

"Blue Collar in the Blue Line: Class and Conservation in the Adirondack Park"

When I began this project with a brief period of predissertation research in the summer of 1998, I sought mainly to gain a general understanding of how the production of the Adirondack landscape—which has been characterized by the exploitation and subsequent reconstruction of the vast forested wilderness which covered the mountains prior to white settlement—fits into the material and ideological structure of nineteenth and twentieth century American capitalism. My initial questions were quite basic: what sectors of capital have profited from the Adirondack landscape over the past two centuries? Who are the working class people who produced and continue to produce value from it? What is the nature of the class structure of the modern Adirondack community? How can the relationship between the State of New York and the social agents who have produced this landscape, including labor, capital, science, and environmental social movements, be characterized? How and why has the Adirondack forest been transformed from a site of production in the nineteenth century to a site of protection in the twentieth? In what ways has the Adirondack wilderness comprised a site of class conflict?

Though the Adirondack wilderness is the object of an astonishing degree of attention, from nature photography to romantic fiction to GIS mapping, looking at the wilderness itself does not provide the social scientist with a great deal of insight into its origins or its meaning. And so my predissertation research began with an attempt to seek out and catalogue those resources, archival and ethnographic, which could provide information about the social geography of the Adirondack wilderness. In the process, I have encountered two distinct levels of Adirondack social history: a vast discursive edifice of environmental propaganda assembled by the bourgeois state and its preservationist allies aimed at constructing, describing and regulating the Adirondack forest, and a much more detailed local history of families, companies, state agents, towns and events which portrays a far more heterogeneous and diverse Adirondack reality than the quaint wilderness identity assigned the region by its self-proclaimed "defenders." The complexity of this social geography is complicated further by the region's vast size, bureaucratic fragmentation, and proximity to major urban industrial centers, from the port of Albany to New York City to the St. Lawrence seaway.

Researchers who conduct broad regional projects must confront inevitable issues of quantity versus quality, particularly where community involvement is concerned. The Adirondack Park boundary covers no less than twelve upstate New York counties, only two of which lie completely inside the Park border. Though sparsely populated, the Adirondack Park encompasses some six million acres, an area the size of the state of Vermont. Thus while the Park designation has created a discernable regional identity—even if it is a resistive identity constructed largely in opposition to state land management—there are nonetheless many disparate "communities" which lie inside the Park's border, many of which have more concrete social, economic, and political affiliations with areas outside the Park than within. The large land base of the Park, the far-flung and isolated nature of its settlements, and the somewhat superficial state imposition of a geographical boundary over a widely varied social landscape all present dilemmas with regard not only to research in general, but to participatory research specifically. How

does a researcher cover such a vast area without (a) conducting only a superficial investigation, (b) imposing too much forced homogeneity upon a region which is in reality quite diverse, or (c) excluding some crucial actors from the participatory process in order to become more deeply involved with others? These are some of the broad issues I struggle with as I continue my dissertation research.

With regard to method, one of the most valuable insights I have gained from participating in this fellowship is that archival research and ethnographic research are not mutually exclusive categories, but may be mutually informative and even concurrent activities. When I first envisioned the research process, I assumed that I would spend a certain amount of time conducting archival research in state and local museums, libraries and public records offices, and a certain amount of time talking with people in the Adirondack community. I anticipated comparing my notes from each of these separate experiences at some later time or at intervals during the research process. However, in trying to put together a research project which is truly participatory, I have learned that archival materials can form a significant part of the ethnographic process itself. In the first place, materials gleaned in the archives—copies of maps, pamphlets, photos, newspaper articles, and other material items—are an excellent way to generate conversations with community members who have some connection to these items. For example, poring over old maps of modern neighborhoods is an excellent way to involve current residents in discussion and speculation over how and why landscapes change over time; passing around old photographs of relatives or neighbors can spark memories of events and lives which are not accessible through written histories. So I have learned not to keep these materials hoarded among my research materials, but to carry at least some of them with me for dispatch at those crucial and unexpected moments when conversations strike up in the corner store, at the post office, over a cup of coffee. In addition, I have found that official archives in fact contain only a fraction of a community's material history. The rest is to be found lying dusty and forgotten in attics and barns and basements, and is often pulled out in triumph by informants to illustrate some point during an interview or an informal conversation. There is also a wealth of marvelous historical material to be found with town historians and historical societies, which, though they are seldom trained professionals, often prove to be the most diligent and insightful chroniclers of a community's past. Not only does work in the archives give direction to ethnography, but ethnography itself may uncover hidden sources of archival material. Through participatory research I have learned that the archival and the ethnographic need not be processes which are separated in time or space, but are indeed most useful when combined to improve the effect of each.

