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## Appalachia Coal: The Campaign to End Mountaintop Removal Mining

Laura A. Bozzi

In this case of mountaintop removal for coal in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States, Laura Bozzi explores the delicate insider-outsider tension of keep-it-in-the ground (KIIG) politics. Mountaintop removal activists recognize both the deep sense of place, history, and culture of the peoples of Appalachia and the impacts of mountaintop removal and coal on local and global ecosystems. This chapter shows how the quick violence of destroying mountains, streams, and rivers creates a slow violence of lung cancer and other diseases, along with diminished educational, employment, and retirement opportunities. Appalachian peoples are effectively pursuing a KIIG politics based on the reality of decreasing coal reserves, ever-increasing mechanization, and declining market share on the one hand, and a dire need for a solution that marries well-being and livelihood on the other. Delegitimization thus combines the economic, the ecological, and the ethical with an eye to the long term.

This chapter also explores the uneasy politics of transition when local peoples have few alternatives and fear losing their way of life. The coal industry's manipulation of public opinion and lack of transparency have long thwarted such a transition despite the industry's decline. But now local groups are engaging both in what we call a politics of resistance and a politics of creation. Such groups are effectively saying that the good life cannot be had in a region deeply entrenched in a fossil-fueled, boosterist economy and with such extreme power imbalances. They are implicitly asking for investments of time and money that yield returns to their own well-being rather than to just company shareholder well-being. Bozzi tells how her own experience in an anti-mining protest makes clear the great difficulties of KIIG politics and at the same time shows the need for urgent transition.

In the keynote address to Power Shift 2011, a major youth climate conference, activist Tim DeChristopher called on the young leaders to come to West Virginia and take action to end a massive and destructive form of surface coal mining called mountaintop removal.<sup>1</sup> Looking out at the 10,000 people in the audience, he laid out a plan in which, “with these people, just right here,” they could shut down a mountaintop removal mine for a year: thirty people each day, every day, occupying the mine site and so forcing the operators to halt their coal extraction. Power Shift had collected these young activists in Washington, D.C., but rather than spur them to rally Congress to pass legislation curbing carbon emissions, DeChristopher directed them to where the climate change problem physically begins: fossil fuel extraction. In his conceptualization, mountaintop removal and West Virginia are the front line for addressing climate change, and direct action is the most expedient way to stop the extraction.

Galvanized by DeChristopher’s challenge, the nonviolent direct action group RAMPS (Radical Action for Mountain People’s Survival) made an open call for people to come to southern West Virginia in July 2012 and participate in the movement to end mountaintop removal. The group planned a “mountain mobilization” where they would use direct action as a tactic to shut down a surface mine for a day. In their public call, RAMPS justified the escalated tactic in these terms:

To win our struggles against the extraction industries, we will have to band together. ... If we want strip mining to end and restoration work to begin; if we want a post-coal future that is more than devastated landscapes, rampant fracking, and deepening poverty; if we want a healthy and whole Appalachia, we must escalate our resistance.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, approximately fifty people walked onto the largest mountaintop removal mine in West Virginia, Patriot Coal’s Hobet mine on the Lincoln/Boone county border, stopping its operations for about four hours. Some locked themselves onto heavy machinery, one onto a tree, and others unfurled banners reading, “Coal Leaves, Cancer Stays” and “Restore Our Mountains, Re-Employ Our Miners.” Twenty were arrested.

What does the RAMPS Mountain Mobilization say about how a movement to keep fossil fuels in the ground might operate, grounded in a place so historically tied to that extraction process as central Appalachia? I had traveled down to West Virginia to participate in the action in order to better understand that question. Setting the mobilization within

a historical trajectory of activism against mountaintop removal more widely, my experience revealed the tensions and the difficult strategic and ethical choices participants confront. A group like RAMPS chooses its relationship with local and national participants, a choice that plays out within a larger contestation over who is a legitimate stakeholder in the conflict, an insider-versus-outsider divide. A group also chooses where on a regulate-to-ban continuum to select its policy goals on mountaintop removal and, relatedly, whether to take a stance against mountaintop removal but accept other coal mining or instead call for the end of all coal extraction. These kinds of decisions are the stuff of politics; they define the incredibly powerful scope of conflict. They are also particularly relevant to KIIG movements, since those contestations sit at the nexus between the local (the political economy at the site of extraction) and the global (the threat of the climate and other environmental crises).

The chapter begins with a description of mountaintop removal and a brief review of its consequences. Because the structural power of the coal mining sector is a primary force pushing back against ending mountaintop removal, I offer a basic description of the region's economic relationship with coal. Then by chronicling shifts in the movement over time, I open a window onto the dynamics of anti-mountaintop removal advocacy's choices. Circling back to the present day, I review the RAMPS mobilization with a discussion of the action in light of the historical tensions. The chapter concludes with a commentary on what, based on this case study, a KIIG movement could look like and the debates it will undoubtedly encounter. There is no necessarily clear or correct solution to the choices and tensions that groups confront, though I suggest that in the end, choices about who participates and what the policy goals should be will shape how the movement is perceived at the source and so may affect the ultimate effectiveness.

