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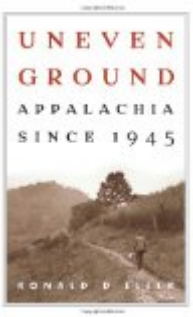
Ronald D. Eller. *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 376 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2523-7.



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Commissioned by Brian D. McKnight (Angelo State University)

In *Uneven Ground*, historian Ronald D. Eller offers a Braudelian narrative of the social, economic, and political transformation of Appalachia after the Second World War. Focusing primarily on the relationship between relief and development efforts and the deteriorating postwar mountain communities and economy, Eller's study stands as an indictment of failed governmental policies, faulty theories and models, and corporate greed and irresponsibility. From the acceleration of Appalachia's postwar economy to the contemporary grassroots efforts to halt mountain-top removal mining practices, *Uneven Ground* covers a staggering amount of historical terrain and fills a long-overdue gap in the region's historiography.

Uneven Ground's six chapters are chronologically organized around the region's most significant socioeconomic developments and challenges as well as the policies, policymakers, and organizations engaged in attempting to bring "progress" to mountain communities. Chapter 1 recounts the transformative decade following World War II in Appalachia. Eller argues that the expansion of Appalachia's postwar economy was "flawed" and ultimately led to "growth without [infrastructural] development" (p. 11). As the coal industry boomed amid soaring markets and technological innovation, Appalachia experienced debilitating out-migration, increased absentee land ownership, environmental devastation, agricultural collapse, rising unemployment, and limited non-resource extraction economic development. Confronted with an increasingly desperate regional constituency, Appalachia's political leadership proved ineffective in transcending the region's corrupt "feudal political system" and providing resolutions to the systemic problems within the mountains (p. 35). The failure of native political leaders to offer solutions to rising regional poverty and economic inequality led to the widespread belief that federal intervention within the mountains was necessary to improve life in Appalachia.

Beginning with the Kennedy administration's efforts to eradicate poverty, chapters 2 and 3 of *Uneven Ground* trace the rediscovery of Appalachia by federal policymakers and social scien-

tists as the symbol of underdevelopment in the "other America." Building on the internal colony model, Kensyian economic theory, and the work of local activists like Whitesburg, Kentucky, native Harry Caudill, the Kennedy administration launched an ambitious federal development program in Appalachia. In collaboration with the Conference of Appalachian Governors, the Kennedy administration initiated an effort aimed at securing developmental funds for the region from federal coffers. With the establishment of the President's Appalachian Regional Commission (PARC), headed by Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., the Democratic Party believed it was poised to embark on a second Appalachian New Deal. After John F. Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson reluctantly pledged to continue to support Appalachia's infrastructural development and made the region one of the centerpieces of his War on Poverty. With the passage of the Appalachian Regional Development Act (ARDA) in 1965, the establishment of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), and the media's intensifying interest in the region's impoverished residents, the contours of the federal government's poverty strategy became evident across the mountains.

In chapter 3, Eller also delves into the inherent flaws associated with these federal development efforts and the cultural misconceptions policymakers and nonnative reformers embraced in their efforts to acculturate Appalachians into the middle class. As wave upon wave of activists began working in Appalachia, the culture of poverty theory governed their regional worldview and dictated their actions. The intense focus on Appalachia's cultural backwardness engendered a regional backlash from native activists who challenged the acculturation principle and demanded institutional reform and economic equality. As the War on Poverty suffered budgetary cutbacks related to America's escalating involvement in Southeast Asia and Appalachians and their advocates rejected the culture of poverty model, Appalachian grassroots activism, scholarship, and cultural identity underwent a "renaissance" (p. 132).

In chapter 4, Eller chronicles the radicalization of outside activist groups, like the Appalachian Volunteers (AV), and the growth of grassroots economic and environmental community action. Driven by the internal colony model, Appalachian outsiders and natives increasingly challenged longstanding hegemonic political and economic structures, organized community activist groups, and demanded greater local control over relief efforts and federal funds. As Appalachians mobilized for the "Poverty Wars," regional grassroots activists demanded welfare reform, the end of political corruption, and the removal of "barriers to reform" (pp. 142, 152). It is also within chapter 4 that Eller takes sharp aim at the coal industry and the devastating consequences of mechanization, strip-mining, and inadequate mine safety measures. As the Nixon administration dismantled the War on Poverty programs, Appalachian activists and grassroots organizations launched campaigns aimed at ending strip-mining, providing health benefits for miners suffering from black lung, and improving mine safety. Eller argues that the transformation of established organizations (i.e., Council of the Southern Mountains [CSM]) and the emergence of new organizations led to a dramatic shift in policy and principles related to Appalachian poverty and underdevelopment. The controversial and often degrading policy of Appalachian acculturation gave way to a "new regional consciousness" fostered by internal demands for environmental protections, economic justice, and political autonomy (p. 170).

During the 1970s, Appalachia's new "regional consciousness," the emergence of Appalachian studies programs and centers, and a growing national interest in mountain culture continued to fuel the "Appalachian movement" (pp. 170-175). As Appalachian scholars increasingly rejected the antiquated ideas of cultural exceptionalism and backwardness as the root of regional poverty, the

creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the passage of Appalachian Regional Development Act (ARDA), and federal and state policymakers' reliance on economic "growth theory" signaled a new federal commitment to "modernizing" the mountains. These new federal development initiatives promoted regional urbanization, infrastructural improvement, and the concentration of development funds in select areas of the region deemed to possess the most growth potential. Appalachian advocates rejected growth-based development as the solution to mountain poverty, and instead argued that misdirected regional growth efforts throughout the twentieth century resulted in the destructive practices of absentee landownership, strip-mining, and crippling endemic poverty.

In *Uneven Ground*'s final chapter, Eller offers a trenchant assessment of today's Appalachia. As Appalachian scholars and activists increasingly honed their critique of federal development policies and their underlying principles in the region, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a severe economic downturn within the mountains and an accompanying shift in Appalachia's economy from rural manufacturing to the service sector. As Appalachians embraced "American consumer culture," the region increasingly became indistinguishable from "average America" (p. 221). The region's service-oriented economic development masked the underlying problems that continued to plague the region, including the absence of a tax base, continued corporate environmental abuses, low wages, absentee landownership, political corruption, drug addiction, and the loss of traditional culture and values. Despite the continued emphasis on growth-based developmental initiatives, regional gains remained insufficient and unequally distributed. As Appalachians welcomed the twenty-first century, regional advocates continued to grapple with the legacy of twentieth-century policy failures and entrenched problems with very little hope for true reform.

It should come as little surprise to regional scholars, activists, and students that Eller has written such a masterfully tragic narrative of Appalachia during the second half of the twentieth century. His book ***Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization in the Mountain South, 1880-1930*** (1982) remains a powerful and seminal work on the region's early rural industrialization and consequences to mountain residents, communities, and the environment nearly three decades after its publication. In ***Uneven Ground***, Eller continues his effort to expose the underlying causes of Appalachian economic inequality, underdevelopment, and cultural disintegration. The only significant criticism of the book is that Eller fails to offer solutions to Appalachia's enduring challenges, but perhaps he is reserving these for his next book. Despite this shortcoming, ***Uneven Ground*** is a must-read for scholars, students, activists, and policymakers who hope to make sense of Appalachia's modern landscape.

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