Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis\textsuperscript{1}

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Building on Antonio Gramsci's approach to the dynamics of hegemony and counterhegemony, this article develops guidelines for the historical analysis of conditions under which religion promotes either social quiescence or opposition. Gramsci stressed the importance of (1) leadership resources and (2) organizational autonomy for oppositional movements. Social-psychological studies of the processes of religious conversion and commitment bring to light the importance of social support for the plausibility of belief—a third, implicit element in Gramsci's thought. These three factors are examined in a comparison of oppositional movements of coal miners and textile workers in the American South after World War I, when religion proved to be a crucial factor in either blunting or heightening workers' insurgency. Leadership resources, organizational autonomy, and plausibility structures are linked to Gramsci's analyses of the roles of force and hegemony in the formation of social classes.

Religion played a prominent yet paradoxical role in the class confrontations that flared up throughout industrial subregions of the U.S. South in the 1920s and 1930s. Much as later it would serve black activists in their struggles for civil rights in the South (Harding 1984), Protestantism contributed moral, ideological, and leadership resources to the battles for unionization in the coalfields of Appalachia (Corbin 1981). At the same time, however, it functioned as a bulwark of antiunionism and conservatism in the textile-manufacturing communities of the southern Piedmont (Pope 1942).

The purpose of this article is to examine the factors that enable religion to contribute to activism by becoming an oppositional discourse and prac-

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tice. To do so, I will merge two disparate literatures—(1) Antonio Gramsci's approach to religion and social class militancy and (2) social-psychological studies of religious conversion and commitment—in a comparative study of activism and quiescence among the textile workers of the Carolinas, as described by Liston Pope (1942), and coal miners in central Appalachia, whose efforts to organize unions have been reconstructed by social historians.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The sociology of religion has stressed the positive contribution of religion to the maintenance of social order (Durkheim 1965; Parsons 1964; Wilson 1982). Even sectarian churches, defined by their rejection of the world, often function to integrate participants into the surrounding society (Pope 1942; also see Johnson 1961; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Troeltsch 1981).

Yet, as Solle (1984, p. 21) points out, religion must be understood in its "double function," that is, "as apology and legitimation of the status quo and its culture of injustice on the one hand, and as a means of protest, change, and liberation on the other hand." Eugene Genovese (1976, p. 163) notes that, if "the living history of the Church has been primarily a history of submission to class stratification and the powers that be . . . there has remained, despite all attempts at extirpation, a legacy of resistance that could appeal to certain parts of the New Testament and especially to the prophetic parts of the Old." Such resistance, however, is never automatic. Genovese concludes from his study of the religion of Afro-American slaves that it is a "mechanistic error" to assume that religion has a direct effect on activism. Religion neither "sparked the slaves to rebellion or rendered them docile" (1976, p. 165). Rather, religion functions as a relatively autonomous sphere of social life that acts as a mediating variable between oppression and opposition or submission.

Numerous factors are claimed to influence religion's role in mediating social conflict, including orthodoxy of belief and frequency of participation (G. Marx 1967), organizational factors such as bureaucratization and congregationalism (Wood 1970), and various ideological factors, including dualism (McGuire 1987, pp. 36–44), sectarianism (Hunt and Hunt 1977), and millennialism (Lantenari 1963). Westhues (1976) attempted to evaluate the importance of such variables through carefully controlled comparisons of instances of opposition by religious bodies to the social orders confronting them. Finding "no necessary relationship between oppositional stance and the church-sect typology, degree of orthodoxy, or locus of control" (pp. 311, 312), Westhues discovered the best predictor of an oppositional stance to be (1) "the potential rewards it offered to the dominant group or groups within the religious body, in light of their own
preferences” (my emphasis). In addition, he found that (2) membership homogeneity and (3) a theological tradition at variance with the existing social order also contribute to the adoption of an oppositional stance.

Westhues’s stress on the power of dominant groups within religious organizations is an important finding. He claims that “when the preferences of dominant groups would be served by societal change, the religious body will be directed to assume an oppositional stance toward the status quo” (1976, p. 307). This proposition is supported by Pope's (1942) analysis of how clergy in company churches, because of their dependence on millowners, delegitimated workers' struggles for unionization in the southern textile industry. Comparison with developments occurring at roughly the same time in the company churches of the central Appalachian coalfields, however, suggests that the issue is not as simple as Westhues implies. In Appalachia, clergy in the coal camps were as dependent on coal operators, who built company churches and paid ministers' salaries, as were their counterparts in the mill villages. Yet when miners began to organize, some clergy in the coal camps provided support to striking miners (Hevener 1978). When they did not, coal miners, unlike workers in the mill towns, abandoned the company churches. Lay miners-ministers arose from within their ranks to displace official clergy and to conduct clandestine worship services and sanctify the workers’ struggles (Corbin 1981). Protestant religion thus functioned in parts of Appalachia as an oppositional discourse and practice.

The contrast between religion’s contribution to opposition in Appalachia and to quiescence in the southern Piedmont suggests that Westhues's thesis offers significant but not sufficient theoretical resources for examining conditions that incline religion in one such direction or the other. In particular, the social processes by which religious groups come to perceive their interests and to define their preferences must be made problematic. It is here that Antonio Gramsci’s sociology makes a valuable contribution to the sociology of religion.

A concern for how socially dominant groups attempt to influence the interests and preferences of subordinate groups and how subordinate groups attempt to resist domination and to achieve autonomy was at the core of Antonio Gramsci’s sociology of religion. A comparison of the role of religion in the industrial conflicts of the Appalachian coalfields and the southern textile region, presented below, is especially suitable for testing the value of Gramsci’s approach since it holds constant the additional factors Westhues found to contribute to opposition, (1) membership homogeneity and (2) the relation between theological traditions and local context. As shown below, employers in the South’s mines and mills drew on local reserves of underemployed farmers and farm laborers for their work forces in both industries. Whether they worked in mines or mills,
these rural workers shared, among themselves and with their employers, a religious tradition of evangelical Protestantism that they carried into the industrial communities of the New South. In my analysis, concepts derived from Gramsci’s sociology will be used to investigate how this tradition came to serve radically different ends in the two industrial contexts.

Before turning to Gramsci’s sociology of religion, however, I should note that religion provides diverse resources for oppositional struggles. In addition to nondiscursive resources such as meeting places and money, the churches’ most important resources are discursive, for example, “the moral authority of the Sunday sermon and of official pronouncements” (Westhues 1976, p. 304). In their study of how “world-transforming religions” mobilize such resources for opposition, Bromley and Shupe (1979; also Roberts 1984, pp. 203–9) suggest that analyses of religious movements must investigate internal mechanisms which insure membership commitment, as well as external factors such as societal environment, visibility, and a context of legitimacy, all of which also influence success. Both internal and external levels are examined in the case studies that follow. Resource mobilization theories are often criticized, however, for neglecting “those aspects of experience that shape the interpretation of interests, individual and collective, and affect the very capacity of actors to form groups and mobilize” (Cohen 1985, p. 688). It is here—in a deficiency that Westhues’s work shares with resource mobilization theory—that Gramsci’s sociology makes its most valuable contribution to the sociology of religion.

