

Killing Mountains

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Michael Shnayerson, *Coal River*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Michael Shnayerson's *Coal River* recounts the recent history of grassroots organization against the ecologically and socially damaging practice of mountaintop removal coal mining in West Virginia. While Shnayerson focuses primarily upon a series of courtroom battles over the legality of mountaintop removal following the 1972 Clean Water Act, his work also addresses issues of environmental justice, U.S. environmental policy, and the influence of powerful extractive industries over contemporary political processes and environmental legislation. Clearly writing with a popular audience in mind, Shnayerson does not engage these broader theoretical issues as thoroughly as one might expect in a work intended primarily for academics. Nonetheless, *Coal River* is an engaging work that helpfully highlights the long-ignored struggles of Appalachian individuals to preserve their communities in spite of continued exploitation by mining companies and indifference by the governmental agencies charged with protecting them.

“Mountaintop removal” describes the mining practice of excavating the tops of mountains to expose underground coal seams. The earth removed from the mountaintop is then pushed into nearby valleys (creating a “valley fill”), a process which often buries mountain streams, alters runoff patterns, and reduces local water quality. While numerous Appalachians have protested against the practice since it became widespread, *Coal River* focuses mainly upon the West Virginia-based lawyer Joe Lovett and his legal struggles with Massey Energy, the company in charge of most of Appalachia's mountaintop removal mines.

While working for a Charleston-based non-profit organization, Lovett learned of the dramatic ecological and economic impacts of mountaintop removal on poor communities—it contaminated well water, increased flooding and mudslides, and eliminated unionized mining jobs, a traditional mainstay of the local economy. The 1972 Clean Water Act requires an official environmental impact statement (EIS) before any development activity that could severely impact a body of water commences. In West Virginia, however, in keeping with a long history of deference toward the coal industry, the Corps of Engineers and Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), grew lax in conducting EISs before issuing valley fill permits. When Lovett challenged the Corps and DEP for their failure to fulfill this legal responsibility, he discovered to his outrage the degree to which profit-driven mining companies control how local and national resource policy is implemented.

In addition to the work of Lovett and other local activists, Shnayerson presents extensive research on the life and motivations of Massey CEO Don Blankenship who, like some Dickensian industrialist, becomes the clear villain of the story. Shnayerson shows how Blankenship's continued fights against worker rights and environmental legislation fit within a much broader economic and political trend of valuing profits over justice in Appalachia. According to Shnayerson, it is difficult for people like Lovett to convince an Appalachian population “too poor and too cowed after a century of harsh treatment by King Coal to think they can stop their world from being blasted away” [p. 8] to stand up against Blankenship and others.

Like other environmental justice movements, the protest against mountaintop removal challenges older conceptions of what counts as an environmental issue. It does not just threaten a

fragile ecosystem, Shnayerson shows, but an entire culture and way of life. *Coal River* has the potential of raising a powerful argument for the profound connections between cultures, environments, and labor, but somewhere amidst the pages of coal executive and government official testimonies it falls slightly short. The attention given to courtroom details is one of the most significant problems with the structure of Shnayerson's book, overwhelming the reader with jargon and names of minor officials. The space devoted to details also takes away from any theoretical discussion of environmental justice, resource policy, and other sociological themes relevant to the character of the communities he describes. For example, Shnayerson recounts several instances where protestors turn to prayer during their actions but does little to explore how religious values influence both opponents and proponents of mountaintop removal. Shnayerson also leaves the reader without a clear understanding of what changes would improve the current system of resource management in Appalachia. What is really needed to end the seemingly interminable legal battles between coal companies and environmentalists and enforce Clean Water Act regulations? How effective is grassroots resistance to mountaintop removal? How could Appalachia (and America in general, for that matter) change its pattern of submission to coal companies? Shnayerson concludes with the hope that a new presidential administration in 2008 will reverse some of the more egregious regulatory roll-backs of the Bush-era EPA, but given the long buildup of legal battles and political maneuvering through the text, this conclusion seems inadequate.

Despite its preference for details over theoretical analysis, *Coal River* is an important contribution to public environmental awareness, reporting in great depth on a practice that is vital to America's economy yet whose real impacts are hidden from the general population benefitting from it. More studies of the environmental and social impacts of coal mining in Appalachia have appeared in recent months, filling in some of the theoretical gaps left by Shnayerson; and as the United States reconsiders its energy policies in light of climate change, resource availability, and a slowing economy, mountaintop removal will remain a contentious issue. More work is needed to illuminate the social and ecological impacts of mountaintop removal, but Shnayerson's work fills a significant void in the literature by explaining the complex workings of resource policy and law to a popular audience and by making visible the struggles of communities that coal companies might prefer remained ignored.