

No Neutrals There: The Cultural Class Struggle in the Harlan Miners' Strike of 1931-32*

FLAGS

In 1921, twenty thousand armed miners marched upon Blair Mountain in Logan County, West Virginia. They were stopped by a private army owned by the operators, which did not hesitate to bomb them from airplanes. The marchers were patriotic citizens, and many were veterans of World War I. The American flag waved at their head. The operators' private army also claimed that they stood for principles—free enterprise and private property—which flourish under the American flag. To prevent these two armies from destroying each other, federal troops stepped in. No need to ask which flag this third army was waving.¹

Let us leave for the moment these three armies under one flag, and move forward ten years and a few miles further southwest. At the end of the winter of 1930-31, the miners around Black Mountain in Harlan County, Kentucky, began to organize and plan a strike. Wage cuts and unemployment following a slump in the already severely depressed coal industry had brought thousands of families to the verge of starvation, while deputy sheriffs and company guards and created a "virtual reign of terror"² that effectively frightened the United Mine Workers of America away from the area. "You could talk with any of these [miners] about striking," says Tillman Cadle, a retired miner and organizer, and "they'd say it wouldn't

make any difference: if you struck, you starved; if you worked, you starved. There's no difference. So it had just come down to just a matter of starvation and war against starvation, that's what it all come down to."

Miners evicted from the company coal camps at Black Mountain moved to the "free" town of Everts, where rank-and-file leaders like W. B. Jones, William Hightower and others continued independently to organize. Up to two thousand miners marched through the county to demonstrate and recruit, walking "behind Jones and his organizers riding in an open car with the American Flag."³ On 5 May 1931, gunfire opened at Everts between a police-escorted convoy of non-strikers driving toward Black Mountain and a group of union men. In the battle, three deputies and one miner were killed. Kentucky's governor sent in the National Guard; and Jones and the other rank-and-file leaders were jailed and later tried and sentenced to death (they were finally freed in 1941). A few weeks after the "battle of Everts," organizers from the National Miners Union, a Communist-led dual union, came to Harlan, and began to organize around the Straight Creek area.

Aunt Molly Jackson, a midwife, daughter of a fundamentalist preacher, and wife of a Harlan miner, worked around the union soup kitchens, spoke at meetings, and wrote songs which later became well-known among urban radicals. One of her songs, based on a hymn tune, said:

The bosses ride their big fine white horse
While we walk in the mud
Their flag's the big red, white, and blue
While ours is dipped in blood.⁴

CHARACTERS

The Appalachian Mountains have been discovered twice in their history: first, at the turn of the century, as a precious reservoir of natural and cultural wealth—timber, coal, ballads, stories, and crafts; and second, in the mid-1960s, as a problematic "pocket of poverty" and a testing ground of the "culture of poverty" theories which were then popular.⁵ Thus, while the federal government created programs of economic opportunity, sociological and anthropological research sought in the people's culture the causes of their poverty.

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In one of the most authoritative sociological syntheses, Thomas R. Ford summed up the region's cultural characters under such headings as "Individualism and Self-Reliance," "Traditionalism and Fatalism," and "Religious Fundamentalism."⁶

While empirical surveys appear to support these conclusions, it is not easy to reconcile these terms with the Logan and Harlan Counties scenarios of conflict. Again and again, in the course of their history, these "individualistic" and "fatalistic" people have combined to try to change their fate. In less dramatic but more pervading forms, these traditionalistic people turned, in the course of one generation or less, from "self-sufficient" farmers to wage workers in the industrial context of mines and railroads. Later, they moved in mass to northern cities. Many mountain people from the mining districts have probably gone through more changes in their lives than the supposedly mobile urban middle class.

Individualism is just as problematic (for one thing, it is not easily reconciled with traditionalism and fatalism). Thomas R. Bell then wrote about the family of Jim Garland (Aunt Molly Jackson's half-brother): "[They] prided themselves on their independent thinking, but his father had understood enough about the impersonal economic weight massed against them to join the United Mine Workers of America."⁷ To a foreign observer, the puzzling word here is "but." Trained as we are to believe that the first thing an independent-minded worker does is join the union, we would expect a "therefore" instead. In the relatively egalitarian context of pre-industrial Appalachia, however, "self-sufficiency" meant that one was independent not of one's (nonexistent, invisible, absentee, or "impersonal") superiors, but of one's neighbors and peers. Husking bees and roof raisings notwithstanding, the "proud mountaineer" needs no one's help and solidarity. Thus, by joining the union and trying collective action (perhaps encouraged by their new and less "individualistic" immigrant neighbors), mountaineer people declared that these earlier ideologies were no longer adequate.

On the other hand, the empirical evidence of Ford's traits cannot be disregarded. It may reveal a discrepancy between subjectively articulated attitudes—values, desires, or nostalgia—and collectively practiced ones. Or it may reflect the fact that these values are being held onto *as values* precisely because the practices were by necessity so different, the changes were so dramatic, and choice and need were so inextricably interwoven. Tradition and change, plus individualism and solidarity may stand in a more complex re-

lationship than sheer opposition. Tradition may supply—as in Molly Jackson's song—the linguistic forms enabling the expression of new ideas. On the other hand, the discrepancy between values and practices may deprive individuals of the means to recognize and even to name their own actions, and thus to legitimize and consolidate them.