**GRAMSCI’S SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION**

A Marxist sociology that reduces culture and ideas, including religion, to a “direct” reflection of economic forces is not conducive to the sociology of religion. But Gramsci’s version of Marxism, which repudiates all such “linear” and “mechanistic” thinking, views culture as a semiautonomous sphere of society that plays an important mediating role in the totality of social life (Gramsci 1971, pp. 365–66). Much like Foucault’s (1979) critique of the traditional Marxist theory of ideology as a passive “reflection” of social structure, Gramsci’s approach anticipates the “linguistic turn” taken by contemporary, post-Marxist social theory in its stress on the importance of discursive practices that contribute to domination (Jay 1984, pp. 160–62; also see Lears 1985, pp. 588–91; Gramsci 1971, p. 325). Nonetheless, Gramsci’s contribution to the sociology of religion remains obscure. One recent commentator notes, “Gramsci’s writings on religion have made little impact on English-speaking sociology” (Fulton 1987, p. 197). A critic, Nesti (1975, p. 542), contends that, although
Gramsci "thought it was necessary to clarify the relationship between religion and social classes," Gramscian thought "remains rather uncertain on this subject."

The difficulty of understanding Gramsci's approach to religion, in part, results from Gramsci's own style of presentation in the *Prison Notebooks*. A large corpus of sociological writings expressed in coded terms intended to evade prison censors and never revised for publication, Gramsci's notebooks—like the worlds he investigated—are "fragmentary, multifaceted (and) open-ended" (Sassoon 1987, p. xii). Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (quoted in Viano [1987–88], p. 51) notes the special problems of interpretation that decoding these writings entails: "Gramsci's writings in the Notebooks are like a network, or a web. Although there is a coherence to them, this coherence is not linear; it is established through multiple branchings out, with arguments that double back on themselves and reconnect laterally rather than in sequence. As a result the sort of univocal reading we expect to be able to make of writings in the marxist tradition is difficult to achieve in the Notebooks. They require a different sort of suspended attention, an openness of reading to match their openness of writing." Despite such difficulties, however, I will show in this article that an analytic model of the relationship between religion and quiescence or rebellion can be derived from Gramsci.

The Problem of Hegemony

Gramsci's discussions of popular culture and class leadership and his concept of the "war of position" offer deep insights into oppositional movements. His sociology developed in opposition both to Idealist philosophers, especially Benedetto Croce, and to Marxist determinists, such as Karl Kautsky. Kautsky and other theorists of the Second International had reduced Marx's rich theoretical legacy to a rigid set of deterministic and mechanistic "laws" of social change (see Gramsci 1971, pp. 425–30). The result of such thinking was political inactivity; class struggle had to await its "objective" moment when the crises of capitalism would produce systemic collapse (Boggs 1984). Gramsci belonged to the generation of Marxists, including Lenin and Luxemburg, who believed instead that socialist revolution would be the culmination of political, and, for Gramsci especially, cultural struggles. Yet when most Marxists of his generation accepted the Bolsheviks' capture of the Russian state in 1917 as the appropriate model for socialist struggle elsewhere, Gramsci recognized instead that class struggle in the Western industrial societies would take a different form, more closely resembling what he termed a "war of position," characterized by long-term political battles within "civil society," than a brief "war of manoeuvre" aimed at capturing control of the
state (Gramsci 1971, pp. 229–38). To theorize this struggle, he developed a complex political sociology at the center of which was his concept of cultural hegemony.

Gramsci understood the supremacy of dominant social classes in capitalist industrial societies always to be predicated on a balance of two factors, "force" (coercion) and "hegemony" (the consent "spontaneously" given to elite rule by subaltern classes). Each factor is present in situations of class rule, and both are united in the state that Gramsci defined as "hegemony armoured by coercion" (Gramsci 1971, pp. 257–64). But the achievement of hegemony is never an autonomic occurrence. To confuse Gramsci’s use of the concept of hegemony with related Marxist notions such as "false consciousness" or "ideological domination" and to interpret hegemony as simply the "reflection" of economic power in cultural and social life is to return Gramsci’s theoretical efforts to the base/superstructure model of social causality from which Gramsci tried to rescue Marxist theory (Mouffe 1979). Instead, hegemony is best understood as a political accomplishment for which there is no historical guarantee. When powerful groups fail to win the consent of subordinate groups, or when they lose it, they are forced to use more overt forms of coercion and often violence to win compliance.

To exercise moral and intellectual leadership over society, a group must win the support of dependent groups by connecting the perceived interests of these groups with their own. The ability to shape such perceptions is an important power resource (Gaventa 1980, pp. 15–20). According to Gramsci, intellectuals play a crucial part in this process by helping to create and perpetuate appropriate worldviews. Thanks to the emergence of intellectuals "organically" related to their class, dominant classes are able not only to exercise economic power but also to provide moral and intellectual leadership to society by creating alliances with weaker classes—some of them perhaps having once been dominant—and by exercising state power and social leadership with legitimate authority. Indirectly, subaltern classes absorb the ideas of intellectuals uncritically and accept intellectuals’ worldviews as their own. Class domination is thus an intellectual and moral victory as much as it is an economic fact (Gramsci 1971, pp. 5–14).

Autonomous Organization and Intellectual Leadership

Gramsci used the term "hegemony" both to refer to the "almost unrecognizable shaping of alternatives" that served as one of the pillars of

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2 Weber made a similar distinction between concepts of "force" and "legitimation." For an introduction to debates about the relationship between Gramsci’s "hegemony" and Weber’s "legitimation," see Bocock (1986, pp. 83–102).
bourgeois class rule (Seybold 1987, p. 176) and to describe the moral and intellectual leadership that he hoped workers would someday exert in a socialist society. Thus, for Gramsci, revolutionary struggle ultimately is a matter of education. "Every relationship of 'hegemony,'" he says (1971, p. 350), "is necessarily an educational relationship." To succeed in revolutionary struggles, subaltern classes must generate their own "organic intellectuals" capable of creating new forms of hegemony by shattering the universalistic claims of older worldviews.\(^3\) Within the working class these intellectuals perform an educative role in associational contexts provided by trade unions, workers' councils, and, especially, political parties. Unlike Lenin's concept of political parties as vanguard organizations bringing political consciousness to members of the working class from outside the limits of their experience, Gramsci conceived of political parties more in terms of what today are referred to as associational "free spaces."\(^4\) Here rank-and-file workers and their leaders would together create an autonomous culture and organization from which they would challenge capitalist political and ideological rule (Gramsci 1971, pp. 147–57, 330–43; also Sassoon 1987). The case studies below investigate the circumstances in which religious organizations and institutions also provide such contexts.

Marx recognized that, although the dominant ideas in a society, including religious beliefs, tend to be the ideas of the dominant class, they are never the only existing ideas. They do not exist without conflicting with ideas that express the "protest of the oppressed" (see Maduro [1975], p. 313, for an important discussion). Gramsci elaborated this position in his analysis of popular culture. According to Gramsci (1971, p. 326),

\(^3\) Gramsci (1971, pp. 5–14) used the term "organic" to refer to intellectuals that function within the ranks of a social stratum or class in an educative or leadership role. Intellectuals organic to the capitalist class include managers, engineers, advertisers, and technicians as well as scholars and journalists. In contrast are "traditional intellectuals" such as priests, who appear to serve universal values that transcend the interests of dominant classes but whose careers, regardless of their class of origin, are tied to organizations such as the church, which is rooted in earlier social formations such as feudallsm.