### **Mountaintop Removal and Its Consequences**

Technically, mountaintop removal mining has been a practice applied in the Appalachian region (also called the coalfields) since before Congress passed the federal surface mining act in 1977. In fact, it is a specific mining technique that is sanctioned in that federal act, specified as when the whole mountaintop or ridge is removed, exposing the full seam of coal. Operators are allowed to leave the area as a flat plateau, a more economical means to mine the coal as long as they make plans for specific

economic development activities on that land. These early mountaintop removal mines, however, were small and much less common than the regular contour mines, which strip mined along the sides of mountains.

Starting in the mid-1980s, coal companies, under the pressure of low coal prices and heightened competition with western mines, innovated so as to increase the economic efficiency of mining the thin seams of low-sulfur coal within the steep slopes of central Appalachian mountains. Whether or not the mines fell under the specific “mountaintop removal” clause of the surface mining act, these enormous mining operations flattened mountains and lowered their height by at times 500 feet, dumping the rubble into the adjacent valleys. Such large-scale mountaintop removal is centered in eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia, as well as western Virginia and northeastern Tennessee.<sup>3</sup> Current statistics on the area affected by mountaintop removal are difficult to find. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated that between 1985 and 2001 in this region, mountaintop removal deforested nearly 400,000 acres of biodiverse forest, buried 724 miles of streams, and adversely affected an additional 1,200 miles of streams.<sup>4</sup> In 2002, mountaintop removal permits covered an area of 630 square miles, with a projection to double over these 2002 levels by 2012, amounting to an area the size of Rhode Island. In sum, one geologic study identified coal mining in this region as the greatest contributor to earth-moving activity in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

A defining characteristic of mountaintop removal is that it results in a large amount of rock and earth—what the industry calls “overburden”—which the miners then deposit in adjacent valleys, creating valley fills and burying streams. Burying the headwaters harms the entire stream length, as it destroys habitat for important macroinvertebrates that are key elements to the stream ecology, as well as reduces the flow of nutrients necessary for downstream health.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as runoff filters through the valley fills, it picks up metals, salts, and other compounds toxic to the biological life in the streams, carrying these to downstream users.<sup>7</sup>

While much of the early science has focused on the ecological effects of mountaintop removal, important new published research gives credence to local residents’ longstanding concerns about how the mining affects their health. Chemicals and toxins are found in the drinking water in areas near the mining sites, as well as in hazardous airborne dust. Rates of mortality; lung cancer; and chronic heart, lung, and kidney disease are all elevated as a function of county-level coal production.<sup>8</sup> New research has found that birth defects are significantly higher in mountaintop mining counties compared to other counties in the region, controlling

for risks associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, such as mother's health and education, prenatal care, and race.<sup>9</sup> Removal of vegetation, compaction of soil, and other impacts at the mined sites cause greater storm runoff and increased frequency and magnitude of downstream flooding.<sup>10</sup> The end product, coal, however it is mined, contributes to global climate change, acid rain, and mercury contamination, among other pollution effects, on combustion.<sup>11</sup> All of this adds up to a slow violence that, by itself, is out of sight and out of mind for decision makers and the public alike.

Aside from the slow violence of the physical, ecological, and health effects, however, this mining practice raises a unique moral question for society: Is it right to permanently remove a mountaintop? Is it right to intervene into a landscape in a way that is irreversible on a geologic timescale? And if, with such practices, people are knowingly causing irreversible damage to humans and the planet, is it right to continue such activity?

### **The Coal Economy?**

The coal sector's supporters emphasize mining's role as a primary economic engine and source of jobs in the central Appalachian region. Indeed, the coal industry contributes significantly to regional economies. This is most pronounced in West Virginia, where, following personal income and consumer sales taxes, severance taxes on coal in West Virginia provided the third largest source of income for the state's general fund (about 10 percent of total general revenue in 2011).<sup>12</sup> In all of central Appalachia, surface coal mining employs about 13,500 people and underground coal mining about 24,000 people. While this figure leads to only a small percentage of mine workers at the state level, it is more significant in "coal counties," where it can represent 10 percent of the workforce, compounded by the indirect, economic multiplier impacts.

From a historical perspective, these employment figures are at the bottom of a steep decline. As coal mining in the region shifted from underground to the surface and became increasingly mechanized, the number of jobs the industry provided has declined even while productivity (tons per worker) has stayed high. In 1973, coal mines employed 124,000 workers in the Appalachian region; in 2003 there were 46,507 miners; meanwhile production during that period stayed nearly constant (about 380,000 short tons coal).<sup>13</sup> According to sociologists Shannon Bell and Richard York, through cultural manipulation, the coal industry

has effectively masked this drop in employment in order to maintain its powerful public influence. Bell and York point to ways in which the coal industry promotes itself and “seeks to convince coalfield citizens that the industry is central to the region’s economy, identity, and way of life”: media campaigns; coal education programs in public schools; sponsoring of sports events, scholarships, or cultural events; and the creation of front groups like Friends of Coal.<sup>14</sup>

