanting to learn, or the kinds of things we wanted to support.

Fifteen years later, they own three acres and have built a large dome house, and thus have acquired some debt and greater expenses. Nonetheless, Pat still feels like homesteading and frugality provide flexibility vis-à-vis formal wage labor. When I asked, "Does homesteading change your relationship with the job market?" Pat responded, "Yeah, it does. Because I don't have to take shit from nobody."

I believe in life before death. I wake up most mornings – you know when you were a little kid, you wake up and you're really happy and the temperature is perfect and you are rubbing your toes together and kinda smiling – I wake up like that a lot. I mean I work, I have a job, but I bring in enough money – and then I have all my side stuff [subsistence production] that I do. But I work two mornings a week, the rest of those mornings I get to wake up happy and have productive days that are based on what I want to do with my life.

When homesteading is pushed like this, the lifestyles that result are something to behold. It is, in certain ways, a radical critique that can be put directly into practice, rather

than restricted to paper, or deferred until after some longingly imagined but unlikely social revolution.

4. Living with nature as a spiritual practice



Figure 7.7. Pilgrimage to Sinks and Rises, a grotto in Jackson County where people pray, meditate, eat psychedelic mushrooms, and enjoy spectacular natural beauty.

One of the primary goals for most homesteaders is to try to live a more spiritual life. As with all of the goals I'll discuss, this one merges into and blends with others. However, trying to live spiritually is perhaps the most fundamental goal for many homesteaders – the central, foundational purpose, which is seen as infusing and breathing meaning into of all the other goals. (There are exceptions – individuals who are secular enough that they just don't think in these terms.) This finding is echoed by Rebecca Gould, in her book-length study of the back-to-the-land movement in New England (2005). She found that movement to be, above all, an expression of spiritual longing and a form of alternative religious practice – specifically, a religious practice founded upon close relationship with the natural world. As a central motivation, I found spirituality ironically difficult to explore: for many homesteaders, it goes without saying that – as they see it – living a simpler life in a closer relationship with the natural world is a spiritual act. The connection between spirituality and the natural world is often held to be a protean truth that hardly needs enunciating.

When I interviewed Ryan Crist, he lived by himself in a tiny wooden home he had built on the top of a wooded mountaintop. Before he built the house, he lived for a while in a tent, with a landline telephone nailed to a nearby tree. The property, which he shared with his sister, was secluded at the end of a long, steep driveway. He lived cheap and pieced together a livelihood out of a mix of carpentry work and professional photography. When I asked why did he had chosen to live as he did, his answer was a

typical, dense mixture of reasons, but a mix in which the beauty and transcendent qualities of nature are prominent.

God knows what all colored my desire. Any number of things I read. Movies. Definitely a need to be closer to nature. And even out here, what with my business and all, you know the tendency can easily be to live life too fast and not take time to smell the roses. I had also been, you know, hangin out with Emma quite a bit at the same time, who was very much an influence on me as well. Definitely somebody trying to get back to nature. And I'm sure that was the capper for me, you know, seeing the way she was trying to live out there and eatin her meals by firelight and, you know, how good everything tasted in the dark, without electric. We came up here one time, when we were making the final decision [about whether to buy the land], and we came up here during a snow, and walked up on the peak, and it was one of those sticking snows, and it just grabbed the trees, it was like wonderland, you know – it was so gorgeous. And at that point, there was just no way I would even consider not coming out here. Something about it was just magical. I remember walking out here and saying, now this is where I need to be, I need to have a place right here.

When I asked Ryan if he had spiritual reasons for homesteading, he responded by talking about nature again. For him, as for many homesteaders, nature and spirituality overlap nearly unto identity:

Oh, absolutely. When you see the pileated woodpeckers outside your window – all the wildlife. I remember being on the phone – I had a phone outside the tent. It was too funny; I'd answer, "Ryan's tent!" The line was buried through the woods, so we didn't have to have poles. I was on the phone, sitting in the chair, beautiful day. A beautiful doe ran by, bounding fifteen feet at a time. It was great. Experiences like that. Seeing the grouse, the wildflowers lining the driveway, the view from off the driveway.

As we will see in the next section, both groups tend to see modern society as having lost its moral footing, as a kind of reckless perversion. In this view, creating a distance from that society by moving deep into the country is almost automatically virtuous.

Something that I need to mention here is the experiential intensity of spending time in "nature." Over the past few decades, scholars have done a wonderful job of showing the degree to which "wild" landscapes have been shaped by the actions of humans, often in subtle ways or by peoples whose actions have been forgotten or (sometimes willfully) underestimated. The fact that even "wild" lands have been heavily influenced by people has led to some debate over whether such categories as "wilderness" or "nature" even make sense. Those are interesting debates, but they do not change the fact that there is a vast difference between living in a town and living in the woods, or between living in a house and living in a tent. One of the simplest ways to

capture the profundity of this difference is to look at the experience of people who are trying it for the first time (like, for example, a class of fifteen college students I took on a road trip across the American west): a night sleeping under the stars, far away from any built environment, is often a terrifying, exhilarating, and liberating experience – and that’s for people who try it as part of a group, not alone. Ryan Crist may have been sleeping in a forest modified by humans, but he was still sleeping in a forest:

When I first moved out here I was bugged out by a lot of things. Just the shadows of the fire, and the noises that you’ve never heard before. The pine borers. Little things that you just never heard cause you lived in the city your whole life. Now people come out and are freaked out by a wasp. You gotta learn to live with things. It is definitely something that you acquire over time. And it’s beautiful – it’s harmony.

