

What Was Left Behind: The Socioeconomic Exile of Appalachia

Orbie Berry was a young man when he left his home in Wayne County, Kentucky in search of work up north. Berry found himself restless with the limited opportunity that was characteristic of his Southeastern roots and began his migration to Michigan. In “Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles,” he recounts taking many trains before he reached his final destination: Flint, Michigan (Berry 24). Over the years, he worked in factories, bought new cars and enjoyed the excitement he found in the north (25). However, he also experienced a longing for the rolling hills of his Appalachian home, and the kin he had left behind. Berry coped with the profound homesickness by “escaping to the South” during winters (25). After feeling exiled from a beloved place and not quite fitting into another, Berry made his way back down south (28).

Unfortunately, this is the story of many Appalachians throughout the twentieth century. They had to pack up their belongings and move, in search of a more sustainable life. In a region where one of the few job opportunities is to work in hazardous coal mines, it is easy to see why these people would migrate. This migration issue continues to be speculated by many scholars. One theory, called the “Internal Colony,” says that, “The socio-economic problems of Appalachia originate historically in processes whereby powerful outside industrial interests establish control, exploit the region, and maintain their domination” (Fisher and Smith 46). The socioeconomic problems take many forms, but some of the most prevalent are financial, educational and migration issues. The coal industry’s intrusive involvement in Appalachia has led to an unstable economy, negative impacts on education and, by default, the diaspora of

Appalachians; therefore placing Appalachia into a continuous socioeconomic exile from society at large.

A History of Coal

The history of coal in Appalachia is one that dates back hundreds of years. Beginning in the rolling mountains of Pennsylvania, coal was mined for uses such as heating homes and running trains across the country. As the world progressed, so did the industry. Like most industries in the United States, coal has had its ups and downs, otherwise known as booms and busts. During the Great Depression, the “small-time local entrepreneurs” went out of business and the coal fields were bought up by corporations in the following boom (Lockard 116). With corporate involvement came a stricter control of the Appalachian people. While the industry provided more job opportunities to the region, it also led to a great deal of repression. This repression started in the company owned towns where miners and their families lived, and has continued to affect Appalachians socially, financially and environmentally; causing many to have a love-hate relationship with the mineral.

By the twentieth century, the coal industry “began to tighten its grip on the region’s economy and the lives of its people” (Burns, Evans, and House 25). Coal towns were springing up in the arching mountains and dipping valleys. These towns were designed to ensure that miners and their families remained loyal and profitable to the company. Everything was controlled by coal in these towns; from the schools and stores to the local government. Most of the money that miners made from grueling hours underground circulated directly back to the company. One miner’s son, Duane Lockard, wrote a memoir about growing up in a coal town. He describes coal towns as, “holding all the cards; keeping discipline through a combination of paternalism and domination” (Lockard 88). Although some coal companies did try to improve

the quality of life with amenities like bowling allies and swimming pools, their presence still loomed over the residents.

Because of the divisive relationship the industry had with its employees, unions often played a major role in coal towns. From the very beginnings of the industry's involvement in the region, unions were formed to protect workers' rights. However, because of the companies' strict control over the miners' lives, the associations were usually crushed before they were able to generate any real change. At the time, it seemed nearly impossible to organize because operators "resorted to laws under which a labor union was considered a criminal offense" (Lockard 116). Miners were faced with threat of dismissal from the job if they were even suspected of unionizing. These brutal work conditions led to some very notable uprisings in later years.

One of the first mutinies against the oppressive industry was the "coal wars," a struggle centered in West Virginia that ended in "exchanged fire" with company-paid sympathizers (Lockard 111). This set the scene for a long century of uprisings throughout Appalachia. In the 1930s, Bloody Harlan reminded coal companies that miners were not willing to back down without a fight. Harlan County, Kentucky, a primary hub for coal, responded violently when faced with unfair conditions, striking for an entire decade. An article from *The New York Times*, dated 1931, is explicit about the struggle, "Economic depression, lower wages, unemployment and attempts to unionize...have led recently to violence and bloodshed" (Stark). Overall, miners have a complex past withstanding up against the industry.

All of this has culminated to form the problem Appalachians are faced with today. Since the coal industry's beginning, Appalachia has lost far more than it has gained. The socioeconomic impact the industry has made on this region weighs as heavily as the removal of its mountain tops. By inciting poverty, impacting the school system and literally forcing people

from their homes, the coal industry has aided in exiling an entire region of the country: the Appalachian Mountains.