The critique of the coal economy can be taken to a further, structural level. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, Appalachian scholars put forward a culture-of-poverty model to explain the persistently distressed economic conditions in the region.<sup>15</sup> The model viewed Appalachian people as ignorant and lazy, a condition that the model explained mountain culture reinforced; in other words, individuals are faulted for their own poverty. The policy prescription resulting from this problem definition was to create social and economic programs to bring Appalachia into the dominant culture and economy. The Appalachian Regional Commission, for instance, focused on road building, ostensibly to connect the region to the rest of the country. The practical effect, however, was to facilitate the trucking out of raw materials.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1970s, other scholars put forward the internal colonialism model, which argued that the region’s integration into, rather than isolation from, the larger market system was a structural explanation for poverty.<sup>17</sup> The model posits that outside industrialists exploited the region for its natural resource wealth without reinvesting the profits in economic development and diversification. To the extent these structural factors exist, they highlight the challenges an antiextraction campaign in the Appalachian coalfields faces. With a local economy built up for a century around coal mining, the region lacks a diversified set of economic drivers, often the underlying conditions to shepherd in new alternatives when they are proposed. It may be that there is also a cultural lag in the perception of the mining industry, which economist T. M. Power coins the “rearview mirror” problem.<sup>18</sup> He asserts that extractive industries are historically entrenched and create a shared vision about the economic livelihoods of a community. As that economic pattern changes (in this case, mining employment numbers decline), the vision is slow to adjust. Power concludes that the “conventional wisdom about the local economy is the view through the rearview mirror, focused on the past rather than the present and dismissing all economic alternatives as unreliable or inferior.”<sup>19</sup>

Anti-mountaintop removal groups are aware of these two explanations of poverty. The groups often tell a story of how, following the culture-of-poverty model, there has been a history of outsiders who come into Appalachia to “fix” things, then leave once they realize the task is harder than it seems. The groups are careful to frame their involvement as one of solidarity with and deference to the local communities. The internal colonialism model also offers a starting point for their critique of the coal industry and absentee landowners.

Meanwhile, geologic projections suggest that the coal reserves in central Appalachia are running out. More specifically, the remaining reserves are those that are more costly to mine due to higher stripping ratios (the ratio of coal to overburden) caused by thin seams buried beneath hundreds of feet of mountain.<sup>20</sup> For instance, a consensus report by researchers at West Virginia University found that “the depletion of low-cost reserves in the southern part of the state leads to increased mining costs that can make the [sic] southern West Virginia too expensive for the market.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the US Energy Information Administration, projecting coal production until 2035, reports substantial expected declines from current levels, “as coal produced from the extensively mined, higher cost reserves of Central Appalachia is supplanted by lower cost coal from other supply regions.”<sup>22</sup> Diminishing energy returns on energy (and capital) investments are now being felt (chapter 2).

In fact, analysts have been sounding a warning about diminishing returns on and depletion of the central Appalachian reserves for a long time. There has similarly been recognition of the need to diversify the economy. That neither of these calls has been well heeded by the political authorities makes the call to keep it in the ground seem all the more an abrupt and extreme transition for which to advocate. Those who call for the end of coal mining become the locus for blame, rather than the long history of repeated decisions and nondecisions that further entrench the region in the coal economy. In response, environmental groups seek to shift the public’s framing of the issue toward the companies. They argue that the companies do little more than exploit the region, taking the resources but leaving little wealth. Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), a grassroots social justice organization, states in its 2007 position paper on coal,

the coal industry has not and will not bring prosperity to coalfield communities. They provide an ever dwindling number of jobs and a big economic windfall to a few, well-placed political figures. ... Coal has been mined in eastern Kentucky for



over one hundred years. If the coal industry was going to produce prosperity for us, shouldn't they have done it by now? ... Government on every level, federal, state and local has failed the people of the coal producing region for generations and has been complicit in allowing the extraction of billions of dollars worth of coal while not compelling the industry to contribute towards building a high quality of life.<sup>23</sup>

In short, concentrated energy (coal) tends to result in concentrated wealth and power (chapter 3).

### History of Activism

Over the course of activism around surface mining—and mountaintop removal in particular—groups continually encounter a series of choices with respect to their goals and the most appropriate pathways through which to achieve those goals. Among these choices, which together delineate the mountaintop removal movement, this chapter probes two: whether the goal is to better regulate mining or ban it altogether and whether to be against coal no matter the extraction technique or to be against a specific type of mining like mountaintop removal (and then perhaps support underground coal mining). In both of these, the group has to decide who will be invited to participate in the advocacy. Will they be from coalfield communities only or part of the wider public? If participants are from the outside, how will they justify their participation, and how will they relate to local concerns? Groups have made different choices about these questions over time. To give a sense of this trajectory and the tension across these themes, I provide a brief history of mining activism in the region, highlighting in particular KFTC, before returning to RAMPS and the Mountain Mobilization.