As with all of the homesteading goals we will examine, spiritual and religious motivations are inflected differently for the two groups. For the country homesteaders, these motivations are expressed through the tropes of fundamentalist Christianity. This Christianity, however, is often rich with what Max Weber might call “enchantments” – a belief that the world around us – and particularly the natural world – is suffused with supernatural elements, with ghosts, angels, demons, premonitions, and with the living breath of God himself (Holmes 1989). This is a religion with animist elements, a religion in which an action like fasting for several days in a cave or on a mountaintop is a path toward revelation.

Edna Alexander, born in 1930, is the elder matriarch of a large family of country homesteaders. She was one of seventeen children, and grew up on the same mountain farmstead she lives on today; a piece of land that, when she was a child, they had to farm “plum to the cliff.” She is deeply skilled at subsistence, a forceful personality, and respected as a holy woman and healer. For Edna, every action has spiritual consequence, and right living is, above all, a matter of walking the path of the Lord. The first thing she said in the interview was to ask, “Well, I sure have had a lot of experience with Jesus Christ. Do you all know Him?”

In her early adulthood, like many rural Appalachians, Edna moved to Ohio with her husband, who found a job at Frigidaire. In Ohio, she said, “I tried to be a Christian, but couldn’t be, hardly. It was just too numbered up.” She fell ill, a sickness which she interpreted as a message and a tribulation from God – a warning that living a modern life was a sin, and that she needed to take herself back to the mountains and to a simpler, virtuous life.

I lived in Ohio about sixteen years. But I was sick all the time I was up there. I was sick just about all the time. Now I’m hardly ever sick, course now I’ve been tried. The Lord He moved back His hand and let me be tried a few times. I had leukemia. My blood just dried up. And the Lord – I never went to the doctor now. But the Lord said to me, He said “Your blood’s dryin up.” I could see I didn’t even have no veins or nothin.

Then a vision came to her; the Lord told her to return to Kentucky, and to listen to the words of her father. “When I had this vision,” she recalled, “I moved back to the mountains. This is what I thought about. My daddy sang this song.”

My eyes are on the mountaintop,
I’m running for my life.
I left ole’ Solomon on his plain
With all his sin and strife.

I’m to the highland bound.
I’m seeking higher ground.
He came and made it oh so plain
I’m to the highland bound.

Some started with me and look back,
but forward yet I press.
I’m bound to reach that mountaintop
by holiness and peace.

I’m to the highland bound.
I’m seeking higher ground.
He came and made it oh so plain.
I’m to the highland bound.

The angel voices came to me
And cautioned me to go.
And now I’m obedient to the Word
I leave this land of woe.

I’m to the highland bound.
I’m seeking higher ground.
He came and made it oh so plain.
I’m to the highland bound.

In 1960, Edna returned to Kentucky. “I went to my cabin on the mountain and I told the Lord, now I said, “This is it. If you gotta take me just do what you gotta do.” But He healed her, and ever since she has lived in the mountains, turning her back on modern things.

James Hamilton ranked religion as one his top reasons for homesteading. Again, the fundamentalist Christian framing is frank. “I believe in God,” he said, “and I was raised very religious, very religious, and I’m into that a lot more now than I used to be. Was drinking and running wild [when he was younger].” But now, he says, it’s “easier to be close to God if you’re livin slow.”

The bohemian homesteaders are also intense in their spiritual feelings and motivations, but these are not expressed in an overtly Christian framework. They are expressed in a great variety of ways, sometimes with clear New Age influences, as when one homesteader remarked that “The Wiccan traditions have had a strong influence on me. The earth-based spirituality that I practice influences our ideas about working with and living on the earth.” Sometimes they are phrased in terms of a syncretism of world religions. But most commonly, spiritual elements are woven with other strands – with social critique, with a celebration of nature, with the struggle to make moral choices about how to live.

When I asked Pat Cleary how she would explain her choice to homestead to a person from the city who had no knowledge of such things, she touched on all of these themes. She spoke about how little money she needed. She contrasted the beauty and tranquility of the mountains with her time living in the city. “I don’t mind Boston,” she said. “I don’t mind city adventures.”

I miss the Hi-Rise Coffee and Bakery, but at the same time, it’s like, *shew*, nothing like this. You know, you can hear a car hit the driveway at the bottom of the hill on a crisp, cool September night. You can hear for a long ways. Wildcats just walking down the road, like it’s no big deal, you know. I like it. It’s still wild here, it’s not tame like so many other places.

Then she wove a holistic tapestry of rationales that cannot be teased apart into separate pieces:

But as far as like for somebody who doesn’t do this? By the blessing of my grandparents I think I was connected to the physical world, to nature, to the cycles and processes of things, the rhythms of the way that seasons move and when it’s the right time to do this, and the right time to do that – and this is a way that I’ve managed to be modern but also to integrate those worlds. So that I’m not living separate from physical reality, I’m not living this schizophrenic, separated, living-only-in-my-mind kinda life. Americans especially seem to live a lot more in their head, whereas I live not just in my head, I live in my body and I live on the planet and I live with its body. I think that living this life, there’s things you have to do – I have a composting toilet that’s really simple. I’m integrated with my human waste. I take that waste and I use it, like a tree drops its leaves to feed itself, I use that on my shrubs, my bushes, for berries, and my nuts, I’m in connection, not just in my mind and in myth, but I’m directly connected. I walk for my own drinking water. I don’t walk for my water for showers or baths or dishes, but for my water I drink, it’s a sacred walk for me.

