

2014

Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley by John Gaventa

Roger J. Chin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/osr>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chin, Roger J. (2014) "Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley by John Gaventa," *OSR Journal of Student Research*: Vol. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/osr/vol2/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Student Research at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSR Journal of Student Research by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

**Power and Powerlessness:
Quiescence and Rebellion in an
Appalachian Valley by John
Gaventa**

Roger J. Chin

Keywords: *Book review, John Gaventa, Power, Powerlessness, Rebellion, Appalachian Valley*

Author Interview

Which professors (if any) have helped you in your research or creative activity?

All of the professors in the Department of Public Administration, Department of Graduate Studies and the Office of Student Research at CSUSB have been a tremendous help in my research activities.

What are your research interests?

My research interests are in teamwork, leadership, American politics, public policy and management.

What are your plans after earning your degree? What is your ultimate career goal? My plan after earning my degree is to attend Claremont Graduate University in order to pursue my Ph.D. in Political Science and Public Policy. My career goal is to become a professor at a university.

The experience John Gaventa had as an activist climbing up a narrow path to a cabin on top of a mountain in the Central Appalachian Valley changed his perception on the theories of democracy he had studied. Gaventa went to the cabin in order to try and convince a retired miner to participate in a lawsuit challenging the low taxation rate of the corporate coal property in the region. Instead of feeling a sense of outrage, the retired miner displayed apathy and awareness of the injustices. Despite the Valley's rich natural resources, the people remained in despair while living in poverty. Through the use of Steven Luke's three dimensions of power, John Gaventa in *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* seeks to comprehend the lack of rebellion among the miners of the Central Appalachian Valley amid blatant oppressions, inequalities, economic exploitations, and political neglects.

Gaventa's theory and analyses of the Central Appalachian Valley were conducted through an empirical research methodology. This case study integrated historical context, newspaper articles, interviews, historical documents, voting data, and active participation and observation from Gaventa. Gaventa contrasts mainstream democratic theories and instead utilized a three-dimensional approach to power to explain why people fail to act on their own interests among vast inequalities. Gaventa supports his theoretical model on power through the historical analyses on the colonization of the Valley in the 1880s, the experience of miners joining unions, the resistance to reforms in the union, the influence of fear in elections, and the inadequacies of community organization drives in the 1960s and 1970s.

The understanding of the three dimensions of power is necessary for the study on power. In the one dimensional approach to power which was developed by Robert Dahl and Nelson Polsby, the pluralists' theory attests that there is an open and fair system where political interests recognize their grievances and would compete to address them (Gaventa, 1980). If individuals felt strongly about a grievance, they would participate in the political process. The lack of participation indicates consent among the individuals and the culpability for not participating is on the individual.

The second dimensional approach to power, developed by Bachrach and Baratz, argues that political participation is controlled and political interests do not share equal power in the decision making process. The elites utilized their abilities to control the agenda-setting process by keeping certain issues from being in the political agenda (Gaventa, 1980). Through the manipulation and influence of the values and beliefs systems, the elites are able to control their own interests and exclude non-elites from participating or even raising issues in the political forum. The third dimensional approach to power, formulates that the elites shape the consciousness of the non-elite by preventing them from expressing or recognizing their own interests as legitimate. This control by the elites in influencing the desires of the non-elites is done through myths, communication, information control, and ideologies (Gaventa, 1980).

Gaventa contrasts the ostensibly simple concept of the pluralists' theory by going beyond individual behavior by stating that the three dimensions of power are interdependent. When elites lose control of one dimension, then typically the other dimensions would reinforce the control rendering people powerless (Gaventa, 1980). The lack of participation among the people in the Valley was not due to the ignorance, socio-economic status, apathy, or alienation of the people. The powerless were quiescent in the political process because of the constant detrimental effects caused by rebellion or dissent. Throughout the history of the Valley, dissents from the non-elite were met with eviction, loss of employment, violence, and even murder. The miners quickly learned that political uprisings and protests would only be countered with success by the powerful elites through the three dimensions of power.

