

PAPER PROPOSAL

Lessons from the Internal Colony Model: A Capability Approach to Appalachian “Development”

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Abstract: The internal colony model (ICM), which posits an extractive/exploitative relationship between the United States and its Appalachian region, has had a mixed track record. It unduly emphasized the geography of capital and reified the region as demographically homogeneous; but also accurately portrayed it as a lesser-among-equals “American Other.” Beyond its (de)merits, the ICM offered postcolonial solutions for just economic transitions: insofar as Appalachia resembles the colonies of the Global South, perhaps its economic development should follow a similar path. This paper analyzes the ICM’s legacy on contemporary development discourses through the lens of Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach (CA), which is usually employed as a metric of justice in development economics. Instead of prioritizing growth or industrialization, the CA equates “development” with abundant sociopolitical autonomy. To be developed is to be free, and to be free is to possess sufficient capability to achieve one’s life goals as autonomously as possible. On this view, the plight of many Appalachians is not “underdevelopment” but systemic unfreedom. In this sense, then, the ICM is correct: colony status transcends mere extraction/exploitation and includes the curtailment of morally significant autonomy to self-determine life goals. Where the ICM falls short is in its proposed solution: simply to move capital in the hands of Appalachians does not increase the capabilities of Appalachians’ without the concurrent dissolution of the power relations that engender systemic unfreedoms in the first place.