The potter, Maria Lenhart, answered the same question with a similar interleaving of themes. She begins with a critique of parental career expectations and consumerism:

My parents looked at me as I matured, and they said, *what are you doing?* [Laughs.] “Why aren’t – you’ve gone to college and you have a college degree, why aren’t you living that life style, of the contemporary up-and-coming moving-out doing something new and different. Instead you’re stepping backward.” I was saying, “Well it doesn’t feel backward to me. Actually it feels appropriate. It feels healthy to me.” I don’t how or why but I look around and I see consumerism being the nature of life around here, and I don’t like it. It’s not my nature. I don’t get any positive feedback from just consuming more and finding more and buying more, and working harder to buy more. The reason I bother having a business to sell my pots is so I can make more pots. If I didn’t actually earn money from the pots I make today, how could I buy more clay to make more pots tomorrow? I couldn’t.

But she ends by talking about the existential freedom of living “way out in the country.”

Maria: And dance in the moonlight. Yeah. It’s stuff like that that I know my parents never did. I just know they never did it. And I’m thinkin how could they, how can they be ok with that? How can you be ok livin your whole life and never dancing in the moonlight naked? I don’t know. I don’t know how someone is happy and okay with that. I just don’t.

Jason: And get a sense of vitality, a sense of deliciousness?

Maria: A sense of, yeah, a voluptuous life, of one that’s really unlimited. There’s no restrictions on my life. That I don’t impose myself, pretty much. That’s what I’ve always aimed for, and that’s what I get closer to each day.



Figure 7.8. Maypole dance at dawn, early 1970s. (Jean Perry)

One theme that runs through the bohemian back-to-the-land experience, and is important for understanding its spiritual wellsprings, is the use of psychedelic drugs. The so-called “recreational” psychedelics associated with the sixties counterculture, such as LSD, psilocybin, and marijuana, are considered by both psychologists and users to be “entheogens,” meaning that they tend to produce transcendent religious experiences in those who ingest them (Lee and Shlain 1994). In addition, bohemian homesteaders who use these drugs often do so, by design, in a secluded natural setting where such effects are likely to be intensified. Many bohemian homesteaders – probably a majority – have had mystical experiences of the divine as immanent within the natural world, fueled by psychoactive drugs. These experiences are profound, and those who have them believe that they produce lasting, meaningful effects, as in this passage from an interview with Tara Oldham:¹³

A friend put seven grams of mushrooms in me and it changed me forever. That’s what got me into mycology, I started studying mushrooms after that. Because I had a spiritual experience, of being born again – and I have the internal Christian language regardless of how much I study or read about anything else, because of how I was raised – the things that were happening inside of me were holy, sacred things. And I was literally born again, and blessed with sacred songs...And I feel like [the mushrooms] almost healed me, because I had such a traumatic life, I came from such a hard place. But when I did that, it was over, I was no longer in that dream any more, I was in reality. And it changed me forever. It actually was a catalyst for my life to unfold in a more healthy, pure fashion. It gave me the confidence I needed to live the life I really wanted. That I dreamt of. Instead of the life that was put on me.

Many bohemian homesteaders were frank about the importance of psychedelic drugs to the counterculture, as in this exchange with Maria Lenhart:

Jason: Did you see those [psychedelic drugs] come through Berea?

Maria: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Jason: Acid and mushrooms and all that?

Maria: Oh yeah. Absolutely. I have college friends who fried themselves, and have lived a life since then just sort of wandering aimlessly. And I have friends who devoted themselves to it for a short period, got a lot out of it, and said, “Shwew! I can’t keep doing this for very long.” And quit,

¹³ There was a flurry of research activity on psychedelic drugs in the 1960s and early 1970s, but after they were classified as controlled substances, research effort dried up. More recently, interest has revived, and contemporary medical researchers agree with the assessments summarized above: psychoactive drugs such as psilocybin can have major, lasting effects on self-perception, depression, etc (e.g. McGreal 2012). Regarding the mystical aspects of these experiences, I am not commenting here on their validity one way or another; they are an important part of people’s experience, and thus worth describing.

and got back in touch with the other part of themselves and have, you know, lived wonderful lives and done great things. Then there's always the few people still sort of hit and miss it you know, who were still willing to take mushrooms if somebody shows up with mushrooms some weekend.

Jason: Do you think that was a fairly crucial part of the whole counterculture?

Maria: Absolutely. And it was something that really separated me from my family. Especially from my parents.

5. Preparing for the end

The spiritual and religious worldviews of both groups, diverse as they are, share a strong theme of decline. Something has gone wrong with human life; somewhere along the way we lost our footing. This kind of sentiment finds its logical conclusion in visions of social collapse or apocalypse, which are ubiquitous among homesteaders. One of the most striking things about these visions is their sheer variety: in some versions, the Biblical End Times are near, the time of tribulation and mass suffering before the Second Coming of Christ. (Even this is not a single belief, but a whole set of beliefs with many different versions.) According to other visions, Gaia is in the process of shaking humans off of her body to restore balance to nature. According to still others, a major economic collapse is coming. The list goes on: runaway global warming. Global nuclear war. Pandemics of new disease. The unraveling and disintegration of the ecosystems that we rely upon. Maybe the earth will suddenly shift on its axis or run into a rogue planet. Damocles shivered beneath a single sword: this is like an entire armory, hanging by a thousand frail threads.