In this essay I will try to analyze how, in the face of unprecedented conditions and finding themselves led to unprecedented actions, miners attempted to legitimize their choices in terms of their traditional culture, of religion, and patriotism. The symbols, words, and sources of legitimacy of this culture were shared with the operators, and the institutions of the state. The consequence was a fierce class struggle for the control of meaning; and this aspect of the conflict influenced the outcome and aftermath of the struggle as a whole.

CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS

In 1932, Arthur Garfield Hays, on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote a letter to the Bell County Attorney Walter B. Smith expressing concern for the violations of civil rights in Harlan and Bell Counties. In his reply, Smith wrote: "The people of Bell County are fundamentalists in politics, religion, and social economies. They are perfectly satisfied with the government of the United States as it is now administered."⁸

Walter B. Smith was one of the fiercest opponents of the strike. His formulation of beliefs, however, might have been shared by the strikers themselves. As one writer for the *New York Times* put it, "The rise and decline of the coal industry in Harlan and Bell County have not erased the religious and patriotic tenets of operators or miners."⁹ The rulers and the ruled, operators and miners, appear to share a common cultural substratum, based on patriotism and religion in their "fundamentalist" mode, and on the relative language and symbols. Given the existing conflict, the question is, however, whether these shared principles meant the same things and operated in the same way for both sides.

"The Appalachian character," says Harlan journalist Ewell Balltrip, is "fiercely patriotic. These people, the people who settled Appalachia were the dregs of society from England and Scotland and Ireland, you know; and they were the very people who were waving the flag of glory, you know, when the declaration of inde-

whereby you might make the condition better for your neighbor and your neighbor's little children. . . . You are denied every privilege that the United States gives you by unjust judges, [who] forbid us every privilege that the Constitution of the United States guarantees a man.

Precisely this discovery that "all your rights have been taken away," as a speaker put it to a mass meeting at Pineville, startled and enraged the miners. "You see, people were so steeped in this idea that people have equal rights. And they come to find out, by God, they didn't have rights. See, they didn't understand, that they was bein' . . . that they was in the hands of the state," says Tillman Cadle. The lesson was soon learned by the sympathizers who came to bring assistance to the strikers.

TILLMAN CADLE. They put all the members of this committee, you see, they put them under house arrest, and a bunch of vigilantes and thugs and things, they took them to the state line and beat them up, and they had a lawyer there, he'd come in from New York, to see that they got their constitutional rights, and they just poked fun at them about their constitutional rights. They would say to one before they beat him up, they would say, maybe you'd like to get your attorney to give . . . make you a . . . an address on your constitutional rights. Just making fun of the Constitution, you see. And, so, [the strikers] had an old song 'bout "come on mama and go my bail, take me out of this buggy jail"—well, then, they added a verse on, there. "Come on mama and go my bail, take me out of this buggy jail, 'cause all of my rights been taken away" . . . They had broken all the laws, there was no laws for us whatever . . . What you get to feelin', that your whole country has betrayed you.

To some of the miners, as contemporary news stories reported, this betrayal seemed final. "One miner, a veteran of the World War, spent his bonus check for a supply of rifles. A mountaineer of Anglo-Saxon lineage, he made no secret about it. He told the court he preferred living in Russia to Harlan County."¹² Commenting on the breaking up of a parade of miners marching under the Stars and Stripes, one miner said, "By God, if they won't let us march under the American flag, we'll march under the Red flag."¹³

The very verbal extremism of some of these statements, however, has the sound of angry, intentional blasphemy rather than

pence was signed. Sure, you know—to hell with Great Britain. And so the ancestry of the people in this area, you can trace it directly back to the . . . the patriotic beginnings of this country." From the revolutionary era to the world wars and Vietnam, from the Watauga Association and the battle of King's Mountain to the legendary war hero from Appalachia, Sergeant Alvin Cullum York, Appalachia indeed boasts "more than our share of heroes."¹⁰

Describing strike meetings in Harlan County, John Dos Passos stressed these revolutionary associations: "I never felt the actuality of the American revolution so intensely." NMU organizer Jim Garland sees a typological relationship between his struggle and the American revolution, when he sings that if police and thugs try to get him "there'll be another Boston Tea Party." Findlay "Red Ore" Donaldson, a miner and a Holiness preacher, told a strike meeting that "The National Miners Union stands for the principles that our forefathers fought for at Bunker Hill." Mary Nick, a 13-year-old miner's daughter, wrote a song, *The Miner's Blues*, in which she claimed, "We must all be united/We will march through the land/Then we will be free Americans and get our full demands."¹¹

However, while Attorney Smith claimed that the people of Harlan and Bell "approve . . . the government of the United States as it is now administered" (the New Deal was yet to come), Findlay "Red Ore" Donaldson declared to cheering miners that "our nation and country [are being] handled by corrupt men," and added "I love my children today ten thousand times better than I love Herbert Hoover."

Although both sides appeal to the Constitution as a source of authority and to democracy as an ideal, they interpret them in sharply contrasting ways. We also believe in freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of movement," wrote Smith to Hays; however, the people of Bell County "do not approve th[e] doctrines [of the American Civil Liberties Union], nor do they acknowledge that any man, or any such organization, or any group of persons representing it have any Constitutional rights in Bell County, that any person is bound to respect." On the other hand, Findlay "Red Ore" Donaldson told the strikers:

I love the flag of the United States—I love the name of America, but I want to tell you what I hate. I hate the men that handles this country of ours . . . I want to say to you my friends, that the miners of the State of Kentucky is today being worse mistreated than Slaves in Slave Times. You are denied the privilege of meeting out and discussing ways and means

When the Everts miners came up for trial, their very use of the American flag was turned against them. The attorney for the prosecution claimed that their leader, W. B. Jones, "carried an American flag, but the red flag . . . was in his heart."¹⁶ It was essential for the prosecution to prove that the striking miners had stepped beyond the commonly recognized cultural boundaries, and therefore out of the protection guaranteed by the authority of the Constitution and the symbol of the flag.