Poverty in Appalachia

Since the very beginnings of industrial exploitation in Appalachia, the region has been “plagued with intense and widespread poverty” (Flynn 1). Even hundreds of years later, this economic issue continues to affect many. It is said that in the region there are “pockets of some of the most desperate and persistent poverty found in the United States,” but even so, poverty is not a trait unique to Appalachia or its culture. Instead, it is a marker of “rural isolation, uneven development, and sometimes destructive patterns of local politics and administration” (Thorne, Thorne, and Tickamyer 342). However, the argument persists that some part of this unstable financial situation is attributed to the extractive economy that Appalachia has maintained for hundreds of years. Interestingly enough, the mammoth coal industry is partially responsible for the financial decline seen in Appalachia even today.

When trying to demystify the story of poor people in Appalachia, one is pointed in the direction of the existing singular economy. Like many regions in the United States, Appalachia is known for a specific industry. With the connection to an industry as large as coal, there are economic benefits and disadvantages alike. The coal industry has been extremely imperative in terms of employment in the region for decades. However, it is this benefit of employment that leads to a disadvantage of the industry.

The region has become heavily dependent on the industry for economic support, resulting in a lack of economic diversification (Burns 11). Because of this, Appalachians “remain vulnerable to changes in the industry’s fortunes” (Thompson, Berger, Allen and Roenker 1). In

other words, when the industry experiences economic hardships, so does the region itself. Without many other opportunities in the area, residents are left to rely solely on mining jobs to support their families. The Appalachian Regional Commission explains that, “coal mining represents such a significant part of the economy that even small changes in demand and output often have a dramatic impact on the well-being of the residents” (1). While it is true that Appalachia’s unstable economy has many different roots, it is also evident that coal may be the most unpredictable.

The link between Appalachia’s unstable economy and the poverty seen in the region is apparent. Appalachia may experience poverty more than some places in the nation, but the explanation for this would lead back to its relationship with coal once again. Research has shown that Appalachia acts as an “internal colony,” an area of the United States that has been pillaged for its natural resources and ultimately left behind (Fisher and Smith 46). While the coal industry was making money off of resources from the region, locals saw next to none of that money support the economy. As an internal colony, Appalachia still struggles to compete economically with the rest of the country.

Because of these economical disadvantages stimulated by the industry, the region is in still considered impoverished today. In fact, many researchers found that counties in Appalachia dominated by coal saw a higher rate of poverty in 2000 (Labao, Zhou, Patridge and Betz 343). It is quite the contradiction that a region wealthy in resources struggles to combat poverty. The logical assumption when examining the relationship between Appalachia and the coal industry would be that the industry stimulates the economy in Appalachia. The reality is that the economy sees little of the money made off coal as it is outside companies that extract the mineral. Many scholars believe that Appalachia might be suffering from the “resource curse,” which is said to

occur if a region's resource wealth detracts from the economic wellbeing of its people" (Douglas and Walker 1). This is a theory that would put a name to the issues that Appalachia has experienced since the coal industry came into the region. With that being said, it easy to see why Appalachia is the place where Lyndon Johnson first declared the War on Poverty. The adversities unfairly placed on Appalachia continue to exile it from the modern world.

Coal's Relationship with Education

A large part of Appalachia's exile stems from how the education system is presented to the outside world. A common notion about the region is how the people are uneducated and reject education in general. Like all stereotypes, there is a basis of truth in the educational problems Appalachia faces. One study shows that coal producing counties in Appalachia have higher populations without high school diplomas (Douglas and Walker 26). This idea of Appalachia allows outsiders to dehumanize mountain people and dismiss their way of life. Problems with the education system in the region are not merely one dimensional; there are often many sides to the story. In this case, the coal industry is intertwined with many of the concerns about education that the region experiences.

One aspect of this complex issue is the industry's responsibility for extracting not only the natural resources, but also money from the region. When outside companies began mining coal, the profit that was made rarely came back to support the region's feeble economy or institutions, such as education. As the industry was making billions of dollars off the land, Appalachia was falling behind in educational standards (Thompson, Berger, Allen and Roenker 2). Appalachians "watched the wealth of the region hauled out by coal trains while experiencing rundown schools" (Fisher and Smith 47). When dollars were sucked out of the region, public

institutions were not funded fully. Although the coal companies were profiting quickly, the people of Appalachia were left to wonder about the future of their home.

Funding is not the only issue that is prevalent in Appalachia's educational system; interestingly enough, environmental factors come into play as well. When thinking about a positive environment for students, one does not picture a school in the midst of a coal field. However, that is exactly what Rebecka Flynn found at an elementary school in West Virginia. At Marsh Fork Elementary, "the children are forced to go to school in the shadow of a coal processing plant and within the destruction path of the earthen dam." Foremost, the health of students was largely compromised when placed in such close proximity to a processing plant. Flynn wrote that "it seems to be common sense that this could harmful to the health of the children." Besides the coal dust that settled over the campus, many were concerned about the sludge dam located a mere 300 yards from the school. If it were to break, the school would have three minutes to evacuate before the building would be engulfed in toxic sludge (Flynn 2). All students are supposed to have a quality education, but this is unfortunately the reality for too many students in the region.