In the years following the passage of the federal surface mining act in 1977, surface mining opposition generally fell in two categories. One was a technical and professional one, in which national groups like the National Wildlife Federation and the Environmental Policy Institute mounted strategic and programmatic litigation to ensure that the implementing regulations retained the stringency Congress intended, fighting in particular against the Reagan administration's efforts to weaken the rules. The other category was localized and in response to specific threats, with neighbors coming together to protest particular impacts of mines in their communities. These local groups used a variety of tactics, including meetings with the state regulatory agency, attendance at permit hearings, and occasionally rallies and other public awareness events. In both cases,

the advocates by and large did not oppose the mining altogether; rather, they wanted it to be done more responsibly. Rather than call for its prohibition, they sought to improve the enforcement of the existing laws and, at times, create new laws, in order to reduce the negative impacts of surface mining.

Meanwhile, mountaintop removal expanded rapidly in the 1980s, unbeknown to many people even in the surrounding communities. How could these massive mines have gone unnoticed? Reflecting back on those early years, people often say that the mines were hidden behind a row of trees, away from public roads and, of course, up a mountain. Word got out only slowly about the practice. In 1987, for instance, the *Washington Post* published an exposé in the Sunday edition with an oversized photograph of a denuded, flattened mountaintop.<sup>24</sup> In the coalfields, the news tended to spread by word-of-mouth. A coalfield organizer recollected, “Stories drifted through the hollows, about this terrible thing that was happening in the next county over, and that they had to pay attention to. That’s how people would hear about mountaintop removal.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and the Regulate-to-Ban Continuum**

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth is a grassroots citizens’ organization actively involved in the campaign to end mountaintop removal mining. The organization has undergone a key shift in its analysis of the problem of coal mining, moving from calls for a more responsible mining sector to a systemic critique that marries the stance of community groups and traditional environmental groups. That is, KFTC has traveled along the regulate-to-ban continuum toward a qualified conclusion that coal should remain in the ground.

Through much of the 1990s, KFTC opposed one coal mine at a time in response to community member requests for help to address concerns like blasting or dust from living close to the mine sites. Due to this bottom-up issue selection, KFTC’s position on coal was one of regulation rather than abolition. It limited its campaigns to calling for mining companies to obey laws rather than questioning whether coal benefited Kentuckians in the first place. By 2002, the organization’s leadership realized that while they had made significant strides and were “winning many battles,” their approach meant they were still “losing the war.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, following support from its membership across Kentucky, the organization shifted its critique from destructive mining practices to

coal extraction in general. The Canary Project, adopted by the membership in 2003, gave structure to this broader focus. The project goals are (1) enforcement of existing laws for coal mines; (2) adoption of new mining-related laws where existing laws are inadequate to protect homes and communities; (3) creation of a sustainable economy with good jobs, and (4) promotion of “survivable” energy sources. On this last goal, KFTC advocates for renewable energy and energy-efficiency projects in the state.

To achieve the Canary Project’s goals, KFTC set out a series of objectives including immediately halting mountaintop removal and “other forms of radical strip mining that are eliminating the mountains of Eastern Kentucky,” as well as the associated valley fills. Another objective is to “accelerate the inevitable transition back to underground mining.” Support for underground mining is a position that many take in the anti-mountaintop removal movement. It allows for continued support of the coal mining jobs—and, in fact, advocates argue that there are more jobs in deep mining than surface mining—to dampen the transition effects for the region. Nevertheless, KFTC also emphasizes that government funds should be diverted from supporting the coal toward investment “in locally generated, sustainable economic development for the coalfields and clean renewable energy sources for the country.”<sup>27</sup>

As a state-based group, KFTC can take an insider’s stance: “We are Kentuckians, which means we are coal miners, the families and friends of coal miners, and the descendants of coal miners.” This position pushes back against the critique that only outsiders oppose mountaintop removal, a main rhetorical tactic by the coal industry and its supporters to delegitimize the advocates.

Thus, KFTC as an organization has shifted along the regulate-to-ban continuum, an evolution based on its many years of advocacy across communities affected by coal mining. Its attention to economic diversification for the region reflects how the group is tied to the region’s well-being rather than to a specific environmental goal. In 2007, KFTC adopted a position statement on coal that formalized the Canary Project. Depletion of the state’s coal reserves provided a starting point for the platform: “Coal is here today and tomorrow—but for how much longer?” But it is not only coal’s inevitable depletion that drives the organization’s call for an end to coal mining and a transition to a sustainable alternative economy. KFTC also takes a position on the debate over whether whatever economic benefits the sector provides justify the mining’s negative impacts. The position paper states explicitly, “We believe if a block of

coal cannot be mined without causing the physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural destruction that we experience so often today, that block of coal should be left in the ground.”<sup>28</sup> That is, given the destruction wrought by mountaintop removal, there is no room for an intermediate, compromise position. The mining cannot be carried out “better”: the government cannot improve enforcement and avoid destruction. Mountaintop removal is inherently destructive. The only choice is to keep it in the ground.