In those areas where people have no solid information – the blank spots on the map – all kinds of theories proliferate. The future is one of these blank spots, and part of what we are seeing in this multitude of doomsdays is the relatively unrestrained play of myth and imagination in an area where no certain knowledge is available. At the same time, some of these visions of decline or collapse are at least loosely based on evidence and extrapolation. Although such a thing might not represent the end of the world, the idea that large-scale economic systems can fall apart has historical support. Epidemiologists and evolutionary biologists are genuinely concerned about devastating outbreaks of newly emergent disease. Apocalypse-inducing nuclear arsenals really do exist, and are spreading to additional nations. Other visions of the end are – based on relevant expert views – less credible, but are still linked to bodies of scientific argument. Global warming sufficient to qualify as an apocalypse is possible, but not likely in the next hundred years. The Gaia hypothesis – and thus any related claim that Gaia will re-establish homeostasis by bringing humans under control – is not persuasive to most biologists, but it is an idea *within* modern science (Barlow and Volk 1992).

The fact that some of these ideas about the end of the world are grounded in contemporary scholarship means that virtually every homesteader embraces some set of serious worries about the future. The country homesteaders and the bohemian homesteaders tend to emphasize somewhat different apocalypses, but neither group can

shake off these worries. They are pressing, pullulating, and frightening. Moreover, because of the sheer number of different apocalypse storylines in circulation, even if a given individual rejects some as implausible, she is still left with a raft of devastating possibilities. One effect of this is that, for many homesteaders, the various specific theories about how society could possibly collapse blend and tangle together into a kind of juggernaut that cannot be argued against. Apocalypse comes to be seen as inevitable: there are too many ways that we stand upon the brink for us not to fall.

Against these visions, homesteading appears as a necessity. You cannot assume that the mainstream infrastructure – the grocery stores and the gas stations and the water treatment plants – will be there tomorrow. Homesteaders hope to become as independent of these things as possible, in part, because they are seen as fragile and ephemeral. In Harm Smallwood's estimation, we have some learning to do:

Better be takin notice of how to grow a garden, and how to fend for yourself. How to cook and how to can some of this stuff. There ain't nothing no better than home canned stuff. I hope we don't have to use it again, but I'm afraid one day we might have to. And it'll be a lost art then.

This sense of subsistence as a shield was a common motif:

Naomi Hayward: I have talked to people, you know, who said "Well I wouldn't go back and live like that [in the old ways], I got away from it, I don't want my kids living like that." Personally, I want my son to grow up like that. That way when he marries and has a family, he can pass it on, you know – you've got to work to get it, hit ain't give to you. That's what I like. I want him to know how to get blisters on his hands, calluses [laughs], what it's like to walk three miles to a grocery store. I want him to learn to survive if something was to happen 'n there ain't going to be no electricity. I want him to know well, my mom 'n dad showed me how to work in the garden, how to put my food away, how to cook outside and on a wood stove.

When I write about homesteaders preparing for the end of the world, it may sound like I'm talking about "survivalists" stockpiling ammunition and MREs in their underground bomb-shelters. There is some of that brand of survivalism in the MERJ area, to be sure, but – as you can see in the above quotes – many homesteaders don't respond to fears of apocalypse in that way. With exceptions, they are more likely to imagine a need to garden with their neighbors than a need to shoot at them.

Although my focus here is upon homesteaders in the MERJ area, it is worth noting that the proliferation of apocalyptic ideas sketched above is widespread in the contemporary US (Barkun 2003). In my experience, such worries are common not only for homesteaders but among the general population. People who are not homesteaders are often attracted to the idea of rural subsistence, in part because – like active homesteaders

– they believe that something bad is coming and that self-sufficiency will be necessary to survive it.

As with other homesteading goals, preparing for the end of the world is a task that is highly sensitive to one's worldview, and is thus shaped by one's degree of literate intellectuality. In the MERJ area, those who are less book educated are likely to embrace a wider variety of apocalypses; they are less able, in short, to set aside visions that have no basis in evidence – the relevant evidence, after all, is often scientific and text-based. They also tend to subsume the entire range of apocalyptic visions on offer within an overtly religious, Protestant framework. For example, the possibility of nuclear holocaust, which highly literate homesteaders see as a human-caused problem, is seen by many country homesteaders as yet another manifestation of the end times prophesied in the Bible. Country homesteaders also tend to be quite vague about the more “sciencey” apocalypses, such as global warming or pandemics – which, again, are often treated merely as signals of the inevitable unfolding of God's plan. Some families, for example, don't bother to recycle, because they know that Christ will return before any of these environmental concerns have time to play out.

When I asked James Hamilton why he pursued homesteading, he expressed a set of concerns about the future, but the underlying framework was Biblical:

James: Well, another thing that pushes me towards that life right now is I just really believe we are living in a real bad time. *Extremely* bad time. I mean, financially, our economy – things is not looking bright right now. We're headed down. I don't know how fur down we'll go, but I got a bad feeling.

Jason: So you think the country or world might be headed for a Great Depression type a thing?

James: Might be a Great Depression, famine, I mean I don't know but I feel like we're headed into something that's gonna be rough.

Jason: What kind of signs do you see?

James: What kind of signs? Oh, I can answer that right off the bat. Well, that would fall back to the King James version of the Bible. It's all, I believe, wrote in there just as sure as anything because you can read about it. And prophesy all down through time has predicted it to come. Some people believe that strongly and some people don't, you know everybody's different. But I believe that very much. Very much. And that pushes me to kind of – you know I feel like, you can't hide from God. I mean you gotta be a good person in the town or in the country or wherever. But I feel it would be easier for my kids and my family to be in the country. On a farm, not a large farm, but a farm.

Jason: So you think that there's some signs this might be end times coming?