Educational problems in Appalachia, like many other issues, have a strong connection to the past. Therefore, it is important to examine the historical context in the education system of Appalachia. When company towns were still predominant in the region, the industry controlled much of what students learned. Duane Lockard describes being educated by company-built schools, "Life in a company town meant that a public library was an institution I would know only long after I had left home. It meant that the high school I attended did not offer physics, modern languages, or mathematics" (Lockard 1998). By not offering subjects like these in school, the companies took away opportunities from students and impacted the way education is

viewed in general. Exposure to libraries and a wide range of subjects is imperative to education, so to take this away meant that students did not value education as much. While the coal industry does not still have such an impact on educational material, it has promoted the negative attitude about education in the region. Because of limited educational and job opportunity enforced by the industry, many Appalachians have sought opportunity elsewhere.

The Appalachian Exodus

Problems with education and economy are not the only issues plaguing modern day Appalachia; the lack of opportunities, and Appalachia's response to it, is also imperative to the discussion. As residents are dependent on the singular economy, when it falls, so does everything else. To combat this, Appalachians have had to leave their home in search of education and employment. As it is not a widely discussed issue, the Appalachians who have migrated to the north are called the "invisible minority." Appalachian out-migration "reached its peak between 1940 and 1970, when more than 7 million Appalachians left the region in search of jobs and a better life" (Cornwell). Educational and economic issues have led to this literal exile of Appalachia, a direct impact of the coal industry's authority in the region.

Perhaps the most memorable display of this exile is the "Hillbilly Highway." This is a term defined as, "the post-World War II diaspora when thousands of individuals left their homes, following the 'Hillbilly Highway' to the larger cities of the North, to find work in various booming industries" (Heinemann and Halder 86). Although it is dated, it is still applicable in modern time. Many residents of the region moved throughout the twentieth century as a result of the erratic economy. However, when these Appalachians left their homes, they experienced derision in the new communities they resided in, as well as a deep longing for the mountains.

This physical exile of mountain folk is ongoing today, with many still leaving the region in search of better opportunities.

As Appalachians moved north in search of a better life, they experienced another form of exile in their dealings. This exile took the form of discrimination against the invisible minority. Unsurprisingly, the stereotypes and ridicule that had been afflicting Appalachia since the beginnings of media representation followed these people in their exodus. In “Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles,” Chad Berry writes about rhetoric that was popularized about these migrants. Many called them “hillbillies,” said they were unskilled and uneducated, and blamed social issues on their lower social class (Berry 172). Even though these migrants were looking for a more sustainable life, they often experienced heartache in their new home. This is another layer of the multi-faceted exile that the industry has brought on the region. Due to an unstable, singular economy, millions left their homes and were shamed for their heritage.

Comparatively, the Hillbilly Highway’s modern day equivalent is a “Brain Drain” from the mountains to bigger cities. A brain drain occurs when educated locals leave their home in search of better opportunities. These are usually young people, leaving for either academic or economic success outside of the limited resources they had growing up. The issue with a brain drain is that it limits the number of educated people that can bring more business and diversity to an area. It is said that, “Appalachian states are predominantly perceived as areas with few economic opportunities and an ongoing ‘brain drain’” (Heinemann and Halder 86). As this goes on, Appalachia is losing valuable assets to its economy and culture. Because of the lack of economic diversity, the young people are leaving their homes in search of something different.

Examples like the Hillbilly Highway and Brain Drain shed light on the physical exile Appalachians experience continually. In order to be successful, many find themselves looking

for more than what is inside of the mountains. This is just another socioeconomic issue that the coal industry has brought to Appalachia. As Appalachia continues to be reliant on the singular economy, the region will see more and more jobs, money and educated people flood out of the region.

Conclusion

Although the coal industry in the twenty first century looks much differently than it used to, there are still some things that will never change. The socioeconomic issues that have been discussed are deeply ingrained. As long as coal is in Appalachia, the region will continue to be used for its resources, but not invested in. First, the unstable economy of Appalachia is, in part, due to the mono economy constructed by the industry. Second, the education system has been deeply impacted by the way coal has controlled the region. Finally, the industry has caused people to leave their homes by limiting opportunity in Appalachia. The effect of this means the region is losing valuable, young people to bigger cities. All of these factors come together to cause the socioeconomic exile of Appalachia. An exile that has been felt throughout the history of the United States.