From the beginning of the industrial colonization of the Central Appalachian Valley, the region was marked by great oppression from the coal company, the local elites, and union officials. Gaventa provided a detailed and historical exploration on the power relations in the 1890s between the Valley and the British-owned company called the American Association Ltd. If there was resistance during the acquisition of land in the city of Middlesboro, the people were burned out of their homes, thrown in jail on

false charges, or had their sales documents forged. American Association was able to establish control over the Valley by owning and controlling all of the land, the company store, employment, police forces, judges, and local elites. The industrial power was influential in the shaping of the social and economic structure of the Valley.

Gaventa then examined the struggle of miners during the process of unionization and the power in the coal camps from 1923 through 1933. The miners lived in coal camps owned by the company and were reminded daily of the control the local elites and the company had over them. The pay slips, rents, services, goods purchased at the store, and the medical bills all came from the same employer (Gaventa, 1980). In 1930, layoffs, wage cuts, and cutbacks began to weaken the control of the company over the miners. A sense of rebellion began to quickly develop in the coal camps. But, just as quickly as the rebellion of 1931-1932 occurred, the rebellion swiftly subsided because the coal company evicted miners and their family from their homes, organizers of the rebellion had their home bombed, miners were killed, "thugs" were hired to commit violence, and soup kitchens were destroyed. Even when the miners attempted to reform their own district of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), they were met with intimidation and threats of expulsion from the union.

The local elites had control over the communication and media in the Valley. The access to outside sources was limited and the elites acted as the gatekeepers, broker, and mediator between the local situation and the outside world (Gaventa, 1980). The control of information by the elites allowed them to isolate and redirect the conflicts in the region. In a comparison between the local Valley newspaper, the *New York Times*, and the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, Gaventa found drastic differences in the stories that were reported regarding the oppression in the region by the different newspapers. The exclusion of support and external validation in the local Valley newspaper compared to the other newspapers prevented further encouragement of rebellion from the people.

In democratic theory, voting in elections

is a way for the deprived public to act on its concerns (Gaventa, 1980). During the exploration of voting data in the Valley, Gaventa found that the three dimensions of power had influence over the voting behavior of the constituents in the Valley. Gaventa collected data from local and national elections from 1956 through 1970 and discovered that people living in company towns were more likely to vote for company candidates than compared to people living in coal communities, the county seat, or rural communities.

From the 1960s through the 1970s, the people in the Valley began to resist strip mining that was causing environmental issues and the monopoly control from the company. The people started a movement of community-controlled programs and institutions by opening a pallet factory, four health clinics, a crafts co-operative, a child development center, and multiple housing projects. Just as the people began to take action, obstacles from the government, local elites, the company, and state government agencies brought back the feeling of powerlessness and quiescence among the people.

Gaventa provided a detailed analysis on the failure of the people to rise against oppression in the Valley, but failed to include cultural and educational aspects of the people in the region into the analysis. Cultural and educational backgrounds of the people in the Valley may play an important factor in understanding the behaviors and actions that occurred. Culture plays an intricate role because the region, religion, and upbringings of an individual may explain the docile behavior of the people. The lack of education in the region may have attributed to the fact that people did not know the multiple resources and outlets that were available to them in order to combat the oppression that was occurring. Along with the three dimensions of power, the cultural and educational factors may have attributed to the sense of helplessness and quiescence among the people in the Valley.

The effectiveness in the power tactics utilized by the elites contributed to the failure of the miners' uprising. Gaventa provided an enthralling, dreary, and descriptive research on the history of oppression, manipulation, and control of the people in the Central Appalachian Valley. The empirical methodology utilized by

Gaventa supported his implementation of the three dimensions of power in analyzing the power struggles in the region. “The pattern is one in which challenges by the people of the Valley to the massive inequalities they face have been precluded or repelled, time and again, by the power which surrounds and protects the beneficiaries of the inequalities” (Gaventa, 1980,

p. 252).

Reference

Gaventa, John. *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1980. Print.