While strikers were denied the use of this symbol, the courts wrapped themselves in it. As Circuit Judge D. C. Jones instructed the jury that was trying Theodore Dreiser after his unfortunate trip to Harlan and Pineville to investigate the strike:

You have two parties in America . . . If one party is not functioning, kick it out and put in another. You don't have to haul down the Stars and Stripes and put up the red flag of Russia to do it . . . Every thread of the Stars and Stripes was purchased at the greatest price ever paid for any flag. . . . It is a disgrace not only to you but to the dead that sleeps in the grave [if] you get wobbledy in your patriotism just because a little depression has hit you.¹⁷

Incidentally, the Everts strike leader W. B. Jones was never a "red," and was often attacked by the Communists; but the strategy of denying the legitimacy of the workers' use of national symbols to label them with hostile, un-American ones was too attractive.

Long before the NMU ever came into Harlan County, the red threat was being agitated by the local authorities and press; whether they belonged to the Communist party or not, these striking miners were not "free Americans," as young Mary Nick claimed, but "Rooshian reds." "If you are hungry, you are a red," a miner told a visiting committee of churchmen, "and if you tell your neighbor that you are hungry that is criminal syndicalism."¹⁸

"I've been framed up and accused of being a red, when I did not understand what they meant," said Molly Jackson years later. Though she was certainly overstating the case when she said, "I never heard tell of a Communist until I left Kentucky," she made a telling point by claiming that "I got all my progressive ideas from my hard tough struggles, and nowhere else."¹⁹ Mountain people had only a vague idea of who these "reds" were. "Ninety percent of these people," says Tillman Cadle, "wouldn't know the difference between communism and rheumatism." Some linked commu-

ideological alternative; they sound as if they were passionately denying what they still passionately believed. A few were radicalized in a more or less permanent way. Tillman Cadle recalls telling a professor from New York who asked him what books he had read "about the role of the state; I haven't been reading books," I said, "I didn't have to read it," I said. "Mister: the damn thing fell and hit me right on top of the head."

As we have seen, Molly Jackson contrasted the "big red, white, and blue" with the miners' flag "dipped in blood"; her half-sister Sara Ogan wrote a song called *I Hate the Capitalist System*. But these were difficult thoughts to hold on to and live with permanently. Later, Molly Jackson replaced "Join the NMU" with "Join the CIO" and tried to downplay her radicalism.¹⁴ Sara Ogan for a time changed "capitalist system" to "company bosses." Jim Garland's song about the murder of NMU organizer Harry Simms ended with "Let's sink this rotten system/to the deepest pits of hell"; later, he added a milder final verse (though by the end of their lives, both he and Sara Ogan were again singing the original versions).¹⁵ Even at their most radical, however, these individuals never felt that they were breaking with America and what it stood for. After all, even those who retained some links with the organized Left were exposed then to Earl Browder's idea that "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism."

The majority of the strikers in fact attempted to reconcile their actions with their patriotism, by proving that they, not the judges and operators, were the "real" Americans and that the union fulfilled the Constitution—while the operators and the judges were claiming the same values and authorities for themselves. Thus, they became involved in a cultural as well as a material class struggle, fought with symbols as well as guns. The question was: Who has the right to control the shared system of symbols and signifiers? Who has the right to formulate interpretations and ascribe meanings? Together with the question of "Who owns the land and its wealth?" the strike also raised the question of "Who owns the symbols of the land?"

RED-BLOODED AMERICANS

I love my flag, but I don't understand why they let them get away with all that stuff.

Sudie Crusenberry, Brookside, Harlan County, Kentucky (1989)

nism to a vague idea of "community," and called them "Communists." "If you had at this time said to a group of average mountain people 'I'm a Communist,'" wrote Jim Garland later, "they more than likely would have answered 'I'm a Baptist' or 'I'm a Mason'."²⁰

The NMU organizers concentrated on the immediate, material needs of the strikers, without putting their ideology up front (although the strikers did adopt such words as "comrade" or "capitalism"); and this choice later furnished the basis for the charge of having deceived the workers. At first, miners did not seem to feel that the issue was too important, anyway. They were "grabbing at straws," and anybody's help was welcome. When the question of communism came up, writes John Gaventa, it was "usually interpreted in terms of the local culture." The nickname, "reds," was a useful handle, as it tied in with a whole cluster of symbols of local and national identity and pride.

The most important is blood—again, a symbol invoked by both sides in conflict. "One drop of pure Kentucky blood is worth more and is more sacred than an entire river of Communist blood" said Attorney W. B. Smith; and Judge D. C. Jones announced that he would "use the full power of my court to prevent these human rattlesnakes from injecting the virus of Communism into the veins of the American workingman."²¹ This might have been Findlay Donaldson's reply:

It is the voice and mouth of every coal-operator-sympathizer that the Russian Red is abroad in the State of Kentucky. When you starve me down and deny me the food and raiment that is required to take care of my body and the little children that I claim to be the father of, I want to tell you that you are putting Red Blood into me as sure as you live.