When examining the issue of socioeconomic exile as pertaining to Appalachia, it is important to discuss others factors as well. The coal industry has brought a lot of damage to not only the people of this region, but also the land. Appalachia is now facing one of the most destructive times in its history. The predominant issue facing contemporary Appalachia is mountaintop removal. In order to mine coal, companies have taken to blowing up an entire mountain for a thin seam of coal and pushing the remaining topsoil and trees into the valleys below (House and Howard 1). This disastrous process leaves the residents distressed and in danger. Judy Bonds of Whitesville, West Virginia describes living in a mountaintop removal site

as being a in “war zone.” She says, “You feel like you’re being attacked. It does something to your psyche. Because you *are* being attacked” (149). Not only are the people of coal country at harm physically, but they are being assaulted emotionally as well. In this way, the coal industry continues to exile Appalachia every day. Therefore, making it difficult to know when the region will progress with the strong arms of coal strangling the very life out of it.

When a region is exiled the way Appalachia has been, it becomes the “other.” As the coal industry has extracted resources and left the Appalachian people in despair, it has aided in creating most of the stereotypes about the region. The financial, educational and migration issues have led to many forms of discrimination; therefore, allowing people to dehumanize and mock an entire subset of American culture. This has been seen in media since its beginnings. Televisions shows cast the dumb hillbilly because people think everyone in Appalachia are uneducated. Documentaries focus on the poverty stricken areas to insinuate that everyone is in misery. It is an ongoing cycle that neglects the people it portrays. It is apparent that a schism has formed between Appalachia and the outside, largely due to the presence of an exploitive industry. It is easy to not acknowledge it and continue to neglect Appalachia, but it is always present for the people of the mountains.

Work Cited

- Berry, Chad. *Southern migrants, Northern exiles*. Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 2000. Print.
- Burns, Shirley Stewart. *Bringing down the mountains: the impact of mountaintop removal surface coal mining on southern West Virginia communities, 1970-2004*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia U Press, 2007. Web. 1 Mar. 2017.
- Burns, Shirley Stewart, and Silas House. *Coal country: rising up against mountaintop removal mining*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2009. Print.
- Cornwell, Lisa. "Urban Appalachians Find Pride in Hillbilly Heritage." *Los Angeles Times*. 25 May 2003. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
- Douglas, Stratford, and Annie Walker. "Coal Mining and the Resource Curse in the Eastern United States." *West Virginia University*. West Virginia University, 18 Aug. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.
- Fisher, Steve, and Barbara Ellen Smith. "Internal Colony—Are You Sure? Defining, Theorizing, Organizing Appalachia." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 22.1 (2016): 45-50. Web. 16 Feb. 2017.
- Flynn, Rebecka. "Unequal Education: How the Brown v Board of Education Decision can be Applied in Rural West Virginia." *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*. 6.3 (2001), p1-10.
- Heinemann, Lindsay, and Markus Halder. "Resisting Economic Opportunities? An inquiry into the reasons and motivations of individuals who stay in a socio-economically deprived area." *Journal of Appalachian Studies*. 21.1 (2015), p86-104.
- House, Silas, and Jason Howard. *Something's rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal*. Lexington, KY: U Press Of Kentucky, 2009. Print.
- Lobao, Linda, Minyu Zhou, Mark Patridge and Michael Betz. "Poverty, Place, and Coal Employment across Appalachia and the United States in a New Economic Era." *Rural Sociology*, 81.3 (2016), pp. 343-386.
- Lockard, Duane. *Coal: a memoir and critique*. Charlottesville: U Press of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- Stark, Louis. *New York Times*, 11 October 1931.
- Thompson, Eric, Mark C. Berger, Steven N. Allen, and Jonathan M. Roenker. "A Study on the Current Economic Impacts of the Appalachian Coal Industry and its Future in the Region." *Appalachian Regional Commission*. 27 March 2001. <https://www.arc.gov/assets>
- Thorne, Deborah, Ann Tickamyer, and Mark Thorne. "Poverty and Income in Appalachia." *Journal of Appalachian Studies*. 10.3 (2004), p341-3.

Explanation:

This piece relies heavily on scholarship and primary sources from the Appalachian region in order to give a complex analysis of the coal industry's impact on the socioeconomic exile of Appalachia. While writing this essay, I spent many hours in Special Collections searching for the perfect primary source to prove my argument. For example, I ended up finding a newspaper article about Bloody Harlan, a coal mining struggle, from *the New York Times* dated 1931. I also used Duane Lockard's Memoir, *Coal: a memoir and critique*, to draw on personal experience about coal mining. This was the first time I utilized Special Collections so it was definitely a formative experience. Since then, I have gone back for other research projects and found myself in the same amount of awe as when I first visited.