\(^4\) The concept of "free spaces" is best developed in Evans and Boyte (1986), who review the history of various American social movements in order to examine how people "develop new visions in which elements of tradition become resources for democratic activity" (p. 188). They define "free spaces" as communally grounded voluntary associations that permit people to "discover the capacities to overcome deferential patterns of behavior, outgrow parochialisms of class, race, and gender, and form a broader conception of the common good" (p. 183). Although class-based parties and social reform strategies grounded in community-based "free spaces" are often seen as antithetical, both stress participatory democracy, which is at the heart of Gramsci's conception of "democratic centralism" as a model for political parties (see Sassoon 1987, esp. pp. 166, 171).
"popular culture," which includes "popular religion," is a "conception of life and the world" that, on many points, conflicts with "official" conceptions of the world. But Gramsci—himself from a rural background—never romanticized popular religion, which he knew firsthand to include vast elements of superstition and fatalism. Popular culture and religion are "debased spill-over[s]" of the highly refined cultural conceptions of superior classes, including theology, which are stratified into "indigestible mass[es] of fragments" (as quoted in Cirese [1982], p. 218). "Every religion," Gramsci (1971, p. 420) said, "is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions" that vary along class lines. These beliefs and practices are often out of touch with the real conditions of people's lives. Reactionary elements—"fossilized reflections of the conditions of days gone by"—are juxtaposed in popular consciousness with progressive elements such as "that mass of beliefs and opinions on the subject of one's 'own' rights which are in continual circulation amongst the popular masses, and are forever being reviewed under the pressure of the real conditions of life and the spontaneous comparison between the ways in which the various classes live" (as quoted in Cirese [1982], p. 225). Progressive elements, however, are often blunted by contradictions and incoherence. Since Gramsci contended that Catholic church doctrine and power were frequently applied in order to keep popular religiosity in "a dispersed and divisive state," he believed that popular religion in Italy was at best a source of passive resistance (see Cirese 1982, p. 223; also Fulton 1987, p. 211).

But Gramsci (1971, p. 324) also believed that "all men are philosophers." Though "common sense" is "not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic," political education can transform common sense into "critical understanding." "For the mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world is a 'philosophical' event far more important and 'original' than the discovery of some philosophical 'genius' of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals" (p. 325). Thus Gramsci believed that, with leadership provided by organic intellectuals from within their own class and by other intellectual allies, workers and peasants would be able to construct oppositional conceptions of life that would become popular and hegemonic (see Gramsci 1971, pp. 330, 333).

One need not accept Gramsci's (1971, p. 392) personal belief that the need for religion is merely a "residue of the pre-capitalist world" to see, as Maduro (1982, p. 140) points out, that "subordinate classes whose worldview is predominantly religious will have difficulty taking any initiatives or participating in a process of transformation of society unless its religious worldview undergoes appropriate transformations." Thus for people living in a culture of religiosity, it is less a matter of their using
religion to achieve secular ends than of their becoming able to see through their religious culture toward political goals in such a fashion that their religious discourse and practices become oppositional. Such a transformation of worldview amounts to religious conversion (Loft and Stark 1965, pp. 863–64).

The Social Psychology of Conversion and Commitment

Gramsci’s experience in the revolutionary factory councils that flourished briefly in Italy around 1920 taught him the importance of autonomous organization and indigenous leadership in working-class struggle (Boggs 1984, pp. 69–108). His writings, however, rarely examine the actual processes involved in consciousness transformation, the movement from common sense to critical understanding. Indeed, it is frequently observed that Gramsci’s thought was biased by an unreflective “rationalist psychology” according to which he viewed human beings as acting purely “on the basis of rational calculations concerning their needs and interests” (Adamson 1980, pp. 147, also pp. 136–79, 154; Lears 1985, p. 578). While it would be wrong to overemphasize this point, since Gramsci’s writings reveal a sensitivity to the influence of nonrational culture, it is true that his only discussions of the conversion of consciousness (which he termed “catharsis”) are brief and largely devoid of an analysis of underlying social-psychological dimensions (Gramsci 1971, pp. 272–72, 366–67). Nonetheless, one can discern in Gramsci’s writings an implicit theory of conversion that recent research on the social psychology of religious conversion and commitment helps to bring into focus.

Research on religious conversion and commitment shares with Marxist sociology the conviction that, though thought and behavior are reciprocal, social existence primarily determines consciousness rather than the reverse (K. Marx [1859] 1977). Conformity to prescribed religious beliefs and values is a normative consequence of religious group membership (Finney 1978, p. 19). This finding is supported by studies of how people become converted to radically “new religions” such as cults where full acceptance of cultic beliefs follows a long process of intense involvement with cult members (Balch 1980; Loft and Stark 1965). As new participants learn to perform roles associated with group membership, their beliefs gradually come into line with group ideology. Straus (1979) sums up this process by observing that “the way to be changed is to act changed” (p. 163).

Interaction with “confirming others” is also crucial for maintaining commitment to religious worldviews. Berger (1969) argues that the plausibility of a group’s beliefs depends on the strength of a supporting structure of social support. Group resources that support belief include
affirmative therapies that are designed to still doubts and lapses of belief, rituals that reiterate beliefs, and ideological legitimations that confirm beliefs. Berger also points out that interactions which sustain plausibility may be either (1) coextensive with overall social experience or (2) limited to a deviant enclave. Studies confirm that the maintenance of both novel (cultic) and deviant (sectarian) religious worldviews is enhanced by "social encapsulation," which strengthens affective bonds within a religious group and neutralizes the influence of attachments outside the group (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Thus the maintenance of traditional worldviews as well as conversion and commitment to new beliefs depends on the availability of these social processes.

The concept of plausibility structure helps to clarify Gramsci's position on the diffusion of new philosophical conceptions as well as to underscore his stress on the importance of organizational autonomy in sustaining opposition. Gramsci (1971, pp. 338, 339) argued that initially the acceptance of new ideas among the people depends less on the "rational form in which the new conception is expounded" or on the "authority . . . of the expositor" than on "faith . . . in the social group to which [they] belong." Even when people cannot repeat all the intellectual justifications that they have heard given for new conceptions, they remain convinced that such reasons exist and that "so many like-thinking people can't be wrong" (Gramsci 1971, p. 339). Since "new conceptions have an extremely unstable position among the popular masses," especially when they are "in contrast with orthodox convictions," Gramsci (1971, p. 340) notes that any "cultural movement" aiming at replacing "old conceptions of the world" should "never . . . tire of repeating its own arguments." "Repetition," he adds, "is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality." In contrast with the fascists, however, who also understood the importance of sustaining plausibility through repetitive channels, Gramsci recognized that it is essential as well for socialist movements "to work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace" so that they can "take an active part in the creation of the history of the world" (1971, pp. 340, 323).

Hegemony and the Process of Class Formation

In contrast with recent neo-Marxist models, which view class formation as an objective process determined by structural location and which minimize the significance of ideology in the definition of class (Wright 1978), Gramsci viewed class formation as a historically contingent political process involving "structure, organization, and ideology" (McNall 1987, p. 223). Differences in leadership, autonomy, and plausibility of belief are proximate factors in the relative success of power struggles, but since they
are as much accomplishments as they are conditions of successful class-based oppositional movements, they must themselves be explained. As the case study analysis that follows will suggest, an understanding of why some groups succeed in building oppositional structures while others fail requires an analysis of the multiplicity of social forces—which Gramsci (1957, p. 164) termed the “relation of forces”—historically present in each context. This involves an analysis of the problematic of force and hegemony in each situation.