### **Nationalizing Awareness and Action on Mountaintop Removal**

In spite of strong local activism, the issue of mountaintop removal has remained unnoticed by the national public for much of its history. By the early to mid-2000s, local and regional groups increasingly employed strategies to raise awareness across the country, all with little support from the large national environmental organizations. For instance, Appalachian Voices was founded by an Appalachian State University professor in 1997 to help support grassroots groups in their campaigns against mountaintop removal (and other issues), providing analysis, communications, and other functions that local groups often lack the capacity to fully address. With online tools like the “My Connection Tool” where people around the country can type in their postal codes and learn whether their electricity provider uses mountaintop removal coal, Appalachian Voices helps make tangible the link between the broad public and this geographically defined issue. Other organizations seek to move people from individual (and often online) activism and toward collective actions. Modeled loosely on the Mississippi and Redwood Summers, Mountain Justice (previously Mountain Justice Summer) began in 2005 as a way to bring volunteers down to the coalfields and train them to join the anti-mountaintop removal movement.

### **Mountaintop Removal and Climate Activism: The Shift from Emissions to Extraction**

From the middle to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, with much of mainstream environmental advocacy centered on passing federal climate legislation, anti-mountaintop removal advocacy groups had to decide whether to frame their issue in terms of climate change. To do so might offer a wider audience, as well as support from national groups, but it made untenable the compromise position of supporting

deep mining as a bridge alternative to mountaintop removal. To oppose coal completely, these local groups would risk losing support from a segment of the Appalachian public who disliked mountaintop removal but supported the coal economy generally. Other groups expressed concern common to coalition politics—a fear that their issue of mountaintop removal could be used as a bargaining chip in gaining support for climate policy. This fear was particularly pronounced given the possibility that the technology of carbon capture and storage could, some thought, allow power plants to continue burning coal while reducing their greenhouse gas emissions (see chapter 1).

The tenor of national climate advocacy now has changed following Congress's failure to adopt federal climate legislation. Many advocates have shifted away from Washington, DC, and away from regulating emissions, moving instead toward place-based action like opposing individual coal-fired power plants. This may work to the benefit of issues like mountaintop removal. While messaging on climate change brings with it the challenge of making the impacts feel tangible, that is not the case with MTR; mountaintop removal has direct and immediate impacts and unavoidably raises major questions on social injustice.<sup>29</sup>

National organizations' move away from emissions reductions and toward place-based action is well demonstrated by how the RAMPS Mountain Mobilization coincided with a number of other actions against fossil fuel extraction undertaken in the summer of 2012. Coal Export Action, a week-long sit-in at the Montana capitol, protested a large coal mining permit that activists saw as the start of a spike in western coal mining aimed for the export market. In another event, thousands marched in Washington, D.C., for "Stop the Frack Attack" in opposition to the hydraulic fracturing boom taking place across the country. Also that summer, activists in Texas created a human blockade to protest construction of the southern segment of the Keystone XL Pipeline, which would pump Alberta's tar sands oil to a Texas refinery.

These and other events became collectively known as part of the Summer of Solidarity, a name that raises two important points. First, it represents the emerging conceptual and organizational link across the sites of local resistance. These links help avoid falling into not-in-my-backyard strategic positions, since the individual campaigns reference and support each other and avoid taking policy stances that trade their struggles for another's. Many of the actions were supported officially or in more informal ways by climate activism organizations like 350.org and Rising Tide North America. In addition, *solidarity* suggests that

those outside the frontline communities have a legitimate and appropriate role in taking action in support of those on the inside. Within the Summer of Solidarity, it seems that groups can unite and be linked to a concern about climate change, but without an explicit statement as such. At its best, it allows people from outside to lend support to a particular action, strengthening that action and widening the concern beyond the local issue. The struggles in Montana, for example, are part of the larger project of stopping fossil fuel use at its source, and yet it is Montanans who maintain the leadership and authority in setting out the action and its frame.

### **Radical Action for Appalachian People's Survival and the Mountain Mobilization**

In late July 2012, I drove from my urban university campus down to southern West Virginia to join others from around the country at the RAMPS Mountain Mobilization action.<sup>30</sup> I arrived at the remote training camp in early evening, rolling onto a grassy field that had become a makeshift parking lot. I scanned the license plates: Missouri, Mississippi, Vermont, and other long drives away like I had made. Others had come from across Appalachia and its mountaintop removal landscape: West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. In the back corner of the field, an old, hand-painted green school bus parked for a short stay along what I later learned was its rambling trip east from Oregon, having picked up wandering activists along the way. A number of the participants also came after learning about the action at the Earth First! Rendez-Vous in Pennsylvania a few weeks prior (and where they conducted a direct action to protest hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, or fracking).

For the next few days, I joined trainings where RAMPS organizers prepared the volunteers and facilitated planning of the action itself. The trainings made clear that this situation was far different from the ritualistic protests and arrests that have become a popular tactic in the environmental activist's toolbox, like those in front of the White House where the arrested are often processed and released after just a few hours, never even entering a jail cell. Occupying a West Virginian mine site, however, could result in serious consequences, perhaps days in jail, police brutality, civil suits by the coal company, and a criminal record that would preclude future choices like certain jobs or adopting a child.