My predissertation fellowship allowed me not only to locate the resources which were to become the starting points for the more involved process of actual dissertation research, but to use the content of those sources to begin to construct a picture of class formation, class struggle and class conflict in the Adirondack Park. At the point of writing this report, one month into the dissertation research, much of the data continue to seem messy and incoherent. I struggle to reconcile detailed historical and ethnographic information describing personal encounters with state power with the broader framework of capital investment and disinvestment, shifts in state land management policy, and changes in the landscape itself. In the process, my understanding of what "the state" is and where its interests lie—particularly with

regard to the often conflicting needs of production and social reproduction—continues to deepen.

The single most difficult task I have faced thus far in conducting participatory research in this region has been reconciling my theoretical training in marxist political economy with the needs of a poor rural community which is trying to make capitalism work as best it can. Participatory research as defined by the CCRF program means addressing the "needs" of the community in which the research is conducted. I believe that this agenda, which seeks to make academic research responsible to the communities from which it profits, is a profoundly progressive one. But it also poses some difficult dilemmas, not the least of which is deciding what the needs of a particular community are, how they are to be pursued, and who gets to make those decisions. While all agree that poverty, unemployment and capital exit are persistent problems facing Adirondack communities, various agents have different ideas about how those problems can and should be solved. The discourse about what is to be done is often framed by the structure of the "jobs versus environment" debate, with most parties expressing a desire to preserve the forest while ensuring that the people who live in it can find jobs with sufficient wages to support themselves. Such a compromise is often termed "sustainable development." Despite their disagreements as to how to go about doing so, the region's most powerful social actors — including the state, local government, timber capital, the real estate industry, and the myriad economic development agencies which have evolved over the past few decades—seek to find a way to create a "green capitalism" in the Adirondacks, a system in which jobs, profits, and environmental protection can beneficially coexist in the long term.

My own training compels me to bring a somewhat different perspective to the situation, one which sees disruptive and even violent cycles of capital exit, job loss, and exploitation as inherent characteristics of the capitalist system. These contradictions can no more be mediated by "sustainable development" schemes here than in the Third World, where development has more often exposed human populations and their environments to the upheavals of proletarianization than to its purported benefits. This perspective has put my position as a participatory researcher at odds with my position as an independent researcher. What I see as a useful and indeed desperately needed marxist critique of rural economic development strategies may not concur with what many community power-brokers define as the immediate needs of the Adirondack hamlets. At the same time, I am finding increasingly that the "needs" of the Adirondack region are often passionately invoked by various capitalistic interests which stand to make a considerable profit from the fulfillment of those needs. Economic development ploys, frequently promoted as the saviors of capital-strapped rural communities, are often designed to take advantage of rural populations so decimated by deindustrialization that they will submit to an extraordinary level of labor exploitation in order to secure some basic employment. Indeed, the economic development literature used to lure capital to the Adirondack region specifically touts the exemplary "work ethic" to be found among its desperately underemployed population. And so the discourse surrounding the construction of community "need" has itself become an object of interrogation in my work.

What then is a researcher to do? If participatory research means no more than allowing prevailing economic ideologies to frame one's

scholarly pursuits, then what is the point of research at all? Conversely, if a researcher's role as social critic prevents her from truly entering the circle of political debate over what is to be done, then what is the good of theory? In the last analysis, a scholar who wishes to engage her community in participatory research must ultimately make a decision as to whose interests she wishes to serve. My own interests lie openly with those of the Adirondack working class. I struggle daily with my obligations to this community, which I do not feel I can meet by either embracing sustainable development as a "solution" to rural poverty or by exposing the structure of capitalist power without also formulating some means of contesting it. This, for me, is the true challenge of participatory research: to place not only the material resources of the university at the disposal of the working class community, but its critical theoretical resources as well, and thereby to broaden the scope of community debate rather than merely occupying its categories. To my mind, the deepest betrayal of both my scholarly obligations and my responsibility to this community would be to produce two separate, discreet analyses of the situation, one for my dissertation committee which openly applies my theoretical training, and one for my community that fails to contest the dominant capitalistic paradigm of the day. As I see it, the point of this research is to bridge the gap between academic theory and community practice: to bring social criticism to bear on the immediate situation rather than allowing it to hover at the level of mere academic debate.