What Attorney Smith failed to perceive was that "pure" Kentucky or American blood is just naturally "red." "I am a true American and can't be beat," said NIMU local secretary Billie Meeks, at the same meeting; "And I am a red-blooded one." Sara Ogan Gunning used blood symbolism to reverse the charge of un-Americanism, by referring to the "blue" blood of Kentucky's "dirty rich aristocrats." The same process extended to other "red" symbols. Charles R. Walker's article entitled "'Red' Blood in Kentucky" quotes a miner who said, "They call us 'Rooshun Red Necks . . . I wonder why that is? My folks have been in Kentucky for five generations, but one of 'em was a red Cherokee Indian. Maybe that's why I'm a Red."²²

The operators' side had claimed to be the real "Believer[s] in America," the "100-percent American" representatives of government institutions. By casting themselves as pure red-blooded Americans and Kentuckians, these Red Indian Rednecks turned the table on the operators and changed the tainting epithet to a symbol of legitimacy. On the other hand, by denying them the legitimate use of national symbols (the flag) and associating them with foreign ideologies ("Rooshian") and outside agitators, the operators claimed the exclusive right to use the symbols of national and local identity. "To Hell with Russia and all the Communists and Bolsheviks in New York City," was Attorney Smith's battle cry. While journalists like Herndon J. Evans stirred resentments against "outsiders" coming in from New York to investigate Kentucky (and even proposed a counter-delegation to investigate crime and prostitution in New York), the union organizers pointed out that much of the local mining wealth was actually owned by outsiders. While the law-and-order element systematically called them "Russians," they sometimes reacted by calling deputy sheriffs "Kaiser."²³

We should not, however, extend the symmetry too far. It is important, in fact, to bear in mind that the confrontation took place on ground chosen and defined by the operators and their supporters. Therefore, the operators campaigned aggressively, while the strikers were mostly on the defensive. There was more emphasis on proving that the strike was not un-American than in proving the "un-Americanism" of the operators, nor was any attempt made to reject this ground of confrontation altogether. This can be partly explained by the fact that the operators controlled most of the places of public discourse from newspapers to courts and the more respectable churches. But it is also apparent that, while the strikers insisted on the operators' lawlessness, they did feel vulnerable to the charges of anti-patriotism brought against themselves.

Therefore, a recurrent rhetorical device in the strikers' discourse is the claim that their goals are limited, that all they ask for is a living. "I don't want your millions, mister," sang Jim Garland later; "All I want is food for my babies/Give me back my job again." "What we want," said Donaldson, "[is] a protection that we are entitled to according to the Constitution of the United States and then we will be satisfied."

The flags that the miners waved really had two sides: one toward their own side, to rally supporters around the struggle; and the other toward the operators and the law, to prove that the strike was not really subversive—as if, by proving it to the other side, the strikers could also convince themselves.

CROSSING THE RED SEA

There are three things I believe in: the Bible, the Union, and God.

Sudie Crusenberry, Brookside, Harlan County, Kentucky (1989)

"I am a good Christian and a member of the Christian church," one operator was quoted as saying, "but I would just as soon tie a Communist in a sack and throw him into the river as do anything else I know."²⁴ On the other hand, preacher Findlay Donaldson gave the struggle a religious sanction. "A man who won't support his children is worse than an infidel, and there is no place for that man but Hell."

Religion was the other shared signifier which became a battleground in the struggle for the control of symbols and meanings. Again the operators' side claimed that the strikers had stepped out of the pale of acceptable cultural behavior, thus forfeiting all their rights as Christians. The strikers, on the other hand, sought religious justifications to their actions. Like the Constitution, the Bible was invoked by both sides. When Ronald Niebuhr came to Kentucky with a committee of churchmen, he found that all the urban and mainline churches in Pineville (as well as the Episcopal bishop of Lexington) opposed him; but he also discovered that "miners are more religious than any similar body of proletarians. The religious character of these proletarians would offer a splendid opportunity for the emergence of a real proletarian religion."²⁵

"The little preachers that didn't get paid for preachin' who worked, worked for a livin', you'd get along well with them, because they was part of it," says Tillman Cadle. "They was preachin' because of their conviction. They wasn't preachin' for money. But you couldn't get along with these guys that had to have a big salary to preach, because he wasn't interested." The essential distinction did not appear to be a theological one, between liberal and conservative denominations, but a social one between urban and rural, middle-class and working-class churches. Myles Horton, a student of Niebuhr who helped establish unions in the South and created the Highlander Folk School, says:

They had mountain religion. It would be the conservative, more literalist sort of religion with a predominantly Pentecostal people, the kind of religion I would describe as the

Regular Old Baptist dominated at the time you're talking about. Not that church necessarily, but that kind of . . . that kind of religion. They . . . their teachers, their preachers were nonpaid, volunteer preachers; some of them couldn't read, but they were . . . they were fervid in their religion, and they were working class. It wasn't the kind of religion that city folks or mainstream folks thought of. And some of the preachers from the Old Regular Baptist Church were the leaders in the struggle. They'd preach on Sunday, this fundamentalist religion, then go out on the picket line all week. And some of the preachers in the cities were talking liberal theology, liberalism, all the modern, you know, interpretations of religion, yet they would side with the [operators] . . . It was a class division.