In another set of trainings on nonviolent direct action and deescalation, the RAMPS organizers told us emphatically that all participants in the action must respect the RAMPS mission statement. It is critical, they explained, that this action not hurt the local organizing efforts, as people within the coalfields have been working for far longer on the campaign than RAMPS had. There will be a public reaction locally to the action, an organizer stated; most of the people at the camp will not be around to deal with the repercussions, but the local resistance will be. Participants were called on to be careful in their messaging and strategic in the action and to act with dignity, particularly in front of the media, and to abide by the tenet of nonviolence. Those who could not follow this code of conduct were advised to leave.

This code caught some of the new participants by surprise. Some disagreed with the stance of nonviolence or on taking responsibility for the action (rather than doing something undetected). For others, the RAMPS commitment to community partners and the local movement felt like an infringement on their own autonomy. Deference to the wishes of local activists, however, is common in anti-mountaintop removal actions, in part because of the historical legacy of the culture of poverty.

Organizers had already set out the action's messaging, framing it so as to "encompass the whole rather than feed a 'environmentalist' versus 'miner' divide."<sup>31</sup> The list of messages included:

Restore Our Mountains, Re-Employ Our Miners | We Want Healthy Communities | MTR Kills Communities | MTR Poisons Our Water | Mountaintop Removal Destroys Our Health | Coal Leaves; Cancer Stays | Keep It Underground

On the Saturday morning, fifty protesters walked onto Patriot Coal's Hobet mine, shutting down operations for about four hours. Ten people used locks to attach themselves to a massive dump truck, dropping a banner reading, "Coal Leaves, Cancer Stays." Another protester climbed a tree and attached himself to it, unfurling a banner along the tree trunk reading, "Stop Strip Mines." Ultimately the police arrested twenty of the protesters. Many of the other thirty who were not arrested then had to walk for four hours, down off the mine site and along nearby roads, before they could meet the shuttles waiting for them. Along the way, they encountered counterprotesters, who harassed them. Ten of the arrested protesters stayed in jail for eleven days, nine for six days. One arrested protester said he was beaten by police and denied medical treatment.

That morning as well, RAMPS hosted a training and media event in the Kanawha State Forest near Charleston. I joined this, choosing to

take the role as a “peacekeeper” along with a few others from the camp. The idea of the event was that people who had not come to the training camp earlier in the week were to attend a shortened version at the forest. That is not, however, what happened. For whatever reason, hardly any additional anti–mountaintop removal activists arrived at the training. Nevertheless, anticipating conflict between the activists and counterprotesters, about twenty state troopers and other police had stationed themselves at the training. Then a crowd of counterprotesters swelled to about seventy over the course of the morning. They held signs reading, “Friends of Coal,” or, “Coal Feeds Us,” and many were dressed in navy blue mining uniforms with orange reflective strips.

For a few hours, my group of peacekeepers and a few other activists shared with the counterprotesters a small strip of grassy area in the park between a fishing lake and the small road. The police then required us to stand in opposing lines, one side of this combustible conflict facing the other. The tight quarters prompted interaction between the two groups. The counterprotesters asked the activists questions: “If the coal industry is shut down, what will replace it?” They asked personal questions too: “Where are you from? Why are you here? Who paid you to come here?” To most of these questions, the activists were largely silent. (As peacekeepers, we were told not to engage because it would distract us from monitoring the overall scene.) There were, however, a couple who took leadership to speak in response to the questions and taunts. In fact, a lengthy dialogue ensued between an activist and the collection of antiprotesters, with a level of courtesy and restraint on both sides not common in such confrontations.

Over the course of the morning, this civil dialogue was punctuated with anger and threats from some counterprotesters. One of the RAMPS-affiliated organizers later reflected on the scene:

I witnessed an incredibly well organized group of people I would call a mob, mainly dressed in mining stripes, some sadly dressed up with coal on their faces, lining up and doing everything in their power to seem menacing, cruel and mean by singling people out from the group and picking apart their identity. ... Most of it was non-sequitur, just any old comment meant to be threatening, which helped show the hopelessness these folks feel about the situation—the mines going bankrupt, the water polluted, jobs scarce, etc., but hate speech all the same.<sup>32</sup>

The counterprotesters conveyed the general message that the activists were unwelcome outsiders and that the coal economy fed their families and sustained their communities. They expressed anger about activists’ coming down to West Virginia every summer and causing trouble. They



viewed the activists not just as outsiders but also as ignorant of the real conditions of the coalfields and to its history. On the popular *Charleston Gazette* blog, Coal Tattoo, a commenter explained what might reflect well the sentiment of those miners and their families:

How more radical can you be by protesting something they really have no idea about? They are mostly outsiders who spend a few weeks running around here claiming to be here to save West Virginia, gather 15 minutes of fame by breaking state law and are gone again until next year's 15 minutes. Really, if they are not mostly out of state, paid protestors going to college, how can they come down here and spend their summer "organizing"? Most of us have to maintain a job 12 months out of the year. They have no solutions to bring to the table. They can't answer the hard questions about their cause as we [have] seen Saturday morning in a face to face in Kanawha State Forest. Really, they are just paid protestors doing someone else's dirty work.<sup>33</sup>

Some of what angered the counterprotesters was the very nature of what the activists planned: people coming into the area for just a few days and undertaking the confrontational action of occupying a mine site. It may have been this tactic that kept local anti-mountaintop removal supporters from participating, feeling uncomfortable with its risks and public nature. Yet by telling the activists to go home, the counterprotesters also were trying to circumscribe where mountaintop removal politics can take place and who can have a voice in the decision. Furthermore, that local activists might have been afraid to participate is also not a neutral decision but one that is influenced by coal's continued cultural power within Appalachian communities.

