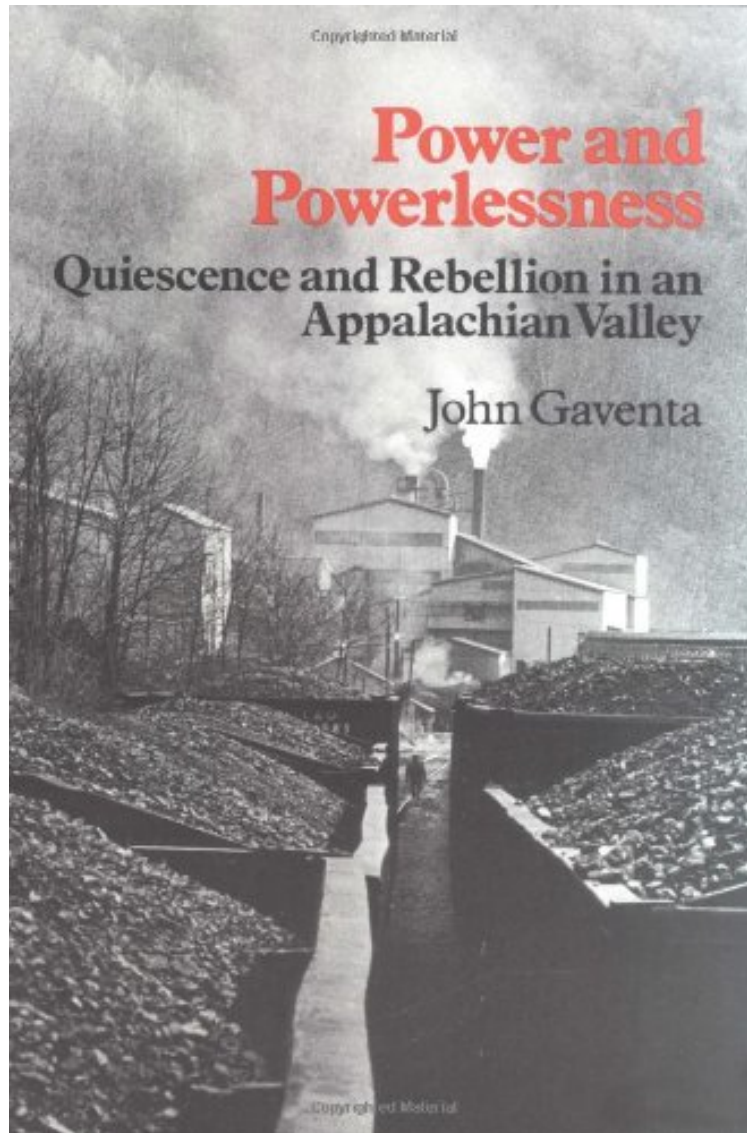


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# Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley

John Gaventa

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2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Gaventa's "three dimensions of power model" remains significant for labor historians...By Brandon KirkIn *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, John Gaventa applies his rather technical three dimensions of power model to understand reasons for dormancy and obstacles to rebellion among residents in a Central Appalachian region of great social inequality, namely the Clear Fork Valley of East Tennessee. Gaventa hopes his study of a single area over time will allow better understanding of the politics of inequality, particularly the "quiescence phenomenon," in industrial society. Central Appalachia, he points out, provides an excellent case study because of its stark inequalities, ridiculous quiescent patterns, and isolation from mainstream politics, society, and culture. The most complicated part of Gaventa's book comes in its initial chapter, wherein he lays out his three dimensions of power model. The first dimension of power is the notion popularly advanced by pluralists: namely, that one group wields power over another and gets it to do something it would not otherwise do. In this dimension, powerlessness and lack of participation originates from individual choice and reflects a relative contentment with the status quo. The second dimension of power is concerned with control of who is actually involved in power negotiation and what issues are addressed. In this dimension, powerlessness comes from systematic or structural barriers that prevent the participation of some groups or individuals. The third dimension of power seeks to prevent conflict by shaping consciousness and awareness or controlling information. Throughout the book, Gaventa primarily draws from the second and third dimensions of power to explain the connection between mountain-miners and their favoring of quiescence over rebellion. Clearly, Gaventa wants to understand why the deprived people of Central Appalachia have traditionally not participated in movements that might bring about a positive change in their situation. He offers a concise summary of the traditional reasons given for this phenomenon. Pluralists blame non-participation on the locals themselves, citing cultural deficiency, individualism, fatalism and backwardness. Others attribute it to elites in charge of political institutions who have neglected the region or offered it broken promises. According to this view, political reform would remove barriers to reform and allow participation. Finally, colonialists blame the problem on absentee elites from metropolitan areas (in the Northeast or England) who establish the legitimacy of the prevailing order (inequality). In Gaventa's view, these three approaches are useful and indicate the nature of the problem but fail to ultimately reveal the complicated truths behind inequality. A noticeable weakness of *Power and Powerlessness* is Gaventa's portrayal of pre-industrial Appalachia. This is most evident in Chapter Three, where he writes of early settlers as mostly Scotsmen, Englishmen and Welshmen – "rebels of industrialization," seekers of independence and a rural lifestyle (p. 48). He dotes on the early settlers as dwellers of "peasant-like communities" on "the American frontier," places of isolation and egalitarianism (p. 50, 80). For Gaventa, the arrival of industrialization in the 1890s radically altered traditional mountain society; for instance, it created social stratification. Gaventa's choice to frame his book in such stark pre-industrial/industrial terms, is partly necessary in order for him to prove more decisively "the impact of industrial power" (his title for Chapter Three). It is also understandable; these were widely held views at the time of Gaventa's research. Revisionist historians such as Ron Eller, Ron Lewis, and Wilma Dunaway had yet to put forth their stirring new views regarding pre-industrial Appalachia – generally that industrialization occurred earlier than previously thought in various places at various times or was perhaps present from the beginning of settlement. The most significant offering of *Power and Powerlessness* is Gaventa's three dimensions of power model. He uses the model superbly (although not always perfectly) to explain much about the struggle for power in one Central Appalachian community. For instance, while over-stating the condition of pre-industrial Appalachia, he makes valid points about the impact of rapid industrialization upon the region, particularly in Chapter Three where he discusses the establishment of a new political and ideological apparatus. Here he gives a persuasive account of the initial stage of colonization of the Clear Fork Valley by industrial society (forces originating in British and American cities): the acquisition of land and minerals, creation of a "boom," establishment of economic monopoly, control of political apparatus, and installation of an ideology. Gaventa clearly has an agenda in *Power and Powerlessness*. He is, for instance, too anxious for rebellion; he sees it as the only logical choice for the miner-mountaineers. He never considers (and actually, his model dismisses the possibility) that the lack of rebellion on the part of miner-mountaineers comes from contentment. For Gaventa, the quiescence of these "docile diggers" came from an effective wielding of power by the "new instruments of civilization" – by the development of dominance of one set of values and procedures over another, in which the dominant set of values is accepted by the dominated (p. 85). Other factors cited to explain the quiescence phenomenon was the rural, isolated nature of the region, lack of desire on the part of miners to relocate to cities, unavailability of farmland, blacklists, pride among miners in their occupation, and the power exerted by the coal company town. As is often the case in *Power and Powerlessness*, miner-mountaineers often appear as victims of larger forces (whether the company or the UMWA) and are thus denied agency; there is not nearly enough information offered that properly reveals their perspective. Additionally, Gaventa's sources are noticeably biased toward the United Mine Workers of America, whose publications are often cited without skepticism (unlike any pro-company sources). *Power and Powerlessness* is a ground-breaking study of Appalachian culture. There are, however, serious shortcomings to the work. Gaventa's topic is interwoven with complex intellectual, sociological and political theory; his deliberate sophisticated writing style and use of sociological language is at times too technical for the non-academic reader. He also ignores recent scholarship

on pre-industrial Appalachia, which essentially dates his work to a specific era in historiography and limits its usefulness. Gaventa might have used more than one Appalachian settlement, the Clear Fork Valley, for his case study. 12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. A Modern Gramsci By D. Caldwell Gaventa's introduction of the "third level of power" can be read as a modern interpretation of Gramsci's idea of hegemony. What Gramsci called "leadership", "command", or "direction" at various times is described as "acquiescence" by Gaventa. Gramsci privileges those in power while Gaventa is more concerned with the victims of imbalanced relations of power. The tracing of the history of coal mining in the clear fork valley illustrates the value of his model for understanding the affects of power. The early years, and his inclusion of rhetoric, is particularly strong. His treatment of the more contemporary business practices leaves the reader sensing some selective interpreting of evidence but nonetheless does more good than harm. This is an incredibly useful paradigm if you plan on analyzing anything involving the effects of power. It's also a story you don't hear about; save the occasional news story lasting about as long as a scrolling marquee in our consciences. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Well written and came in good shape. By Dealyn A college book. Well written and came in good shape.

Explains to outsiders the conflicts between the financial interests of the coal and land companies, and the moral rights of the vulnerable mountaineers.

"With [this volume], a compelling work of powerful reportage and careful analysis, Gaventa joins other trusted Appalachian observers - Tom Gish, Harry Caudill, James Branscombe - in explaining to outsiders the conflicts between the financial interests of the coal and land companies and the moral rights of the vulnerable mountaineers." - Colman McCarthy, The Washington Post