Thus, while the First Baptist Church in Pineville held meetings to denounce the Communist influences in the NMU, and the middle-class based Red Cross refused (on grounds of "neutrality") to feed the hungry miners' families, rural churches were lent to the strikers for meetings and soup kitchens, and many preachers were active in the struggle—from Holiness preacher Findlay Donaldson to former snake-handler and NMU activist Harvey Valentine; from Baptist pastor Rev. Frank Martin, who was jailed for criminal syndicalism to the black preacher Gill Green who, "while helping the miners in their efforts to organize . . . conducted a revival and had over a hundred converts, all of whom were baptized."²⁶

TILLMAN CADLE: And one day, we was havin' a big mass meeting in Pineville, and they was a fellow they called him the "cussing preacher." His name was Randalls, Randolphs, I guess; he was a preacher but he could talk very violently sometimes; and he was the last speaker at this meetin'. And when he started to close his speech he said "Well, I guess we'll all be gathering back here next weekend for another meetin'," and they began clamoring back out in the crowd, "What's the use to go home if you can't take any food to your family." He asked, how many there was in that crowd there that didn't have any food in their homes for supper; and a whole gang of hands just went up like that. He jumped down off of the steps, and he said, "Foller me." And he made a break for the A&P store: and by God, they was all follerin' him, too.

Eventually, Cadle says, the A&P agreed to feed the miners if they would also raid their competitors. Led by the "cussing preacher," the miners duly obliged.

Of course, it would be wrong to generalize. The "otherworldly" approach still prevailed in many Holiness churches, and preachers in the coal camps were often under the direct control of the operators. On the other hand, some town ministers did sympathize with the unions. Rev. C. E. Vogel, a Harlan Methodist minister, discussed the miners' plight in his church, protested against the deputy sheriffs' violence in the UMW drive, and was finally removed from his church after his middle-class congregation complained of his pro-union stance.²⁷

But the general distinction holds, with both sides quoting the usual Biblical clichés. While company preachers might teach "some-thin' 'bout some will be masters and some be servants," (Cadle), Rev. Hugh Cowans, a black miner and later a preacher from Verda, warns that "there's a passage in the Scripture. It said if you don't work, you don't eat, you know. And I think I kinda halfway go along with that."

The miners' religion, in fact, seemed to oscillate in perpetual tension between otherworldly resignation and radical criticism of this world, and between subordination to the status quo and egalitarian solidarity. These attitudes can be detected, for instance, in the miners' songs, ranging from religious consolation for mine deaths to representations of the union as an extension of the church and a step toward a unionized heaven.²⁸

In times of conflict, "fatalist" religion gives way, at least temporarily, to the religion of the union; and the old-time folk religion supplies the language and forms for the new ideas. All the great strike songs—from Molly Jackson's *Join the NMLU* to Florence Reece's *Which Side Are You On?* and Sara Ogan's *Dreadful Memories*—are based on hymn tunes. Findlay Donaldson spoke "like an old time hell-roaring evangelist."²⁹ Billie Meeks addressed the Straight Creek meeting as "service," interchanged "comrades" with "congregation," and wove the words and images of the Biblical sermon together with those of the revolutionary agitator:

The time is presented to you in the days when the Children of Israel was under bondage, when Moses went to lead them out and he came to the Red Sea and the Children got scared . . . and they thought they could not go through, they walked through dry-shod, and Pharoah's hosts came on and

the water closed up on them. . . . We have the same opportunity presented to us, laboring men, by the National Miners Union to walk out as the Children of Israel did, and if you don't drown these Capitalists and this Capitalism, it is your own bad luck. You can't blame any one but yourself.

In the same meeting, Aunt Molly Jackson not only quarried the Bible for words and images, but cast the whole struggle in neat theological terms, with the union as a "second cause," as one of God's "means" of intervention in the world. "Now, we are under bondage. We have been under bondage for a long time but God is going to redeem his people. He is fixing a way and a plan for them to be redeemed from this bondage through this great organization."

Some went as far as viewing even the Communists as some kind of church. "They was trying to get something started, to have an organization, so that people could have something to live on," a miner's wife recalled. "They even gave'em clothes . . . like the Church of Christ . . . like when they started the Church here."³⁰ "The local people, they [the operators] might tell them that I didn't believe in religion or something like that," Tillman Cadle says, "but you see, the people all knowed me, and they'd say 'why, we know he's not against it, if we wanna believe in religion,' because they knowed my family's background, you see."

In fact, some have their religious identity severely shaken. Jim Garland was a religious man, a deacon of the church, and came from a religious family. "But when a person gets involved, truly involved, in a labor struggle," he writes, "it's hard to keep his religious beliefs primary, mainly because he gets so damn mad." "I've had two days' work since August and no money," Chester Hoskins, a miner and a former church member, told a journalist. "I don't know much about this Communism and I ain't worrying about God, but if the Communists can get me something to eat, I'm for 'em." A black preacher named Johnson told his fellow workers on the eve of the battle of Evarts, that his religious beliefs would not allow him to fight, but he would pray for them. The black activist Elzie Phillips replied, "You'll get no results from prayer."³¹

Yet, the church remained an essential part of these people's identity. Jim Garland, who moved away from Kentucky after the strike, wrote later that, though he seldom went to church now, he made a point of attending when he visited his native region, because "this is the mountain life . . . and the sociability I have returned for." Long after the strike, Sara Ogan still sang with pride:

My daddy was a preacher
 But he loaded coal as well
 My mother was a Christian
 And she served God all her life
 She worked hard for her children
 And she was a miner's wife.³²

A twofold ambiguity characterizes the role of religion in the strike. On the one hand, the same traditional Christian religion is shared by both sides. On the other hand, while the operators hardly entertain a doubt about their own righteousness, the miners are again uncertain, ambivalent, and in constant need of justification. Their religion tells them that what they are doing is both righteous and sinful; and this contradiction is the lever which the operators use to finally break the precarious continuity between the old the new, the actions and the beliefs, leaving the defeated miners culturally powerless, sinful in their own eyes.