A common goal of actions like the Mountain Mobilization is to attract media attention. Articles appeared in local newspapers including the *Charleston Gazette* and the *Williamson Daily News*, though without splashy front-page photographs. Other than mention in progressive sites like *Democracy Now* and the *Huffington Post*, however, national outlets gave the event little coverage. In fact, the environmental news website, *grist.org* published an article, "A Weekend of Protests Barely Makes the Papers," on how the RAMPS action and other antiextraction events that weekend also passed by largely unnoticed.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

What does it mean to be a movement grounded at the point of extraction? Does this phrase mean truly grassroots or local, or does it mean going to the source? Whose campaign is it, anyway? Political scientist E.

E. Schattschneider's classic work, *The Semisovereign People*, argues that such divides are constitutive of an issue's politics: "The most important strategy of politics is concerned with the scope of conflict."<sup>35</sup> That is, this very question of who is an insider or an insider, or who is a "legitimate" participant, is a strategy of political conflict in and of itself. Nationalizing an issue, or more generally expanding the bounds of an issue, offers the chance to "break up old local power monopolies," which suggests why those seeking change would want to expand the conflict while those privileged by the status quo would want to keep it restrictive.<sup>36</sup> During the US civil rights movement, for instance, the controversy was not only about the rights of southern blacks to protest but also about the rights of outsiders to intervene.<sup>37</sup> From this perspective, counterprotesters at the RAMPS rally were trying to restrict the scope of conflict by saying that a national public does not have a place in the decision about mountaintop removal's legality or appropriateness. Meanwhile, RAMPS's efforts to invite participation from across the country and gain wide media attention with its direct action on the mine site were strategies to expand the scope of conflict and break apart the Appalachian coal industry's local power monopoly.

Nevertheless, to see that debate as only one of strategic positioning ignores the actual localized repercussions that are being raised. During the rally, a man came up to me and asked, "Say the mines are shut down tomorrow. Then what do I do?" I fumbled with a response, saying that people should not have to choose between the home they love and a paycheck. Others talked about economic alternatives. Our answers felt vague and theoretical. He said we had no real response, and that in fact no one does.

When climate advocacy groups shift from their downstream emissions-based approach (see chapter 1) to specific places of extraction such as an Appalachian coal community, the dynamics necessarily change. Such a shift moves the political conflict from the global (or national) scope to the local and, as a result, the specific, the particular, the grounded. This is not to say that the current carbon management approach does not play out at the local level (with assessments of the localized costs and benefits of greenhouse gas regulation), but going to the source makes those costs and benefits more concrete and imaginable for a particular place and for those who engage that place, however much they come from afar. For instance, gaining public support to keep coal in the ground in central Appalachia would likely require compensating that same region with benefits (e.g., funds to kick-start renewable energy production). This

is a very different scenario from a national greenhouse gas policy that might lead instead to reduced coal production in central Appalachia but investment in renewable energy in the Midwest.

A homegrown resistance is likely to be more cognizant of these concerns and the need for a just transition away from extraction and toward sustainable economic alternatives. Indeed, Appalachian groups that oppose mountaintop removal tend to be very conscious of coal's cultural significance and its contribution (though declining) to regional employment and tax revenue. Like KFTC's Canary Project, their campaigns to end mountaintop removal often include at least one of two transition elements. The first is to call for an end to mountaintop removal while supporting a return, whether temporary or permanent, to underground mining. Underground mining is more labor intensive than mountaintop removal, among other reasons for groups to support it as an alternative. Of course, such a proposal does not keep the coal in the ground. The second route is to counteract the region's extractive resource dependence by helping to build up a diversified economy. KFTC, for instance, supports projects to train workers in energy-efficiency trades, and it is part of a coalition advocating for state policy to incentivize renewable energy in Kentucky. The RAMPS action had this theme as well, for instance, dropping a banner reading, "Restore our mountains, reemploy our miners."

This book calls for an inquiry into the exit strategies of the fossil fuel industry itself (chapter 12). Unlike modern coal companies that are usually diversified energy conglomerates and so are quite resilient to market shifts, the communities themselves remain vulnerable because they often lack alternative economic opportunities.<sup>38</sup> The advocacy efforts reviewed in this chapter have recognized, with varying degrees of commitment, that coalfield regions also need an exit strategy. To achieve this would not only lessen the impact Appalachian residents feel from the inevitable end of the coal era, but it might also soften resistance to the early exit necessary to address the climate crisis.