James: Yeah. Just a lot of things. The trade center going down and security clamping down and everything's just – nothing ain't good. And the economy just keeps on stepping down and some people says it's a

recession, and what I think we're coming in to – if we're not coming into it I know we will come into it – there is no doubt in my mind. That's me. But I believe this country is headed for a bad time. I can't detail what *kind* of time, but I believe we're gonna suffer. We've lived way too delicious, way too high. And it can't last forever. *Everything* has a cycle and I believe our cycle's running toward the end.

Like James Hamilton, Edna Alexander expects tribulations soon:

The Lord let us know to get in the mountains, cuz' there's bad things a comin. A few years ago, several years ago, the Lord let me know that the sun's gonna get too hot. We don't live with social security. We have to, they have to work at things, and they have to be out in the sun some times. And He told me, He said, "You tell them they can't get into debt. Cuz' they can't work in this sun, it's fixin to get hotter and hotter." And it is. I read Revelations, and it's a tellin about it. I know what's going on. Whole world's in a mess. [Addresses the heavens.] Lord we need your people to be saved. We need it.

As we travel down the scale toward decreasing literacy, decreasing quality of schooling, decreasing job quality, and so on, individuals become epistemologically segregated from modern science. The country homesteaders are unlikely to have read a high-quality popular science book, they have not had a decent lab course or taken a substantial science class, they don't drink beers on the weekend with a molecular biologist, and they may be exposed at church to passionate and explicit attacks on certain basic scientific ideas. Under these conditions, the blank spots on the map grow, and the world becomes less mundane and more mysterious. Social security numbers are the number of the beast. The US federal government has been taken over by an elite cabal based in the United Nations, who are setting up a New World Order and have used FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) to prepare concentration camps where they will round up all dissenters. Operatives fly around in black helicopters. Aliens are here and are playing a major role behind the scenes; the government knows this, and has covered it up. There are people who can perform black magic. Ghosts are real, and you'd be a fool not to know it. Exorcisms are real. Again, a shared underlying theme is using subsistence production to distance and shield yourself, but the images of what you are protecting yourself multiply, ominously and with little restraint.

The bohemians as a group are better book-educated – less epistemologically segregated – and their worries about the future are shaped accordingly. A given bohemian homesteader is likely to have read at least some popular science, to have taken a college science course, to personally know a working scientist, et cetera. Their level of familiarity is not, as a group, sufficient to constrain all the wild theories, but the level of constraint-by-evidence is much greater than for the country homesteaders as a group. As a result, many bohemian homesteaders focus their concern about the future primarily on

secular problems. Rebecca Meeks, for example, a long-term homesteader and college professor, was particularly concerned about the fragility of the mainstream economy.

Our economic system is a house of cards, and it could fall at any time. Cause it's based upon continued growth, and people buying things they don't need. I think there would be some really neat young people who might like to come share this space [her homestead], if it did, you know, collapse. [Laughs.] Even with that not being such a seeming possibility in my mind, I remember when I traveled in the British Isles – that was in the early eighties – and I went to Wales, I just felt like – it's just like Appalachia. There's a way in which these people are survivors. And they know how to do practical things. You can laugh about this area all you want, but if people need a porch, they go out and buy some nails and some wood and they build themselves a porch. It's an area where people still know how to take care of themselves. And even though there's been a lot of welfare culture, there's a lot of people – travel around the United States and hardly anyplace do you see the kind of gardens that you see here. People grow gardens here, and they eat their food, you know. To me, this is a healthier economy in a way, even though it's poor, because it's a real economy. I'm still really attracted to that idea of self-sufficiency.

The bohemians as a group also have a strong sense of specific environmental threats. With the fading of nuclear holocaust as the dominant fear, human-caused environmental damage has become, for many of them, the dominant declensionist theme. This passage from Cody Shuler was echoed in many interviews and conversations:

I grew up pretty aware that previous generations had not perceived of our natural resources as finite. But being very aware that they were and that they were being consumed rapidly – you know, I was eight years old when the oil embargo hit. It was mainly economic, but it was easy to recognize there was more to it than that as well. I'm from one of the earliest generations that was raised with the awareness that the end was in sight, the end of our resources. The end of the trees. The end of the oil, was tangible in human terms.

One of the hallmarks of this theme of ecological damage is that there are so many environmental problems that they glom together in people's minds into one huge mass. It is this mass that towers over the future – even for the well educated – rather than any one particular issue. This fusing together is a large part of what makes environmental degradation so convincing as the horseman of the apocalypse for the 21st century: global warming, overpopulation, groundwater depletion, oceanic fisheries collapse, soil erosion, the build-up of environmental toxins, invasive exotic species. Taken one at a time, each of these might seem daunting but not like the end of the world. Taken all together, as a single mass, they tend to drive people directly to the feeling that the end is nigh.

Margaret Bingham succinctly captures the way that a diverse set of (real) problems combined, during her youth, into a unified sense of doom:

You know 1968 of course being such a watershed time, and the Civil Rights movement being such a big part of things, and then remembering the war in Vietnam, I remember being extremely affected by that, being really depressed about it, crying a lot about the state of the world...The emphasis on ecology was really important, *Silent Spring* and all those things that started coming out then...And that winter my mother's teacher's union was on strike, too. So here we were on strike, walking the picket line with my mother, gas prices – I mean it felt like the world was just gonna fall apart. And so that idea that you could provide for yourself, that you could stock-up-back-to-the-land thing was definitely in there as part of the mix. And then my already understood feeling like I wanted to be in the country, it was definitely this idea of ok, if I can go live in the country I can take care of myself.