THE RELIGION OF THE WORKERS

In February, 1932, nine NMU organizers were on trial in Pineville for criminal syndicalism. Almost a thousand miners "marched around the Pineville courthouse expressing protest and solidarity with the nine jailed revolutionaries as they knew how—singing hymns, carrying American flags, led by a fundamentalist preacher."³³ When NMU secretary Doris Parks took the stand, Attorney W. B. Smith began the interrogation. The magistrate's first question was: "Do you believe in any form of religion?"

Let us consider Doris Parks' quandary. She knows that a negative answer will damn her. On the other hand, she does not wish to deny her beliefs. Perhaps, Communist as she is, she still retains some vestige of patriotic and religious education, and thinks that church and state are separate under the United States Constitution and that religion is a personal matter; she might also have some vague notion of bearing witness to her faith. Be that as it may, she answered, "I believe in the religion of the workers"—meaning, as she explained under further questioning, "the working class and their right to organize and to teach [that] they can be led out of this oppression by the Communist party."

"Once Herndon Evans reproduced this statement in the *Pineville Sun* and called Doris Parks and the entire NMU atheistic," writes Jim Garland, "we lost more than half of our members."³⁴

When Findlay Donaldson addressed the Straight Creek meeting, he had said:

We don't want to get rich. I hate the name of money because it led me into a bad life. I used to have some money and it led me down in Sin further than anything that ever happened. There is four things that the Nation and American people must [dislike: the typescript says "like," but it is clearly an error]; that is, Degradation, Privation, Starvation, and Sin. If you put a man in privation you are driving him into sin, but if you give him something to live on, he can stand up to help the Christian world, but if you deprive him of food and raiment, you cause that man to commit in his heart, murder and robbery and stealing, and they have almost starved me.

If Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos, who both heard him speak, had relied on their writers' ear for language and words rather than on their ideological preconceptions, they might have helped the NMU avoid some tragic mistakes. They might have realized that Donaldson not only spoke like a "hell-roaring evangelist," but he *was* one, and obscurely sensed that his radical rebellion was somehow tied to a sense of sin "in his heart." "Today, friends, I would not ask much to steal a good square meal, haven't had one in so long," he said. To the outside radicals, this meant that Donaldson was on his way to challenging private property; to him, it also meant he was on his way to hell. The strike was an inevitable risk for the soul as well as the body, which the miners had not chosen to take but which had been foisted upon them by the operators. Dreiser and Dos Passos might have understood this if they had given a thought to what a tough fighting rebel like Aunt Molly Jackson might have meant when she took for her text "Blessed is the peacemaker and cursed is the peace breaker," and invoked "all the promises that God had promised to the obedient."

Fascinated as they were by the miners' songs and eloquence, however, these urban intellectuals never really listened to what they said; or perhaps they ascribed it paternalistically to the miners' rural naivety, charming but not serious. Thus, when the Communist party began to bring strike leaders North for political training, the results were disastrous. In an affidavit filed in the Bell County courthouse, and widely circulated through the local press and in leaflet form with those of other former NMU members, Findlay Donaldson stated:

Fellow workers and citizens, the teachings of the Communist party would destroy our religious beliefs, our government and our homes. In their teachings they demand their members to teach their children [that] there is no God; no Jesus; no Hereafter . . . I heard them in a mass meeting and a big demonstration while in Chicago denounce our government and our flag and our religion . . . I saw them who were believers in the Communist Party with great applause give honor to Soviet Russia by honoring and saluting the Red Flag. The Communist party believes in white and coloured marrying each other and if you refuse for the negro men to keep company with your daughter you cannot be a friend to Soviet Russia.³⁵

Discussing his organizing work in the 1930s, Myles Horton commented, "We learned very early that you cannot make people do something which they consider evil, a sin. You must know how people are, and what they believe in. And then they can change." The northern organizers had not learned what these people were like and what they believed in, although they had come with great generosity and great personal risk to help them. On the other hand, as John Gaventa notes, the local elite knew them, and even shared some of the same ideas and beliefs.

While they thought they could reconcile the strike to their beliefs, miners fought against both the deputies' guns and their own misgivings and guilt. But when they found that these same actions were interpreted by their new allies as part of a wholly different and conflicting system of values and beliefs, they withdrew in fear. "Lean miners look levelly through solemn eyes and say, 'I couldn't deny my God,'" reported a writer for *The New York Times Magazine*. "Religion in this case is on the side of the strike-breakers."³⁶ Until a few weeks before, the strikers had thought it could still be on theirs.

I WILL NOT FIGHT MY GOVERNMENT

Let us go back to the three armies with the same flag, which we left facing one another in Logan County. Fred Mooney, one of the leaders of the strike, wrote in his autobiography:

When the miners surrendered their arms to Brigadier General H. H. Bandholz in September, 1921, and said to the

grizzled veteran of many battles, "General, we are not fighting our government," it was similar only to the signing of the Magna Carta [Mooney's spelling] by King John on the battlefield of Runnymede. Thus was established beyond question the fact that they were not in revolt against constituted authority but had taken to arms because they believed there was no other way to correct the wrongs perpetrated upon them by a conspiracy between the law and unlawful violence.³⁷

"Boys, we can't fight Uncle Sam" was the word, echoing the words with which John L. Lewis had ended the national coal strike two years before. "I will not fight my government, the greatest government on earth."³⁸ In a different mood from Mooney, Frank Blizard, a miner from Cabin Creek, West Virginia, reminisced:

And then the governor called in the U.S. troops . . . We surrendered. We wouldn't fight the regulars. If they hadn't brought Uncle Sam in there, there wouldn't have been a thug left in Logan County. Well, it broke our local, broke our district, came damn near to breaking our International.³⁹

In his discussion of the ethnic use of national and religious symbols, Werner Sollors notes that "people who sing very similar anthems or wave flags all of which contain the colors red, white, and blue need not be pursuing the same goals" and that "the consensus ritual of speaking with the Bible . . . did not make the speakers of a shared rethoric uniform in spirit."⁴⁰ The shared signifier may be ultimately more powerful than the conflicting signified; in fact, in "rituals," the signifier itself tends to become the signified. Furthermore, the way in which different meanings attach themselves to the same symbols depends to a large extent on the context of power relationships. The powerless, the poor, the unschooled grope toward interpretations of their own, but are constantly exposed to the powerful interpretations of the elites. They may risk the lonesome and doubtful effort of creating their own meanings; but when this fails, it is too easy and tempting to go back to the warmth and security of those authorized interpretations which even the insurgents carried inside them all the time anyway. The "surrender" which, according to Frank Blizard, almost destroyed the union, becomes a victory comparable to the signing of the Magna Charta—as if the miners had conquered those democratic rights which, in fact, were effectively denied them. The most representa-

tive song which came from the Harlan strike, written by Florence Reece, said: "They say in Harlan County/there are no neutrals there," and asked the question, "Which Side Are You On?" The miners were finally defeated by the one-sided neutrality of pow-ers—the churches' God, the nation's President—which they had thought could be on *their* side.

The extent to which the cultural class conflict is waged upon the attribution of meaning to shared texts and symbols is one of the specificities of the American labor movement. If we compare with the Italian experience, we find that, to a large extent, the cultural class struggle there has been a conflict between, not within, symbolic systems. Although patriotism, religion, and family are important parts of Italian working-class culture, yet a number of historical circumstances have made it both necessary and possible for the organized workers to sanction their own actions largely according to independent sets of signifiers, symbols and texts. Among these factors were the relative weakness of national identity, the recognizable class nature of the State, the fact that democracy is seen as a result and not a condition of working-class struggles, and the undemocratic structure and often hostile position of the Catholic Church. This symbolic autonomy allowed Italian workers to preserve some of their alternative consciousness in forms that were stable and self-sufficient, if often staid and bureaucratic, with a conformism of their own. The greatest threat to this autonomy has come, recently, from the shared symbols and signifiers of mass media and consumer culture.⁴¹ In the United States, on the other hand, explicitly antagonistic symbolic clusters have surfaced mostly in the context of exceptional conflicts, with an incomparably intense emotional appeal but a limited staying power.

Findlay "Red Ore" Donaldson's affidavit breathes with a sense of relief, as if he had at last come in from the cold. "I feel at this time that the great capitalists and officials of this great nation of ours which I deem second to none, in some way will give relief and assistance to our poor starving humanity, which is now suffering in America." There are echoes in Donaldson's statement of "Divine Right" George F. Baer, the industrialist who claimed in 1903 that "The rights and interests of the laboring man" would be "protected and cared for . . . by the Christian men to whom God, in His infinite wisdom, has given the control of property interests."⁴² Donaldson's affidavit also contains an inverted signifier—the word "capitalists," no longer hostile but protective: they will find "some way." Donaldson does not know how; but what he now knows is that finding

the way is no longer his responsibility. He had tried for a while to take his life in his hands; now it is safely back in the hands of the "capitalists"—a demonstration of how "fatalism" and other such traits attributed to folk cultures are not necessarily inherent in them, but are often actively created and enforced by the framework of power relationships.

WOULD YOU LET YOUR DAUGHTER MARRY ONE?

In his recollection of the interrogation of Doris Parks, Tillman Cadle adds a detail which is not confirmed by other sources. Attorney Smith, he says, first asked her about her religion, "and then he brought up the question of marriage. He says: 'You wouldn't want my daughter to marry a nigger, would you?' She said, 'I don't tell my daughter who she should marry. I think my daughter can decide that for herself.'"⁴³ Whether this exchange actually took place or not, Cadle's story underlines the role of another shared signifier—race.

When both sides contended for the right to call themselves "100-percent Americans," they agreed on one essential thing: freedom of speech is inherent to being "100-percent Americans." By invoking "blood" symbolism to legitimize the "red" stigma, they automatically and implicitly excluded Afro-Americans and immigrants. By another turn of the screw, their own blood symbolism turned against them, in the form of the most frightening of southern taboos: racial blood mixing, or miscegenation.

"Mixed marriages, even mixed dances, were virtually unheard of, but, as one would expect, some mixing was done on the sly. Sometimes the white boys would try to make time with the black girls," writes Jim Garland. "And I'll tell you, anytime, anytime that they wanted to have trouble . . . bring trouble with the minorities, they'd use a black man and a white woman," says Julia Cowans, the wife of a black miner and preacher. Interracial affairs, in fact, were the cause of at least one major riot in the 1920s; and Iverson Minters, a musician from Mississippi (also known as "Louisiana Red"), tells about his father, who worked at Lynch, being killed around 1940 by a mob who thought his light-skinned wife was a white woman. Months before Donaldson and the others took their trip North, a local minister explained to the Middlesboro Kiwanis Club that communism means: "(1) hatred of God, (2) destruction of property, (3) social and racial equality and class hatred."⁴⁴ Race, how-

ever, hardly surfaced as an issue in the strike. Perhaps, Tillman Cadle's version of the Doris Parks episode should be interpreted to mean that, though dormant, it had been there implicitly all along, ready to surface again when the strike broke down.

