*Published in the Summer 2006 Grantmakers in the Arts* Reader, *these thoughts were sparked by attending the Council on Foundations 57th Annual Conference, "Philanthropy: Investing in the Vision of Progress," held in Pittsburgh, May 7-9, 2006. I was especially engaged by the plenary remarks of George Soros and Newt Gingrich.*

## Progress

By Dudley Cocke

Those holding economic power in the U.S. are mightily concerned about whether the U.S. will have the talent to compete successfully in the new global economy. Worried about problems such as our broken education system and our extraordinarily high rates of incarceration, some of the economic elite have already decided that the U. S. will soon lose its competitive edge, and consequently they have begun re-thinking their national orientation. Many more accept that the divide between rich and poor will continue to widen with globalization, creating an ever-larger U.S. underclass. In this scenario, most of our grandchildren will be significantly worse off economically than we are, inheriting a standard of living 30%-40% poorer than that which we presently enjoy.

In April 1964, President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty from the humble porch of the Fletcher family in Inez, Kentucky. It came as a shock, then, to many Americans that by far the largest number of poor people in the United States were white. In the central Appalachian coalfields of southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southwestern Virginia, the persistently high poverty rates were a direct result of 60 years of absentee ownership of the region by national corporations. Economically, central Appalachia had become a mineral colony, a rich land of poor people with all the telltale signs of colonization – a discounted workforce, a natural environment regarded by its absentee owners as a commodity, a population that was unable to implicate itself in its own plight and thereby unable to adequately defend itself. Beginning in the late 1960's, as ownership of its land and natural resources began shifting from national corporations to transnational conglomerates such as Exxon and Royal Dutch Shell, central Appalachia's coalfields became the first large area of the United States to experience globalization

In 1969, eighty miles from the Fletcher's porch in Inez, a multi-media organization that would come to be known as Appalshop (for Appalachian Workshop) was beginning to be organized by local youth in their teens and early twenties. In the course of the next three-plus decades, Appalshop would create the largest single body of work about its place and people in each of its major production divisions: 189 documentary films, 95 music and spoken word recordings, and 53 original plays. All this production would have in common a rendering of the Appalachian experience from an insider's perspective – and a commitment on the part of Appalshop's artists and managers to link the Appalachian story to the stories of others elsewhere struggling with stark inequities.

Appalshop's experience with globalization teaches that the fight for economic justice is best located in particular landscapes and communities. With this grounding, complex

corporate financial ownership arrangements have the best chance of being discerned. We've also learned that citizens and their local leaders must be realists about human nature, sufficiently skeptical of their own motives as well as those of their absentee antagonists.

In his conference remarks, George Soros explained the thesis of his forthcoming book, *The Age of Fallibility*, in which he writes:

> Markets, especially financial markets, have become global, but the institutions that are needed for a society to flourish, or even to survive, have not. Political arrangements are based on the sovereignty of states; they are not sufficient to take care of the collective interests of humanity, such as peace, security, the environment, social justice, and even the stability of financial markets.

Based on central Appalachia's experience of globalization, the opportunity to realize the collective interests of humanity to which Mr. Soros refers lies not in the realm of a new (and indefinite) hierarchal world order, but more in the spirit of the prescription spelled out by Confucius 2500 years ago:

> The men of old wanting to clarify and diffuse throughout the empire that light which comes from looking straight into the heart and then acting, first set up good government in their own states; wanting good government in their states, they first established order in their own families; wanting order in the home, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their hearts, they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts [the tones given off by the heart]; wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost.

Here's hoping that conservatives such as Newt Gingrich will take their themes of personal responsibility, family, and the importance of local life to such a sincere place. As for Appalachia, whose mountains are 850 million years old, 2500 years ago can seem as recent as this morning's light reflecting off Troublesome Creek.