The bohemian homesteaders also tend to put their declensionist ideas in a spiritual framework, but a Christian cosmology is not dominant, and is often explicitly rejected. Thus, for example, global warming is understood by some homesteaders as a sort of expected outcome of spiritually-dead western science. It's not the Second Coming. It's not the wrath of an offended deity. But it does represent the wages of, if not sin, then a kind of technological hubris and widespread immorality – the metaphysical fruit of wrong livelihood and greed.

Instead of seeing science as fundamentally mysterious and ominous, as many of the country homesteaders do, the tendency among bohemian homesteaders is to see science as limited, ethnocentric, and spiritually bereft. Many bohemian homesteaders look toward alternative ethnosciences – or the versions of those presented in New Age books – as sources of a purer, more whole form of knowledge. Consider someone like Cody Shuler, college-educated and literate, who spoke in chapter six about developing a syncretic spirituality out of different religious traditions from around the world. Jews taking over the United Nations? He wouldn't find that plausible. Obama as the anti-Christ? Nope. Social security numbers as the mark of the beast? Nope. But the Maya predicting the end of the world, since they had a better understanding of the universe than modern scientists? He found that claim plausible, and along with his wife, began stocking up to prepare for 2012. He bought a crossbow, for example, to be able to hunt deer and turkey even after bullets were no longer available.¹⁴

6. Environmental sustainability and social activism

Most of the above goals involve distancing from the mainstream – changing yourself (not alone, but in concert with a small, local community), rather than trying to change the world. Which begs a question: Do homesteaders see homesteading as a form

¹⁴ Berea gained fifteen minutes of fame for being named, in a prominent New Age book, as one of the best places to whether the Mayan apocalypse (Joseph 2008).

of activism, in the sense of a strategy for fostering broader social change? Is that one of the many goals they imagine for homesteading?

As we have seen, the two groups of homesteaders for the most part pursue different, if overlapping, versions of the same goals. However, pursuing homesteading as a form of activism does not follow this pattern; it is one of the few goals that is embraced by one group, but not the other. Not every bohemian sees their homesteading as a form of activism, but most of them do; country homesteaders generally do not see it that way. It is not difficult to understand why. Bohemian homesteaders, in general, feel that their homesteading counts as activism when two conditions are met: 1) They are, or hope to become, engaged in some sort of outreach, which makes a broader population aware of homesteading as a possible way of life. 2) Their homesteading is only one form of activism among others that they are engaged in, such as anti-war protests or showing up for the Fairness Ordinance hearings. These conditions apply to many, if not most bohemian homesteaders, but generally not to country homesteaders. Outside of the educated liberals – the larger group from which the bohemian homesteaders are drawn – there is very little social and political activism in the MERJ area. Most country residents have no experience whatsoever with protest marches, labor strikes, sit-ins, voter registration drives, or something as simple as writing letters to the editor. This makes it unlikely that they will think of their own actions within an activist framework, even when those actions could plausibly be counted as a kind of social activism.

In the rest of this section, I will focus on the bohemian's ideas about homesteading as a form of activism. In addition to using material from my own interviews, surveys, and observations, I will draw on a survey of thirty bohemian homesteaders performed by Tammy Clemons in 2005. The survey asked a number of questions relevant to the discussion here, such as: *Do you consider yourself an activist? Please list the activist organizations that you have been or are currently involved in.* And, *Do you consider homesteading a part of your activism? Why or why not?*

Most respondents did consider their homesteading to be part of their activism, but let us start by looking at a couple of individuals who did not. Ann Edmunds felt that her homesteading was not a form of activism, “because I’m not actively promoting my homesteading lifestyle and values to the rest of the world.” Ann demonstrates the criteria I mentioned above: for it to count as activism, there has to be outreach, which is a logical distinction. It is interesting to note that she is being quite stringent in the application of this criterion: there are many ways in which she does, I would argue, engage in outreach. She played a central role in developing the “MERJ Market project,” which was an attempt to create a rural store and “sustainable community center” that would serve as a focal point in the “local food and product network.” She and her husband, Cody Shuler, host workshops on homesteading and wildcrafting skills. They often have Berea College students live and work on their property. They run a small-scale CSA, which involves local consumers directly in alternative food production. My point here is that bohemian homesteaders are not simply assuming, willy-nilly, that subsistence production counts as a form of activism. It’s a question that they care about and take seriously.

Another homesteader, George Shotwell, has been deeply engaged in activist projects for many decades. He was director of local non-profit organization, where he

“helped citizens develop skills, make plans and conduct projects, and build effective organizations to address community issues.” He also worked closely with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, for example. Like Ann Edmunds, George takes a minority view, concluding that his homesteading does not count as activism *per se*, largely because, as with Ann, it is not “out in the world.” However, it is also clear that he does not see it as unrelated or irrelevant to his activism, either. In response to the question, “Do you consider homesteading a part of your activism?” George wrote:

Sort of, although in itself it seems relatively minor. Having built a passive solar home and heating with wood, largely from our land, and raising some of our food has helped to shape my perspective on life and our world, and this forms an important foundation from which my life and my work proceed. Mostly, though, it is where I rest and recharge my batteries, in part by working on small and large “homestead” projects (construction, maintenance, woodworking, landscaping, electronics, small engines), and pursue my spiritual practice. I consider my real activism to take place “out in the world.”

For most bohemian homesteaders in the MERJ area, homesteading is seen as a form of activism – and, not surprisingly, as a remarkably polyvalent form of activism. According to this view, if the US population in general were to shift toward more subsistence and locally-based production, it would have a wide array of beneficial effects, from helping to de-fund the corporate elite to reducing the consumption of fossil fuels to loosening the grip of pop culture on the minds of young people. (I am not endorsing or critiquing these claims here, which would take many pages; I’m just describing them.)