Gramsci’s (1971, pp. 52–55) notes on “methodological criteria” for the study of “subaltern classes” suggest how the dynamics of coercion and consent should be analyzed historically. He observed that the role of dependent classes in a historical configuration of force/hegemony involves analysis on two levels in addition to an assessment of leadership, ideological, and organizational resources: (1) the class formation of dependent groups “in the sphere of economic production” and (2) “their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology, and aims they conserve for a time” (Gramsci 1971, p. 52). Both factors—on-the-job experiences in the world of industrial production as well as preindustrial traditions—are regarded as important by sociologists interested in industrial conflict, but often these factors are studied separately. Thus Burawoy (1979) investigates the dynamics of consent and opposition that emerge in contemporary conflicts in factory settings, while Calhoun (1982) stresses the historical importance of workers’ efforts to defend traditional values and to preserve preindustrial communities in explaining the radicalism of workers in early periods of industrial development. Both dimensions are prominent in Gramsci’s investigations of Italian social development. Further, Gramsci suggested that “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population” to the leadership of hegemonic classes is “historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci 1971, p. 12). Thus dominant groups, like subalterns, must also be studied in terms of their social origins and their roles in production. Figure 1 summarizes this model of class-based opposition. An examination of these factors in coalfield and textile communities reveals significant differences in the process of class formation in the two regions.

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5 See Laclau and Mouffe’s (1982, p. 103) discussion of Gramsci’s concept of “relation of forces” as “the political articulation of society.” This controversial exposition, which argues that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is even more fundamental for current Marxist analysis than Marx’s concept of class, provides an excellent interpretation of Gramsci’s nonreductionistic methodology.
Mill Hands and Preachers in the Carolina Piedmont

Liston Pope's (1942) study of the interdependence of religion and economics in Gaston County, North Carolina, is a classic demonstration of religion's contribution to social quiescence. Pope (1942, pp. 27–35) found that in "normal" times, religion in the mill villages around Gastonia (1) legitimated capitalistic virtues such as sobriety, hard work, and obedience, (2) contributed to community integration, and (3) offered workers outlets for emotional escape. In times of crisis, religion was called upon to sanction and preserve the traditional order. Though he did not use Gramsci's concept explicitly, Pope's interpretation of the relationship between economy and religion hinges on an implicit notion of cultural hegemony. Gramsci, as we have seen, recognized that "ideas can have the weight of a material force" but nonetheless, as Sassoon (1987, p. ix) stresses, he was "fiercely critical of most of the content of popular ideas which are an important element in keeping people subordinate." Clearly, religion in Gastonia contributed to the social subordination of textile workers.

Pope (1942, p. 332) interpreted the religious culture of the Carolina Piedmont as both a "product of [capitalist-industrial] transformation and a guarantor of prevailing economic arrangements." At the same time he
rejected the view that southern religion was "simply an opiate of the people," recognizing that "there is nothing automatic . . . in the adaptation of the churches to economic variations; they retain a measure of separateness" (pp. 332–33). Thus granting a semiautonomous relation between religion and economic society, Pope's central question was, Why were churches and ministers consistently unwilling to criticize exploitation and social injustice in the southern textile industry? He studied a 1929 strike at the Loray Mills in order to assess religion's role in mediating class conflict in the local community and to find causes for the "social quiescence" of local clergy.

The Loray strike was one of several major labor conflicts that erupted in the textile industry throughout the southern Piedmont from 1928 to 1931. Intense competition, market declines after World War I, and reduced prices for textile goods encouraged manufacturers to cut labor costs by reducing wages and firing "excess" workers. At the same time, managers tried to increase productivity by intensifying labor activity through innovations such as the "stretch-out," which forced workers to tend more machines than was customary (Bernstein 1960, pp. 1–12). As a consequence, several thousand workers initiated a spontaneous strike at the Loray plant, a large, absentee-owned mill. Seeing that the workers lacked organization and leadership, professional organizers from the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU), a small, Communist-affiliated union in New England, decided to use Gaston County as the basis for launching a southern organizing drive. They quickly assumed leadership of the strike.

Within two weeks after the Loray walkout, the number of strikers had dwindled from more than two thousand to less than two hundred while mobs of local citizens—including ministers, church leaders, and members—attacked strikers and union organizers in order to rid their community of Communist influence. One such mob sang "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow" as it marched into a Gastonia boardinghouse, seized NTWU organizers, and took them out into the country and beat them (Pope 1942, p. 292). Several people on both sides, including a chief of police, were killed in various incidents. In the trials that followed, all persons accused of killing strikers were acquitted, while workers accused of conspiracy and murder were found guilty. These trials were turned into spectacles of symbolic politics in which Communists were exposed as atheists aimed at destroying religion and union organizers were portrayed by prosecutors as "fiends incarnate, stripped of their hoofs and horns, bearing guns instead of pitchforks" (quoted in Pope [1942], p. 303).

Across the entire southern Piedmont, "the press and the church arrayed themselves in almost solid phalanx alongside . . . the millowners" (Bernstein 1960, p. 41). After the strike in Gaston County was crushed, as were all the others in the Piedmont, local ministers led in mobilizing commu-
ticy resources to eradicate Communist teachings in the region and to defend "God—Our Country—Our Order" (Pope 1942, p. 326). The strike taught management at the northern-owned Loray Mills—which before the strike had not supported local churches to the extent that was customary among southern manufacturers—the ideological value of churches. Consequently, management "initiated a scheme whereby any applicant for a job in the mill [had to] present a recommendation from his former minister." As late as 1939, it remained "somewhat difficult for a nonchurchman to secure a job in the mill" (Pope 1942, pp. 322, 323).

Throughout the Loray strike, almost without exception, Gaston County ministers "refuse[d] to cooperate in anyway with the strike." At the same time, they failed "to condemn mob terrorism and police brutality against the strikers" and their Communist organizers (Pope 1942, p. 283). Although only a few ministers preached directly against the strike, the clergy's principal strategy was "to divert attention of the workers from the strike to religion" by sending popular evangelists into troubled villages and by conducting lengthy evangelical meetings throughout the county (Pope 1942, p. 282; also Hall et al. 1987, p. 285). Commenting on the effectiveness of such "tactics," Pope (1942, p. 282) observed that "most of the members of the Gastonia community, including the mill workers, expect religion to keep itself undefiled by the things of the world; if the ministers had entered openly into the economic conflict, they might have lost prestige. Instead, they did all things decently and in religious order, and thereby served as a rallying point for the return to 'normalcy'" (p. 282).

In order to understand why ministers were "sincerely opposed to the strike," Pope analyzed the "structural" and "cultural" dependence of mill churches on local millowners. He found that mill churches had been built and maintained by local industrialists who took an active leadership role in their churches. Ministers' salaries were paid in full or supplemented by the millowners, and, in general, when the textile industry expanded, churches grew and prospered. The churches' organizational viability was thus linked directly with industrial profits.