These two place-specific elements can combine with the ethical imperative and cultural shift developed in chapters 2 and 3, which scratch at coal's unquestioned position in the dominant fossil fuel paradigm, to collectively contribute toward delegitimizing coal in the region. For this to be effective, these ethical and cultural alternatives must have a local resonance and so also must be grounded in the place of extraction. There are many troubling issues to point to: mining's declining employment, the region's chronic poverty amid the coal companies' wealth, the cancer clusters in communities surrounding mine sites or the streams running

rust orange from mine toxics, the irreversible destruction of mountains and Appalachian heritage. If this is posed alongside an honest hope for a just transition—for the good life—a politics of creation may open the space for a viable movement to keep coal in the ground in Appalachia.

## Notes

1. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81EZUkYzrxU>.
2. Available at <http://rampscampaign.org/mountain-mobilization>.
3. There is disagreement over the term used to name these mines. Industry and government tend to use *mountaintop mining*, while environmental activists use *mountaintop removal*. Since this chapter centers on activists' strategies, I use their nomenclature to reference all large-scale surface mining in the central Appalachian coalfields.
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5. Roger L. Hooke, "Spatial Distribution of Human Geomorphic Activity in the United States: Comparison with Rivers." *Earth Surface Processes and Landforms* 24 (1999): 687–92.
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9. Melissa Ahern, Michael S. Hendryx, Jamison Conley, Evan Fedorko, Alan Ducatman, and Keith J. Zullig, "The Association between Mountaintop Mining and Birth Defects among Live Births in Central Appalachia, 1996–2003," *Environmental Research* 111, no. 6 (2011): 838–46.
10. Palmer et al., "Mountaintop Mining Consequences."
11. Norbert Berkowitz, *The Chemistry of Coal* (New York: Elsevier Science, 1985).
12. *West Virginia Executive Budget Fiscal Year 2012: Volume I Budget Report* (Charleston: State Budget Office of West Virginia, 2012).

13. Energy Information Administration, *Coal Production in the United States—An Historical Overview* (Washington, DC: Energy Information Administration, 2006).
14. Shannon E. Bell and Robert York, “Community Economic Identity: The Coal Industry and Ideology Construction in West Virginia,” *Rural Sociology* 75, no. 1 (2010): 111–43; Shannon E. Bell, “Review: *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields* by Rebecca R. Scott,” *American Journal of Sociology* 116, no. 6 (2011): 2034–2036.
15. Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Makings of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Robert L. Lewis and Dwight B. Billings, “Appalachian Culture and Economic Development,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 3, no. 1 (1997): 43–69.
16. Ron D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).
17. Billings and Blee, *The Road to Poverty*.
18. Thomas M. Power, *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: The Search for a Value of Place* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996).
19. *Ibid.*
20. Rory McImoil and Evan Hansen, *The Decline of Central Appalachian Coal and the Need for Economic Diversification* (Morgantown, WV: Downstream Strategies, 2010).
21. Randall A. Childs and George W. Hammond, *Consensus Coal Production Forecast for West Virginia, 2009–2030* (Morgantown: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, West Virginia University, 2009).
22. Energy Information Administration, *Annual Energy Outlook 2011 with Projections to 2035* (Washington, DC: Energy Information Administration, 2011).
23. KFTC, “The Canary Project: For a Better Future Beyond Coal,” position paper (2007).
24. Cass Peterson, “Bulldozers Driving through Holes in 1977 Strip Mining Law,” *Washington Post*, May 30, 1987.
25. Interview by the author with former West Virginia citizens’ organization staff member, April 16, 2011.
26. *Ibid.*, May 25, 2011.
27. KFTC, “The Canary Project.”
28. *Ibid.*
29. Interview by the author with national environmental law organization staff member, September 28, 2011.
30. The following account is based on the author’s participant observation in the RAMPS Mountain Mobilization, July 26–28, 2012.
31. Available at <http://rampscampaingn.org/our-eco-chaplains-take-on-the-mountain-mobilization/#more-2820>.
32. *Ibid.*

33. Available at <http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/2012/07/31/coal-protest-was-this-really-so-radical>.
34. Philip Bump, "A Weekend of Protests Barely Makes the Papers" [grist.org](http://grist.org), July 30, 2012, <http://grist.org/news/a-weekend-of-protests-barely-makes-the-papers>.
35. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, 1960).
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. The energy companies' portfolios often include mines across different regions across the country (e.g., low-sulfur, low-cost Powder River Basin; high-sulfur, underground mines of the Illinois Basin). Arch Coal, for instance, is the most diversified American coal company, with 15 percent of the country's coal supply at mining complexes in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Illinois, West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, and Maryland (<http://www.archcoal.com/aboutus>). Others, like CONSOL Energy, produce both coal and natural gas. Admittedly, these are varied forms of fossil fuel extraction, but it still underlines the point that these companies are buffered against risk of change in particular regions. William R. Freudenburg and Lisa J. Wilson, "Mining the Data: Analyzing the Economic Implications of Mining for Nonmetropolitan Regions," *Sociological Inquiry* 72 no. 4 (2002): 549–75; William R. Freudenburg and Robert Gramling, "Natural Resources and Rural Poverty: A Closer Look," *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal* 7 no. 1 (1994): 5–22.