This multi-faceted character is a theme that runs through interviews, conversations, and survey responses. A homesteader named Dave Easterling, for example, used homesteading as a form of environmental activism and as a means to work against the funding of war, writing that “Seed saving was an important part of homesteading for me, and living several years as an adult without a car. In addition I was part of the war tax resisters league so I tried to earn under the amount for federal tax for several years.”

Pat Cleary sees homesteading as unambiguously a form of activism. For her, it works as effective activism in part because she is actually living in an alterative manner, instead of simply preaching about unrealized possibilities. Pat and her partner Grace perform outreach in a number of ways, for example by including their home in an annual Solar Home Tour.

The way I choose to participate politically is I vote every time the doors are open. And also try to be an example – that’s my big thing, that’s the reason the [solar powered] car is so important, the wildcrafting, and living without the coal. Is to be an example, you know, to be exactly what I say I believe.

But another reason homesteading works as activism, she feels, is because it withdraws resources from dominant political-economic circuits.

Jason: So your homesteading is a practical, down-to-earth, working example?

Pat: An example of why we don't have to do it their way. You know which to me is the utmost – it's my chosen form so of course I would think it's the utmost form of resistance. It's the same thing Gandhi did: stop, you don't need what they are offering you. Stop needing it. Don't need their TV. Don't need their coal. Don't need their gasoline. Then you cripple them, then you're in control.

Jason: Right. So it's a political act. It's a political critique.

Pat: It is. Yes. You know, it's one thing to be standing up on a soap box and then go home and turn on your cable, you know what I'm saying? [Laughs.] So I don't want to be that person.

Another theme that runs through discussions of activism is the way that homesteading is seen as just another mode of activism – another arrow in an activist's quiver, so to speak. A homesteader named Stephen Glass became involved in homesteading twelve years ago, but only after years of urban activist work. He was involved in wide array of campaigns and issues: "Food Not Bombs, Earth First!, grassroots campaigns working to free political prisoners, grassroots campaigns struggling against rural and urban poverty and homelessness, and Rainforest Action Network." He helped to start the chapter of Food Not Bombs in Athens, Georgia. Asked to summarize the missions of some of these organizations and efforts, he wrote a remarkably diverse list: "the connection between militarism and poverty, homelessness, corporate globalization, deep ecology, single issue ecological campaigns like illegally harvested mahogany from Brazilian rainforest tribal land, Appalachian chip mills, Watts Bar nuke plant in Tennessee." For Stephen, because it involves "working towards the creation of a local economy based on food security," homesteading is simply another means of working on most of these same issues.

While homesteading is seen as a multi-purpose or multi-issue form of activism, in many accounts there is one set of problems that come to the fore: environmental issues. In terms of its activist potential, homesteaders in the MERJ area see homesteading as above all a step toward a more sustainable society. This jibes with the findings of Jeffrey Jacob, who wrote one of the few scholarly books on the contemporary back-to-the-land movement (1997). Rebecca Gould – who wrote the other book – portrays the back-to-the-land movement in New England to be above all a spiritual movement (2005). Jacob, drawing on a survey of over a thousand homesteaders all around North America, portrays the back-to-the-land movement as, above all, an environmental movement. These findings are not incompatible; rather, they reinforce my own finding in the MERJ area, that homesteading is seen, by bohemian homesteaders at least, as *both* a spiritual and an environmental movement.

The emphasis on environmental concerns is clear in a number of interviews and survey responses. Dan Mead is a man in his early fifties who has been homesteading since the mid-1980s. He brings an engineering background to his subsistence projects, which cover an amazing range, from beekeeping to sawing out lumber. With a couple of partners, he also refurbished an abandoned hydroelectric plant on the Kentucky River, which generates power again for several hundred homes. Asked why he chose to homestead, he wrote:

With apologies to Henry David Thoreau, “I came to the woods to live directly,” to find out what one could reasonably provide for oneself outside the conventional economy. It had a lot to do with self-reliance, which I think of as providing a meaningful amount of one’s requirements for oneself (as opposed to self sufficiency which I think of as providing the majority of one’s requirements for oneself). It was sort of an experiment to see what was really needed for “the good life.” It was driven by concerns about environmental impact and social justice. My Masters Degree is in Science, Technology, and Values, essentially a critique of modern industrial capitalist society by the radical humanities and social science professors at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, which is mostly an engineering school. Sort of an antidote to Engineering (with a large E as opposed to engineering with a small e).

Another homesteader, Forrest Grant, grew up Lexington, Kentucky and went back-to-the-land in the first wave in the early 1970s. He has participated in a number of activist projects, including helping to found the natural foods cooperative in Lexington, which is still running, many years later. Forrest felt that homesteading was a form of activism, “because it still makes a statement that you believe that living gently on/with the land can make a difference in the micro environment.”

Well-educated homesteaders who grew up in rural Appalachian families share the emphasis on environmental concerns, even as they register other influences and concerns. Katie Gowan and her husband bought a farm in Jackson County several years ago.

I think the main reason I live the way I do is because of the way I was raised. I come from a long line of farmers and as long as I can remember canning and gardening has been a part of who I am. I also grew up with a wood stove and had to gather wood for every winter. This is a way of life in which my family has lived for generations. When I became an adult, I more seriously looked at building a life that helped to protect my family’s health and the environment’s. With that thought, we used almost all recycled materials in building our home, use wood as a source of warmth and limit the amount of chemical-laden food by food produced or gathered from our farm.

In many cases, any activist outreach activities on a particular homestead are added on; they're not integral to the homestead. In other cases, however, outreach is built in from the beginning. During her time as a student at Berea College, Jessa Turner dreamed about developing a piece of land into a kind of homesteading school, where people could come to learn new, up-to-date subsistence practices. She wrote:

My goal upon graduation is to purchase land where I can start an ecological design school geared toward the needs of Appalachia. I would like to do this near Berea in order to remain an active part of this vibrant community and possibly to work in conjunction with the SENS [Sustainability and Environmental Studies] program at the college. No matter what I do, I will continue to educate others through word and deed to the best of my ability. Activism isn't what you do, it's who you are.

And that's what she did. She and her husband, Nathan Turner, bought a piece of land in Red Lick Valley and turned it into Homegrown Hideaways, where they hold a growing number of popular workshops, retreats, and festivals which draw in people from all around the region and the country. One such event is the annual Whippoorwill Festival, which is described on their website:

The goal of the Whippoorwill Festival is to promote sustainable living in Appalachia by sharing earth-friendly living skills with one another in a positive, healthy, family-friendly atmosphere. The Whippoorwill Festival celebrates our Appalachian heritage while helping prepare our minds and bodies for a future world of climate change and a diminished supply of fossil fuels. The festival is an all-volunteer, multi-day, low-cost event with simultaneous workshops, tent camping, healthy, home-cooked meals, guest speakers, plus old-time and mountain music, dancing, and story-telling in the evenings. (Cooper 2012)

Let me close by returning to a point already mentioned above. For many of the bohemians, homesteading is attractive as an activist strategy above all because it is a form of *action*. It is not just something you do a couple of times a year, when the protest march is on. It's not just talk. It's not something you go do and then return to your normal life. It is a re-fashioning of life itself. As a young homesteader named Hannah Goodwin says:

Homesteading counts as activism because it is putting all the feelings I have about the way I should live and work into action. There is no real way to separate it from my activism because it makes up so much of my ideals about life. I want to live by example, not force people to live as I do but make it visual and get out the message that it is possible to live more sustainably, in whatever stage of life.

7. A distancing from modernity

Why do people homestead? The answer, in short, is that they do so because it seems like a really good idea. They are confronted by what they see as a frightening mass of problems; by a modernity that has run off the rails and threatens to take everyone down with it. The specific problems that individuals perceive and emphasize, and the way they comprehend those problems, differs dramatically, primarily according to their level of literate education. Nonetheless, *everyone* – from homesteaders who have never read, to homesteaders with PhDs who hardly ever stop reading – senses that we face serious challenges, and homesteading appears to represent a promising strategy for responding to those challenges.

With one exception, I have not tried to judge the success of homesteading at meeting the goals variously imagined for it. The exception is the use of subsistence production as a means of changing one's relationship with the job market, which is a goal that many homesteading families did appear to be able to meet, at least to some degree. Whether or not homesteading is successful at meeting the other goals discussed in the chapter would be genuinely difficult to assess. Is it an effective form of social activism? Figuring out the actual effects of a form of activism is an empirical nightmare. Is it an effective form of spiritual practice? I'm not even sure what criteria one would use to answer that question. Is it a good way to prepare for social, economic, environmental, or cosmic collapse? I hope I never find out. These are important questions; I neglected them here because they would require a different kind of research, not because they aren't important or interesting. Thus, my argument in this chapter is not that homesteading is an unusually *effective* social practice. Rather, it's that homesteading is an unusually protean and flexible social practice, something that people turn to for a surprising variety of reasons.

I would also argue that contemporary homesteading should be accounted as a vigorous social movement. In the MERJ area, at least, it shows little signs of abating, and it is actively, consciously embraced by participants as a form of resistance, and – in many cases – activism. Will homesteading replace industry? No. Will it shut down the plutocracy and usher in real democracy? No. Will it bring an end to wars and famines? No. But at the same time, it does represent a profound critique of modern US life. Stepping onto a homestead where subsistence is vigorously pursued is like stepping across a border into another country. The buildings are different. The food is different. What people do with their time is different. The smells and sounds and stories are all different. It is easy to forget how fully mainstream families have become ensconced within the industrial, capitalist-driven economy: easy to forget that many young adults have never built a useful object or grown a plant or gutted their supper; have never slept outside; have never lit a fire; have never solved a meaningful practical problem on their own. When I take college students on field trips to local homesteads, they are blown away. "I had no idea that people lived like this," one student wrote. At a minimum, contemporary homesteading in the US provides, for those who encounter it, a moment of interruption, where the taken-for-granted moldings of life are torn away, and it becomes palpably clear that there are other ways to be.

I began the dissertation by noting the ironic vitality of rural subsistence production in the heart of a high-tech industrial modern society. Many people, it appears, are turning to homesteading in the hope that they can thereby resist or remove themselves from what they perceive as the failures of that modern society. Practitioners of homesteading, of all stripes, typically see it as a way to distance themselves from the dominant society and economy – but that society is variously imagined. Individual homesteaders have been so strongly shaped by their experience of dominant social structures that they cannot help but carry that shaping into their practice of homesteading. I may grow my own food, which is not a capitalist form of production. But the reasons why I grow my own food are themselves heavily influenced by my position, and the position of my family, in a predominantly capitalist division of labor. Thus, there is a further irony here: namely, that even as they turn to homesteading, they enter into it as people indelibly marked by the system they dream of escaping.

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