Structural dependence was reinforced by cultural control. "The capitalist did not merely provide capital; he also established facilities and set the norms for politics, morality, religion, amusement, and other major spheres of culture. His control and his moral right to control had hardly been questioned" (Pope 1942, p. 208). The "acquiescence" of clergy to the norms of "capitalist paternalism" reflected both the hegemony of the ownership class and the extent to which ministers' thinking represented an uncritical acceptance of ideas they had absorbed from above.6 In

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6 Such myopia on the part of the clergy, as Pope (1942) makes clear, should not be
Gramsci's terms, common sense predominated over critical understanding. Lacking independent "knowledge of economic and social affairs," local clergy "appropriate[d] ideas from their immediate environment without clear understanding of their significance or implications." They substituted "well-worn, time-honored phrases which really dismiss the problems" for which their parishioners need "cogent analysis" (Pope 1942, pp. 181, 182). Consequently, religion failed to transcend the "economic ethnicways" imposed by the dominant group. Pope concluded that it was little wonder "having received most of their training, value standards, and self-realization from the type of culture being attacked by the Communists" that the clergy "would defend that culture against all open onslaughts" (Pope 1942, p. 330). A follow-up study of churches in Gastonia 35 years later found that churches there remain an "opponent of change" in labor-management relations (Earle, Knudson, and Shriver 1976, pp. 171–236).

Contrasts in the Coalfields

There are striking similarities in the organization of religious and economic institutions in the single-industry villages of the coal-mining and textile-producing regions of the South. Yet the role of religion in the industrial conflicts that occurred there varied dramatically in the two settings, contributing to quiescence in the mill towns and to activism in the coalfields. A comparison of industrial conflicts across the Appalachian mountain and Piedmont regions is especially instructive because it controls for variations in membership homogeneity and theological tradition, two factors that Westhues (1976) found to influence oppositional stances among religious groups in addition to leadership preferences. Survey research confirms that residents of the mountain and Piedmont regions of the South are culturally similar (Billings 1974). Workers in the coal and textile industries during the early decades of the century shared a common religious heritage of a rural evangelical Protestantism that had developed in the southern "backcountry" (Isaac 1982).

Likewise, the social organizations of industrial communities in the coal-mining and textile-manufacturing districts in the 1920s and 1930s were remarkably similar. Mining camps and mill villages in the rural South were typically located in isolated areas near the sources of coal or waterpower and peopled entirely by company employees and their families whose lives were segregated from other occupational groups and viewed simply as an intellectual failure but rather as a structural consequence of the power and influence of local industrialists and the absence of sustained alternative discourses in the community.
influences. Besides providing jobs, companies built and controlled schools and churches and often operated the only available recreation and shopping facilities. In extreme cases, they exercised the right to prevent visitors from entering company towns and, occasionally, even prevented the delivery of newspapers (cf. Eller 1982, pp. 161–98; McLaurin 1971, pp. 16–40). Ironically, however, the mutually reinforcing conditions of isolation and paternalism are commonly offered as explanations both for the quiescence of southern millworkers (Boye 1972; Blauner 1964, and Earle et al. 1976, p. 235) and the militancy of southern miners (Kerr and Siegel 1954).

Even if its cause is in doubt, the variation in activism between southern miners and millworkers is readily apparent. Only 32 strikes involving 9,274 textile workers occurred in the South from 1887 to 1905, while 519 strikes involving 205,156 coal miners occurred in the region during the same time period. Strikes by coal miners account for one-third of all southern strike activity in those years (Marshall 1967). In the 1920s and 1930s, Appalachian miners struggled for union recognition and became one of the most class-conscious occupational groups in the United States. Research on labor conflicts that occurred in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky reveals the positive significance of religion in the miners' struggles.

Just as in the southern textile industry (P. Wood 1986), early coal operators in Appalachia enjoyed an economic advantage over producers elsewhere because of lower wage rates in the South (Hevener 1978). Consequently, they opposed the miners' demands for higher wages and better living and working conditions. Just as in Gastonia, coal operators attempted to use "the company-sponsored and -controlled preacher[s], the company-built and -controlled clergy, all operating within the confines of the company-controlled town" to blunt miners' activism (Corbin 1981, p. 148). There is no reason to believe that Appalachian clergy differed in social background or experience from their counterparts in the textile industry. Company preachers were called upon to extoll the work ethic

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1 In 1900 there were approximately 50% more workers employed in the South's textile factories than in the region's coal mines.

2 Comparative data on the social backgrounds of clergy in coal camps and mill villages are unavailable, but there is no reason to suspect systematic variation between industries. Most company clergy came from working-class backgrounds, but some were college educated. Pope (1942, pp. 109, 135) reports that nearly half of the Baptist ministers in Gastonia a decade after the strike had high school educations or less and that "many" of the ministers in sectarian churches were "millworkers who preach as an avocation." Pope (1942, p. 108) and Corbin (1981, p. 153) both report that highly educated clergy were less effective and less popular than ministers whose backgrounds were similar to those of their working-class parishioners. Just as many of the ministers who supported the miners' cause were employed as miners, some of the company-
and "to provide a bulwark against the rising tide of unionism." Ministers openly denounced unionism from their pulpits as "ungodly and wicked" (Corbin 1981, p. 150). They were backed up by prominent evangelists such as Billy Sunday who, in a revival sponsored by a local coal operators' association, referred to United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) organizers as "human lice" (Corbin 1981, p. 151). Likewise, clergy in the county seat towns of the region tended to identify with the coal operators. Reinhold Niebuhr, who brought a national committee of clergymen to Harlan County, Kentucky, to protest violence against the miners in the 1930s, reported that middle-class churches there were "pretty unqualifiedly on the side of the operators" (Niebuhr 1967, p. 110).\(^5\)

But during the long period of conflict in the coalfields, as they matured as a class, Appalachian miners rejected the doctrines offered them in the company churches and developed autonomous counterinstitutions. David Corbin's (1981) oral history research reveals that by the time of the Paint Creek--Cabin Creek struggles in West Virginia after World War I—conflicts that rank among the most violent and prolonged in the history of American labor—most miners had abandoned the company churches. Attendance rates in the company churches fell to as low as 10% of earlier levels (Corbin 1981, p. 153). As one miner wrote to the UMWA Journal, "We are beginning to see the light for ourselves and realize that the company preachers are selling us out to the bosses for a mere mess of the potage [sic]" (quoted in Corbin [1981], p. 152). Utilizing tactics that resembled those of the radicalized peasants and artisans known as "Ranters" in the English social revolution (Hill 1975), miners disrupted services in the company churches and discredited company pastors. Some pastors came to identify with the workers' struggle (Hevener 1978). More important, however, miner-ministers arose from within the ranks of militant miners to conduct alternative religious services at the beginning and end of work shifts, at picket lines, and at clandestine meetings in the tent colonies that housed evicted miners (Corbin 1981, p. 158). Their authority was rooted in frontier religious traditions that recognized the legitimate role of lay ministers. Outside official channels, and along with other independent ministers, these miner-ministers helped to imbue the miners' struggle for a union with religious legitimacy. The recently published

\(^{5}\) As will be noted in the discussion of Kentucky (below), workers in both industries occasionally found allies in independent rural churches that, unlike company-built and "uptown" churches, were sheltered from the influence of industrialists.
autobiography of a prominent labor organizer in eastern Kentucky reveals the significance of the leadership they provided (Garland 1983).

Jim Garland, son and brother of ministers in eastern Kentucky, was an elder in the Missionary Baptist Church when he became an organizer for the National Miners’ Union (NMU), a Communist union that offered support to blacklisted miners in Harlan County after the UMWA had been temporarily defeated. Garland writes that “one would have to have lived in the mountains to realize the importance of the churches’ support to the NMU’s initial success” (Garland 1983, p. 146). Independent rural churches of the Holiness and Baptist sects located outside the company towns allowed the NMU to set up soup kitchens for evicted miners and their families, and they “lent a hand in the strike” (Garland 1983, p. 145; also see p. 147).

Social historians confirm Garland’s observations. In east Kentucky, “many vocal Harlan preachers supported unionism” (Hevener 1978, p. 179). A Holiness minister and former miner in Closplint, Kentucky, “organized a local union . . . and conducted local union meetings in the church where he and his family lived,” while a Baptist minister who worked as a checkweighman was a strike leader in another Harlan County community. The UMWA appointed a Methodist minister as union field representative for another district of Harlan County (Hevener 1978, pp. 105, 110). Likewise, in West Virginia some ministers became strike leaders. One such miner-minister who preached the doctrine of unionism is reported to have said to his congregation, “I say to you that any man in this gathering today who does not join this strike and stand by it, even until death—for the sake of the children—is not worthy to call himself a Christian because he is not willing to stand up for the Kingdom of Heaven” (quoted in Corbin [1981], p. 159). Another, joining an army of ten thousand miners and supporters who marched from Cabin Creek to Logan County, West Virginia, to overthrow that county’s government and its notorious system of private mine guards, said: “Now I lay down my Bible and take up my rifle in the service of the Lord” (p. 159).

Thus miner-ministers and other clergy, functioning as the “organic intellectuals” about which Gramsci theorized, waged a long-term “war of position” by helping to create an oppositional religious culture in Appalachia that influenced many working miners. Corbin’s analysis of letters written to local newspapers and to the Journal of the United Mine Workers of America suggests that miners combed the Bible for passages they interpreted literally as supporting unionism and interpreted their struggles through biblical lenses. “The miners found God’s presence in anything that enabled them to win a strike and recognition of the union” (Corbin 1981, p. 163). It would be a mistake, however, to regard such efforts as support for the reductionistic argument that miners simply
interpreted religion in line with their material interests since texts, such as the Bible, do not simply speak for themselves. Gramsci, who was trained in linguistics, anticipated the insight of modern hermeneutic theory, which states that a reader makes sense of a text by placing it within his or her own interpretive frame or "horizon of meaning" (Jay 1984, p. 161). Changes in interpretive frames, such as the one that accompanied the coalfield insurrection, make new readings possible. Avoiding both materialist reductionism and idealism, Gramsci stressed that innovative interpretations are not the product of individual insight but rather "an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment" (Gramsci 1971, p. 350).

In addition to the creation of new religious meanings, miners rewrote familiar Protestant hymns to proclaim the gospel of unionization and sang these at rallies and on picket lines. Thus the Christian song "Hold the fort for we are coming, Christians be strong," became "Hold the fort for we are coming, union men be strong" (Garland 1983, p. 161). Another song proclaimed: "When you hear of a thing that's called union / You know that they're happy and free / For Christ has a union in heaven / How beautiful union must be" (quoted in Corbin 1981, p. 164). Jim Garland—who, along with his sisters "Aunt Molly" Jackson and Sarah Gunning and their neighbor Florence Reece, translated gospel songs into labor songs in Harlan County, Kentucky, with some becoming the most familiar in the American labor movement—stresses the role of group singing in helping to sustain the plausibility of miners' belief in the efficacy of collective struggle (Garland 1983, pp. 158–61).11

Corbin (1981, p. 169) concluded from his study of miners' religiosity that coalfield religion, as transformed by militant miners, "promoted collective thought and action, gave cohesion and strength to a social class, and permitted the miners to resist the servility and feelings of inferiority that class oppression often breeds in the oppressed." Southern evangelicalism, as sociologists of religion frequently note, "is distinguished by its highly individuated conception of human salvation (the notion of collective salvation—the salvation of the church—is foreign to this tradition)" (Hunter 1983, p. 7). For miners raised in this religious culture, the acceptance of a politicized theology that viewed salvation as being collective as well as individual, material as well as spiritual, was truly a conversion experience.

10 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possible alternative explanation.

11 Jackson and, to a lesser extent, Gunning and Reece, are discussed in Green (1972). For an analysis of southern folk musicians as "organic intellectuals," see Patterson (1975).
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Differential Resources

In prolonged labor struggles in Appalachia, religion contributed to miners' efforts to challenge the power of coal operators in coalfield communities. Alongside union organizers, unordained miner-ministers and other clergy played a significant leadership role in these political efforts by helping to articulate oppositional interpretations of religious traditions and by giving religious legitimation to popular struggles. Such leadership was both a cause and an effect of the "free spaces" miners created when they abandoned company churches and when they created union locals. Alternative worship sites in tent colonies and on picket lines, in addition to the freedom to speak that they found in the union locals, created new opportunity structures for the development of both indigenous leadership and critical reflection—coming "to see the light for ourselves," as the miners described their own conversion experience. The repetition of collective symbols and their ritualized expression in sermons, prayers, and group singing helped to sustain miners' commitment to the sacred cause of unionism and solidarity.

In sharp contrast, indigenous leadership, autonomous organization, and plausibility support structures—resources Gramsci found essential to successful oppositional movements—were in short supply in the southern Piedmont when, briefly, and with less success, workers protested conditions in the textile industry. Here, millowners' control "functioned effectively to destroy any autonomous space and institutions which the working class could claim as their own—in which independent leadership could emerge and develop, in which popular traditions could be sustained, or in which workers could compare and analyze their experience as working people" (Boyte 1972, p. 23).

Oppositional religious practices, such as those that matured in the coalfields, emerged momentarily during the textile conflicts, but the social situation there did not sustain their full development. In particular, sustained support for the plausibility of radical beliefs was absent. The importance of oppositional practices among Appalachian miners lends additional significance to an observation by Pope (1942) that usually goes unnoticed by his commentators, that is, that initially, textile workers also thought about their struggle in religious terms. He reports that "the strikers held their own religious service, led by a lay preacher who joined them, on the first Sunday after the strike began. They brought their religious convictions with them into the strike and pronounced it right unto the eyes of God. Many of the lay strike speeches were religious in tone, and 'Praise the Lord!' was a characteristic exclamation of approval for workers at strike meetings. Though the strikers learned to sing 'Sol-
ldarity Forever,' they continued to use spirituals and hymns at strike meetings" (Pope 1942, p. 262). Oral history research recently completed by Hall et al. (1987, p. 221) demonstrates that workers employed religious discourse to justify strikes in other Piedmont communities during the same time. In Marion, North Carolina, for example, informants recall that "activists held 'open-air services,' sang hymns on the picket line, and invited strikebreakers to join the union and be saved." Why did such inklings of religious opposition go no further than they did?

Earlier in this article, I stressed that rationalistic models of the recognition of class interests could be corrected with insights from the sociology of religion. Just as conversion to religious cults is typically the culmination of a long-term social process in which the plausibility of novel ideas is repeatedly reinforced through intensive social involvement in the cult community (Loftand and Stark 1965), so too is conversion to a course of working-class activism in union-organizing efforts. Coal miners struggled throughout the entire decade of the 1920s to establish the UMWA in West Virginia, and they fought the same battle from 1930 to 1940 in eastern Kentucky. This was a long enough period of time to permit the development of leadership resources, free social spaces, and support for the plausibility of oppositional beliefs. In contrast, what has been called "the revolt of the Piedmont" (Bernstein 1960) lasted no longer than a few months.12

In addition to differences in duration, leadership resources and attitudes also varied between the two movements. Although initially absent from the unorganized coalfields of Appalachia, the United Mine Workers of America were fairly well organized in other coal-mining regions and could provide some leadership to Appalachian workers. More important, their local organizers were sympathetic to the miners' religion but helped to point it in radical directions. "Walter Seacrist was a miner and lay minister in Holley Grove, on Paint Creek in Kanawha County. He not only preached unionism to the miners, but also served as vice-president of the West Virginia Mine Workers' Union and wrote some of the most militant union songs that have come out of the coal fields" (Corbin 1981, pp. 158). Similarly, Roy Combs, a miner-preacher described as "one of the most effective UMWA organizers in southern West Virginia," is said to have "established several union locals and later served as a leader of the Mingo County strike, conducting numerous mass organizing meetings and delivering powerful pro-union sermons" (Corbin 1981, p. 159).

No national union comparable to the UMWA existed in the American

12 It was the recognition of the importance of duration in oppositional struggles that led Gramsci to develop his concept of the "war of position" as a long-term social process.
textile industry. Consequently, the strikes by southern textile workers in 1929 tended to be "leaderless" and "spontaneous" (Bernstein 1960, pp. 33, 21). When the tiny NTWU stepped into this void, its New England-based organizers proved hostile to the religiosity of southern workers. In Gastonia, Communist organizers viewed the workers' religious orientation as an instance of false consciousness that needed correction. Organizers made no effort to reach out to the religious community or clergy, condemned religion in public, and in one instance an "organizer kicked a Bible out of the hands of a resident of the new tent colony and said, 'No one believes that book now'" (Pope 1942, p. 291, also p. 202). Plausibility and commitment to religious beliefs must receive support either from within a religious enclave or from the wider society (Berger 1969). Striking workers in Gastonia, who initially may have suspected that their God was on their side, found no support from either. If textile militants found little sympathy for their religious beliefs among their leaders, they obtained even less support from the wider environment, where owners and clergy effectively drove a "wedge between the strikers and the remainder of the community, thereby forcing strikers to choose as to loyalty" (Pope 1942, p. 252). A potentially autonomous expression of opposition was thus silenced in Gastonia.\footnote{American left-wing culture in general has not been particularly sympathetic to religion. It is interesting to note, as Corbin's (1981) work reveals, that much of the protest music written by Appalachian songwriters during the period being examined was explicitly religious in its content and form. Yet when some of these musicians, notably Aunt Molly Jackson and Sarah Gunning, left the region and began to sing protest songs for urban audiences overt reference to religion seems to have diminished. A good example is Gunning's "Dreadful Memories," a secularized reworking of a traditional hymn, "Precious Memories," which Gunning wrote in New York City to raise money for the NMU and which recalls hard times back in Kentucky. The best discussion of Gunning's music is provided by Archie Green (1965) in his album notes to her recording \textit{Girl of Constant Sorrow}.}

Class Formation in Coalfield and Textile-manufacturing Communities Gramsci regarded both (1) preindustrial "mentality, ideology, and aims" and (2) on-the-job experiences in the world of industrial production as factors influencing not only the historical formation of classes but also the development of leadership, organizational autonomy, and social support for oppositional beliefs in class struggles (Gramsci 1971, p. 52) (see fig. 1). These factors varied significantly in the coalfield and textile communities of the South.

1. \textit{Social origins}.—Historical research reveals that the southern textile industry was built by prominent cotton planters (Bartley 1983; Billings 1979; Escott 1985). Powerful landed families that had dominated south-
ern society and politics during the antebellum period led a massive social crusade to build an industrial "New South" after the Civil War. Evoking images of the "Lost Cause" and a mythical past (Gaston 1973; Cash 1941), planters presented themselves as the champions of impoverished white farmers as well as business and professional classes. An alliance between planters and industrialists extended the paternalistic social relations of cotton plantations into the rural mill villages of the New South (McLaurin 1971). Traditional rural social relations were upheld as both planters-turned-industrialists and white sharecroppers-turned-mill hands alternated between cotton growing and cotton manufacture (Billings 1982). Personalistic recruitment into the mills and paternalistic favors—echoes of the plantation system as a way of life and of the traditional relations between planters and their yeomen neighbors (Genevose 1967)—were exchanged for workers' loyalty. Part of the bargain included a guarantee of jobs for whites only, which manipulated traditional racial antipathy in the owners' favor. The millowners' prestige thus reflected preeminence in the new sphere of industrial production as well as their traditional position of dominance in the agrarian social structure.

In contrast, coal-camp paternalism had no grounding in the prior social experience of the autonomous subsistence farmers of the mountain South who became coal miners (Billings, Blee, and Swanson 1986). This is why, in sharp contrast with industrial experience elsewhere in the South, the use of racist rhetoric on the part of coal operators did not deter white miners from uniting with black workers in their common struggle to build a union movement in those sections of Appalachia (especially southern West Virginia) where significant numbers of black miners were imported as "scab" laborers. According to Lewis (1987), blacks and whites entered the industry on more or less equal footing in Appalachia, and neither group questioned the other's right to make a living in the mines. Appalachian miners brought to their new work situation traditions of independence and mutuality that had been sustained by an agrarian "moral economy" in which "relations of production were mediated principally by ties of kinship rather than by the market place" (Hahn 1986, p. 181). Such farmers were accustomed to making their living without interference from a landlord class. Their relatively egalitarian way of life was challenged when corporate investors from outside the region penetrated the mountains around the turn of the century with railroad lines, purchased huge tracts of land and minerals, and built industrial towns (Eller 1982; Gaventa 1983).14

14 To refer to Appalachian rural communities as "relatively egalitarian" is not to imply that households were unstratified by age and gender but rather to call attention to how social relations in Appalachian communities differed from those in the plantation
When miners organized to confront mine owners and managers, their demands were not restricted to conflicts over wage improvements and other workplace issues. In opposing forms of company paternalism, including company store profits, owners' control of housing and evictions, script payments, and the civil control exercised by private mine guards, they challenged the basic organizational structures of coalfield life (Marshall 1967, pp. 71–86; Banks 1980). In contrast, evidence suggests that workers in the textile industry in the 1930s challenged the millowners only in situations where norms of paternalism and personalism had broken down, for example, in larger, absentee-owned, and bureaucratically structured firms such as the Loray Mills (Bernstein 1960). They did so in order to restore the balance of rights and duties and to defend the style of personal relations in the mills that textile workers had come to expect since the early postbellum years. This interpretation is consistent with Pope's observation that "lower wages appear not to have been crucial" in the Gastonia strike, "nor was the fact of the stretch-out of itself of supreme importance." Rather, he wrote, "so far as internal mill policies were concerned, the impersonal and arbitrary methods of the superintendent appear to have been the most significant factors underlying the strike" (Pope 1942, p. 231). Even today, older textile workers are observed to react with hostility to the replacement of paternalism by bureaucratic modes of industrial control (Conway 1979, pp. 16, 25, 35–36).

2. The organization of work.—Differences in the internal organization of work in the coal and textile industries reinforced these tendencies.¹⁵ In large, mechanized factories, managerial power is partially concealed in the technological organization of production since owners or managers need not directly intervene in the labor process to exert power over workers (Edwards 1979). Machines appeared to direct the labor process in textile mills, except when owners or managers interfered with routine production processes to impose "speedups" or "stretch-outs." Since most southern firms were small and personalistic, however, millowners acting as benevolent patrons of company villages also exercised direct personal

South where the textile industry flourished. The interpretation of subsistence farming in Appalachia as a "moral economy" is not meant to imply the absence of patriarchy.

¹⁵ An alternative explanation for differences in opposition and quiescence between the coal and textile industries, raised by an anonymous reviewer, relates variations in militancy to the gender composition of the respective work forces, since coal mining, until recently, was an exclusively male occupation, while textile mills employed many women. Historical evidence, however, suggests that women employees were no less likely to be involved in textile strike activity than were men and, in fact, often played prominent leadership roles (see Hall et al. 1987, esp. pp. 226–31). The same pattern is true today (Conway 1979). Outside the South, women textile workers staged several of the first working-class protests in U.S. industry (Dublin 1979).
power over their workers. Thus the relative invisibility of millowners in the production process and their prominence in mill village affairs helps to explain the tendency for southern textile workers to "absolve top management of responsibility for the out-of-line activities of supervisors and to consider the latter as indicative of personality quirks of individuals rather than a representative of company policy" (Gilman 1956, p. 144). Coal mining, on the other hand, was a craft occupation before the period of mechanization (roughly 1930–60). Mine operators exerted direct control through foremen, but miners experienced an unusual degree of labor autonomy (Dix 1977). Work teams developed strong social solidarity because of shared danger and interdependence underground. Miners' relative independence at work thus reinforced their preindustrial social experience of autonomy.

Mutually interacting factors of preindustrial experience and workplace organization thus shaped the relations between owners (or managers) and workers in the coal and textile industries into different patterns. Elements of both coercion and consent were present in both cases, but the balance of elements varied. Textile manufacturers achieved a position of moral and intellectual hegemony over the industrial communities they built that was denied to coal operators. In the mill towns, religion functioned to promote labor discipline and community control. Force was applied through fear of unemployment and evictions, mob violence, police harassment, and the courts, but the moral authority of the millowners, buttressed by the clergy, proved to be the greatest obstacle to unionization in the Carolinas. On the other hand, coal operators, lacking moral authority, resorted to applications of force notorious in American labor history in order to block unionization. These efforts included blacklisting, evictions, prohibitions of "public" meetings and gatherings in coal camps, refusal of the right of entry in camps to visitors and strangers, prohibition of newspapers, and massive applications of violence by private mine guards, police, and militia. For radical miners in such circumstances, religion contributed significantly to oppositional discourse and practices.

Few oppositional movements ultimately succeed at becoming hegemonic, however. Religion aided coal miners' efforts to build a strong union movement in Appalachia. But the militant miners of the South failed to establish a cohesive moral and intellectual bloc with other oppositional groups, an act that would have proved capable of radically restructurizing industrial life. This was accomplished, instead, by a progressive wing of the American capitalist class, which, during the New Deal, recognized a legitimate role for unions in a restructured political economy. Only when federal leadership shifted in favor of industrial unions in the United States, and the coercive power of the state came to support rather than to oppose unions, did the United Mine Workers of America.
succeed completely in organizing the Appalachian coalfields (Hevener 1978).

CONCLUSION

In 1931, as she stayed awake all night with worry in Harlan County, Kentucky, knowing that Sheriff J. H. Blair’s deputized “gun thugs” were searching for her husband, a union supporter, Florence Reece wrote what would become one of the most familiar songs in this country’s union movement, “Which Side Are You On?” It was written on a torn-off calendar sheet to the tune of an old Baptist hymn, “Lay the Lily Low”, some of its lines depict the polarization of sympathies in the coalfields of Kentucky during the 1930s:

If you go to Harlan County,
There is no neutral there,
You’ll either be a union man,
Or a thug for J. H. Blair.

Which side are you on?
Which side are you on? [Reece 1972, p. 9]

This article began with Westhues’s (1976) finding that whether or not a religious group will take an “oppositional stance” toward its sociocultural environment is best predicted by the “preferences” of the dominant groups within it. But how such groups interpret their preferences for change or the status quo—which side they are on—is a complex sociological problem.

In the case study comparison above, religious leaders in southern textile communities identified with the planter-industrialists’ hegemonic project of building a New South. They saw their interests, and the needs of their congregations, as best served by avoiding the costs associated with protracted struggles for unionization and thus helped to defend the social logic of paternalism on which planter and industrial interests had been predicated since the antebellum period. In contrast, many clergy in the Appalachian coalfields saw things differently. The latter provided leadership to the union struggle, sustained religious justifications for it, and helped to convert miners to the union cause.

Gramsci’s model of class-based opposition has been utilized here to interpret historically which side religious leaders were on in these two situations of industrial conflict. In an immediate sense, their allegiance was a matter of whether clergy identified their own and their congregations’ interests with local owners or workers. But how they made this choice—the voluntaristic dimension of social conflict—was influenced by the political process of class formation.
The historical analysis above supports several conclusions. First, religion is not a "superstructural" reflection of material interests. Rather, as a mediating variable in social conflicts, it has both a degree of autonomy and material impact. In the South, identical religious traditions have been called on to defend the status quo and to justify opposition.

Second, whether religious leaders defend the hegemony of dominant social groups or contribute to the creation of an oppositional culture depends on the development of what Gramsci called critical understanding. Critical understanding is dependent on three mutually supportive conditions that Gramsci identified among oppositional movements: (a) autonomous organizations, or free spaces, that allow room for reflection independent of the ideological presuppositions of dominant groups; (b) organic intellectuals who help to develop alternative worldviews that challenge the status quo and who work to educate movement participants; and (c) social interactions among participants that sustain these new worldviews and insure their plausibility. Although Gramsci's thinking was developed in response to situations of class conflict, these sociological insights should prove useful for the analysis of other situations of opposition where religion plays a prominent role. Examples that would be fruitful for further analysis include the civil rights movement in the U.S. South, in which clergy played an important role (Harding 1984), the contemporary women's movement of which feminist theology is an important dimension (McGuire 1987), and the role of "liberation theology" in contemporary Central American oppositional movements.

Third and finally, in the case of class-based oppositional movements, religion may figure as a significant dimension of the politics of class formation. Here, Gramsci's thoughts on the historicity of class relations, which included a stress on the open-endedness of class phenomena as they are lived and experienced, stands in sharp contrast with conceptions of class as an objective configuration of interests. In such situations, as in the coal and textile communities of the U.S. South, religion—no less than the workplace—is a contested terrain.

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