As we have seen, Donaldson's affidavit lists interracial marriage as one of the offensive tenets of the Communist party. This motif recurs in most of the other statements by disaffected NMU members. "They believed and said in their meetings that they just as leave their girls to marry a negro as a white man, let the girls be pleased." (H. L. Doan). "They teach that there is no God, that a white woman is equal to a colored woman, that a negro has a right to marry a white woman . . ." (Harvey Collett).

Black and white miners had been quick to recognize that their interests were the same in the struggle with coal operators. Reverend Hugh Cowans recalls that, when he became active in the UMWA drive:

My father . . . he's passed and gone now . . . he told me . . . says . . . uh . . . "You're crazy to go on those pickets lines. You'll get killed." He said, "It's not going to benefit anybody but the white man." I says, "Well, I know it will benefit him more than it benefits me, but I see some good in that for you, and I see some in it for me."

On this basis, black miners joined the struggle and the union. The UMWA was in the vanguard of American unions in formally rejecting segregation; and several black miners and preachers had taken an active role in the Evarts movement. Black miners, including Elzie Phillips (later a defendant in the trial for the Battle of Evarts) and preacher Gill Green had been included in committees and delegations. The NMU, of course, made it a point of including black miners, both in the first group of delegates who attended the union's convention in Pittsburgh in the summer of 1931 and in the central committee of the strike.⁴⁵

Segregation and racism, however, were part of the region's heritage, though more attenuated than in other parts of the South. "Way back when I was just a kid," says Tillman Cadle, who was born in Tennessee near the Bell County line in 1902, "they had signs up in all those little old communities, 'nigger don't let the sun set on you here' and things—oh, yeah." Julia Cowans recalls that in the 1930s "We were up in a place called Louellen. And you

come down going to Harlan, which is the county seat, and you go through two or three communities where blacks wasn't allowed to live."

Even among unionized miners, whatever limited integration took place was restricted to the workplace and to union business. Jim Garland writes that "Once the work day ended, blacks and whites were separated, living in different coal camps, attending different churches and schools."⁴⁶ Critical though we must be of the Communists' errors concerning patriotism and religion, one can hardly blame them for trying to interfere with this aspect of the traditional culture, insisting, if not on interracial marriages, at least on integrated soup kitchens. In fact, miners did not seem to mind the socializing while both blacks and whites were equally hungry. Sara Ogan sang:

Really friends, it does not matter
Whether you are black or white
The only way we'll ever change things
Is to fight, and fight, and fight.⁴⁷

When the crisis occurs, color matters again. Donaldson and the others seem to imply a shifting of borders from *class* back to *race*: from class conflict and race integration, back to race discrimination and class "harmony". In fact, the NMU itself had been a "mixed marriage" of sorts. The miners found the courage to join with others who were unlike themselves in color and background, but who shared their interests. When the strike collapsed, they re-joined those who were very much like them in color and background, but whose interests were opposite to theirs. For some reason, the fact that Doris Parks did not believe in God and would not mind her daughter marrying a black man authorized the Harlan County Coal Operators Association to continue its "reign of terror" and starvation.

A LONG WAY FROM HARLAN

Myles Horton came to Harlan, in the guise of a Federal Press reporter when the strike was virtually over. Asked if he had a visual memory of what he saw, he answered:

That is very easy. It was hunger . . . hunger in the faces of the people, you know, gaunt-faced children and parents, people that you could see that they hadn't had enough to eat.

And lifelessness. You know, this kind of—you know, givin' up; this kind of sense of no struggle left; there's no road that they could take that gave 'em any hope. No future. Organization was the only road to any kind of decent life and that had failed, so there's nothing. So there's kind of a sense of despair. It was tragic, it was really tragic. I used to go to bed and cry. I just couldn't take it. After seeing and talking to those people. So it was . . . it was the epitome of poverty and hopelessness. The kind of despair that you have when there's no hope. People with no hope will not do anything. And they weren't doing anything.

The struggle in Harlan wasn't decided by Doris Parks's misguided earnestness or by Findlay Donaldson's culture shock. The strike wasn't defeated by the cultural class struggle—it was probably already lost by the time the NMU stepped in, anyway. But the cultural struggle defeated the men and the women. Not only did they lose the strike, but they lost their reasons for it. "Most of those who joined the NMU in 1931," writes Bill Bishop, "now bow their heads or avert their eyes when asked about the Communists . . . Some even look away and say no group called the National Miners Union ever entered Kentucky."⁴⁸

Again, it would be wrong to generalize. "That Harlan experience," says Myles Horton, "as disastrous as it turned out to be, was a seed bed of a lot of real solid radicalism in the mountains. It had some bad effects, but it also had some . . . it radicalized a lot of people." Some joined in the new effort to organize the UMWA a few years later, when the union was officially allowed to appropriate the national symbols in John L. Lewis's slogan "The President wants you to join the union."⁴⁹ Others, perhaps the most politicized—the Garlands, Tillman Cadle, Florence Reece and her husband Sam—were forced to continue their lives and their struggles elsewhere, gaining more audience among urban radicals and intellectuals than among their own people. It was many years before Jim Garland was able to return to Harlan without finding sheriffs and thugs ready "to welcome the traveler home."

III. THE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH