

# ECONOMIC TRANSITION IN CENTRAL APPALACHIA: KNOWLEDGE/POWER MAPPING FOR BOTTOM-UP POLICY

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This article reflects on collaborative and action research projects for economic transition in central Appalachia catalyzed by the Alliance for Appalachia, a coalition of fifteen grassroots organizations. In 2012, the Alliance formed an Economic Transition team to nurture horizontal support and knowledge-sharing networks among local economic transition projects across the region and to build vertical communication structures with the state, regional, and national entities that control the flow of economic development monies and expertise. The authors of this article are members of the Alliance's Economic Transition team.

## Key Questions and Findings

For over a century, central Appalachia has been on a path of development that locks it into dependency on extractive industries. These economic macrostructures have co-evolved with structures of government. We have been trying to understand what the current governmental apparatuses of development are and what ordinary citizens feel they need to support the development they want. A key finding is that existing governmental development structures are deeply fragmented, making it hard to connect the dots between economy and ecology, between scales, and between sectors (civil society, government, and experts). These disjunctions make it hard to build an adequate support structure for economic transition projects. Post-fossil fuel economies might appear to be about "going local," but such a transition entails deeply integrated transformations

of much wider structures of energy, transport, finance, value chains and markets, culture, and education. Flexibly integrated, multi-issue, multisectoral, and multi-scalar webs of knowledge and governmental support are needed for healthy economic transition. In addition, the current fragmentation of development structures in the United States is an entry point for corporate power, which benefits when citizens cannot connect the dots between the benefits and costs of production and the ecological and social impacts of production.

zens in historic coal mining communities mobilized against MTR because it creates far fewer jobs than deep mining, destroys watersheds and biodiversity, harms land-based livelihoods and cultural heritage, and damages human health (Epstein, et al. 2011).

The permitting of MTR was enabled by a history of changing interpretations of the federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (SMCRA). When instituted, it was claimed that SMCRA would integrate ecological, social, and economic regulation of strip mining. A vibrant,

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In this article, we try to map structures of power and knowledge as they are, and as citizens would like them to be. We end with some reflections on what this means for applied anthropology.

## The Corporate State and the Challenge of Connecting Dots

The Alliance arose a decade ago when long standing social and environmental justice groups in Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia decided they needed to scale up in order to coordinate campaigns at the federal level against the massively destructive strip-mining practice called "mountaintop removal" (MTR). Citi-

grassroots, anti-strip-mining movement in Appalachia had been a key force in pushing for such legislation at the federal level because state level government agencies had been largely captured by mining interests. However, SMCRA included a possibility for exemption if the leveled site were deemed economic development. This exemption was like a toggle switch that suspended ecological and social considerations, and turned the site into an economic venture (without actually putting the venture under the authority of any government entity responsible for economic development). Because of this loophole and other ways in which Congress had weakened the law, Appalachian grassroots groups

unsuccessfully petitioned President Carter to not sign SMCRA.

Increasingly, SMCRA, rather than preventing strip-mining, has become a powerful engine for expanding it at a vast scale. This happened, in part, because of fragmentation of responsibility between the federal agencies, so that no one government entity was jointly accountable for economic, ecological, and health impacts. But, it also was enabled by processes of linguistic and ontological reconstruction of federal laws that undid the original integrative goals of them, and made these laws function as toggle switches which could turn on certain dimensions, while turning off others. In 2001, under the Bush administration, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Army Corps of Engineers redefined the meaning of the word “fill” in the Clean Water Act (which had originally meant ecologically polluting matter) to permit the dumping of stripped mountaintops into valley headwaters as ecologically harmless. The pace of MTR mining grew explosively. By 2005, almost 7% of the land in the coal regions of central Appalachia had been stripped by, or was permitted for, MTR. Approximately 1200 miles of headwater streams were directly impacted through increased flooding and with massive loss of biodiversity and forests (EPA 2005).

In part, such “permitting of destruction” (Wood 2013) is the result of wider tendencies toward fragmentation in our systems of natural resource governance that rely on specializing and fragmenting technocratic and regulatory structures (Reid and Taylor 2010). But, in addition, corporate power has deeply infiltrated many government agencies by proliferating arcane languages and procedures that disrupt integrated public knowledge or deliberation (Wood 2013). As real-life processes are discursively and ontologically dismembered, the corporate state becomes a system for disconnecting the dots and toggling off aspects of reality that corporations want to hide. It benefits when the public is unable to connect the dots between production and impacts of production (Reid and Taylor 2010).

These dysfunctions of knowledge and governance are severe in energy and extractive industries (Mitchell 2011).

### **Historical Roots of the Alliance in the Distinctive Legacies of Appalachian Civil Society**

The Alliance for Appalachia arises from a long and distinctive history of effective and courageous social movements in Appalachia (Fisher 1993; Fisher and Smith 2012). On one hand, the region has entrenched political economic structures that exemplify resource curse development pathways that suffer from vicious cycles between ecological externalities, political corruption, inequality, lack of diversification and capital accumulation, displacement, and weak public services (Taylor 2014). On the other hand, the region has seen waves of activism. Militant labor movements at the point of industrial production have been strengthened by the legendary solidarity of mining communities (Smith 2014), forged in forms of social reproduction partly based on non-market subsistence and mutual support traditions, and on ecological and civic commons (Hufford 2004; Taylor 2006).

A decade ago, many Appalachian grassroots organizations fighting MTR were struggling to operate at the national level where key policy was being set. These groups were primarily multi-issue, place-based, and focused on grassroots and state-level mobilization. Integration of social and environmental justice issues was central to their ethos, and these organizations built considerable flexibility as they built organizational capacity to move fluently between multiple issues, scales, and diverse stakeholders (Fisher 1993). This distinctive history creates a different regional civic culture from many other non-governmental organizations that feel driven to specialize to master arcane regulatory, legal, and bureaucratic languages and procedures in order to affect policy (Taylor 2009). Over many decades of organizational experimentation, Appalachian movements have built unusual capacity to mount periodic

regional and national campaigns targeting particular issues, while remaining grounded in multi-issue, complex, and labile realities. Scholars of Appalachian Studies have served as important bards of collective lessons learned, and have established many centers for Appalachian studies across the region that can transmit history-from-below to rising generations (McSpirit, Faltraco, and Bailey 2012).

### **The Economic Transition Projects of the Alliance for Appalachia**

The Economic Transition team was formed in 2012. Membership fluctuates, but we typically have about six participants in our weekly or biweekly phone conferences and more at occasional daylong regional meetings. The team reports to the Steering Committee of the Alliance, and we strive to keep a good geographical balance across central Appalachia.

In 2013, we conducted a Listening Project to identify existing projects of economic transition in the region. The Listening Project identified groups and individuals with experience with economic transition projects in Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina by snowballing out from the wide civic webs of the Alliance. We interviewed seventeen diverse groups (including economic development, environmental, labor, faith based, energy policy, community organizing, local foods, and local media). We asked people about their vision of prosperity in Appalachia, successful projects, existing resources and barriers, what support systems they need, what existing state and federal policies are detrimental, and what existing or potential government policies would help.<sup>1</sup>

In these interviews, people identified a few sectors with successful local projects ready to be scaled up regionally: local food, horticulture and forestry systems, arts, culture, heritage, nature tourism, and entrepreneurship/small business development. People noted a number of good state and local government development programs for local food systems, including value chain

building through farmer' markets, local food labeling and promotion, and small farmer supports and training. People did note the importance of advocacy around the federal Farm Bill, but seemed to feel more room for maneuver at the state level than was apparent in other sectors. Several states have civil society organizations with excellent training and capacity-building expertise in sustainable, local food, and forestry system development (for example, Community Farm Alliance and Green Forest Works in Kentucky and Appalachian Sustainable Development in Virginia). Yet people described barriers and weak support systems in other kinds of small business development from governmental, civil society, or expert entities.

People saw much potential in the energy sector, but fewer successful projects. Many highlighted the potential number of green jobs in energy efficiency and construction, as well as small scale and locally based renewable energy sources such as micro-hydro damming, wind, biomass, geothermal from strip mining jobs, and solar. However, people described a very negative and complex policy and funding environment, which, in turn, sets up multiple barriers to local action in this area. Federal level development monies and legislation (such as the proposed Energy Savings and Industrial Competitiveness Act in the House, and State Energy Race to the Top in the Senate) were highlighted. However, federal filing processes for executing various energy programs are described as inefficient and inaccessible, and both federal and state funding opportunities are inadequately advertised. Some state level initiatives were mentioned. In states that still have electrical cooperatives, some organizations have campaigns to seize democratic and grassroots control over cooperatives from long entrenched local elites. In the energy sector, then, existing development apparatuses in government create a disabling environment for bottom up action projects and citizen advocacy.

Some are very interested in worker owned cooperatives, and see this as part of wider movements to democratically restructure industry from a corporate

model. A few people noted civic or psychological patterns in communities, including a lack of entrepreneurial skills or ambition, hope, or confidence in change because of the history of dependence on outside investment and industry. Many respondents were concerned about building better and more relevant education. A focus on youth was widely advocated, as was expansion of community colleges, GED programs, and literacy initiatives. Current job training programs were criticized for focusing on skills needed for jobs that exist only outside of the coalfields.

Many people focused on underlying macrostructural barriers. Many considered inequality in land ownership to be a barrier that must be overcome for any real economic transition. Extractive and corporate interests have owned about 70-90 percent of the land in coal producing counties for over a century. Another, less well-documented problem, is intestate land owned by multiple, non-resident heirs. Many felt that economic transition is not possible without fundamental change in land ownership patterns. Possible solutions were mentioned, including reform of land tax policy, land trusts, seizure by eminent domain, and further research on mineral/lease rights and landownership patterns. However, no clear pathways to land reform were identified. The only existing projects mentioned were a few successful, locally owned land trusts.

There is a widespread perception that industry is not paying enough to public revenues, and that the structure of public funds and the disbursement of public monies are fundamentally flawed. Tax reform, in diverse and complicated forms, came up repeatedly, such as a Carbon Tax to directly benefit miners in the form of an Earned Income Tax Credit, land tax reform to encourage more equitable land ownership and use, and fundamental reform in tax structures to undo corporate favoritism (often reaching back over a century). Large government subsidies for extractive industries and corporate farms were noted, as were sequestering and austerity ideologies. A clear and well-developed strategy for revenue reform

that gives people hope includes proposals to establish permanent funds at the state level for revenues from extractive industry (such as the models proposed by Kentucky's Center for Economic Policy and West Virginia's Center on Budget and Policy).

The one proposal that was supported by every organization or individual on the listening tour was reform of the federal Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to benefit local organizations, businesses, and communities rather than continuing to support existing infrastructure expansion projects.

### **Scaling up to Reclaim or Build Wider Webs of Multisectoral Support**

Our other projects seek to identify the supra local conditions and systems that support the flourishing and scaling up of good local projects. Our Agency Mapping Project was an attempt to identify federal agencies that have resources and mandates such that they could help regional transition in Appalachia. We held a Citizen Summit in December 2013, attended by over 60 people, to reflect on the year's work, and, through participatory planning processes, developed a platform for regional transition called the Appalachian Agenda. We are just beginning one component of this Appalachian Agenda, which is a collaborative research project on the Abandoned Mine Lands Fund (AML) managed by the United States Department of the Interior. This research is designed to lead to a campaign to use more of the AML funds for economic transition, green jobs, and reclamation.

Every year, the Alliance holds a Week in Washington, during which grassroots members converge in Washington, D.C., to lobby elected legislators and federal agencies, and to perform direct actions such as the 2010 "Appalachia Rising" march, which led to the arrest of 115 people in front of the White House. In 2013, the Economic Transition team used the Week in Washington to meet with national powerbrokers to get information and build networks for our Agency Mapping project. A bureaucrat

in the Department of Interior gave us a metaphor that powerfully sums up the most important finding of our agency mapping. He said that it is as if there is a huge wall between the federal government and the people who receive federal funds. Periodically, agencies or Congress produce a lump of money, but there is no sane system to pass funds on to the local communities who really need the money. Instead bureaucrats like him have to take the money and throw it blindly over the wall. Again and again, he sees that the communities that can catch the money are the ones that have the biggest mitt up and ready. "Communities in central Appalachia usually do not have such a mitt," he says.

### **Crony Networks, the State, and Development Apparatuses**

A key theme in the Agency Mapping work and the Citizen Summit was the power of vertical crony networks between local and state elites to control the flow of development monies. This kind of clientelistic State is typical of resource curse patterns (Taylor 2014). And, in many ways, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century land grabs in the central Appalachian coalfields were a key breeding ground for corporate power as railroad/mining/timber cartels exploited power ambiguities between local, state, and federal governments to build influence (Reid and Taylor 2010). Corporate power spreads in the interstices of government between scales and between agencies because well-funded patronage networks become adept at functioning as gatekeepers that control how and how much public revenues are gathered from production through taxes, severances, among other means, and how that revenue flows back to the public.

We saw many examples of coal industry control over who gets a mitt for federal money. For example, we had trouble getting a meeting with staff at the ARC. Eventually, they agreed to meet with us if we promised not to discuss "environmental" issues. This was the least helpful meeting we had. On the other hand, our meeting with a high level Department of Labor official was helpful and far more

open to the idea that Appalachia needs diversification in jobs and training. It became clear, however, that it would take considerable resources and time for us to learn the acronyms and complexity of siloed funding streams with frequently changing staff.

Our most productive and positive experience was with the VISTA program of the Office of Surface Mining in the Department of the Interior. The internal organization and mission definition of this program make it far more open to engagement with bottom up citizen mobilization. Under the Director, Allan Comp, the program is expanding dramatically. He has a background in historic preservation and integrated, place-based, asset-based community development models, and with public involvement and engagement forms of knowledge and planning. Through iterative cycles of community identification of assets and needs, along with peer learning among the VISTA volunteers across the region, Comp has developed a remarkably flexible and creative program that is decentralized in goals and sensitive to communities, but centralized in training values and models. In addition, members of our group already had observed the VISTA volunteers in action and heard from communities that they are unusually effective. Allan Comp himself travels extensively in the region, so he had the grounded understanding to engage with the complexity of questions and real-life situations with which we struggle.

### **Building Networks with National Labor Organizations**

Our meeting with national staff of the Blue-Green Alliance was particularly disappointing because we had hoped that their goals matched ours. Soon after their founding in 2006, they had promised some of our members to put "some boots on the ground" for organizing in Appalachia for green jobs and economic transition. However, it seemed clear that the refusal of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to engage with post-coal economic transition meant that the Blue Green Alliance would not

engage with our community-based efforts. Focused on preserving retirement and health benefits, the UMWA has decided not to confront industry over MTR. The UMWA has almost no direct presence in the lives of most working people in our communities, but it maintains its power at the national level as a power broker for workers in the region. We also met with a high official in the AFL-CIO, but he insisted on not meeting in his office, so he could speak off the record. This gave us a fascinating and helpful look at the left wing of the labor movement that wants to create partnerships with environmental and social justice groups and to explore new and creative forms of organizing, such as sector wide and general worker unions, worker owned ventures, and open shop cooperatives.

We were galvanized by our discussion with leaders of the collaboration between the Steelworkers Union and the renowned Mondragon cooperatives in Spain. Michael Peck (North American representative for Mondragon) set up a phone conference with leaders of cooperatives in Ohio, and also the Cooperative Development Center at Kent State University. This provided us with a wealth of practical models for workers cooperatives and economic democracy that are shaping our plans going forward and opening new peer learning possibilities with people like us elsewhere. As with Allan Comp and the OSM VISTA program, relationship building was easier because of the grounded, place-based, community-engaged, and driven nature of this program. In other words, community-based organizational structure can overcome clientelistic State hegemonic blocs by providing multiple interscalar webs for expanding linkages.

### **Conclusions**

As global systems respond to climate change while scaling down fossil fuel use, there are clusters of ecological and cultural assets that will be crucial for sustainable economic transition (Prugh and Renner 2014). Central Appalachia is in a paradoxical situation at the beginning of

the 21<sup>st</sup> century because it has many of these assets, but is dominated politically by the coal industry. With abundant water, biodiversity, and forests, it has rich natural resources for a re-regionalized, post-carbon economy that is geographically fortunate in being close to huge urban markets. It also has cultural and civic assets that will be needed in re-localizing, land-based economies as we go down the carbon curve.

However, citizens seeking to develop bottom-up policies to support such regional transition face huge challenges. Coal mining leaves behind massive ecological, social, and health impacts (EPA 2005; Epstein, et al. 2011; McIlmoil, et al. 2010). Reclamation and recovery from these inherited costs requires specialized knowledge and well-funded collective action, but the region suffers from severely underfunded public services and knowledge institutions (Taylor 2014), and a deeply factionalized political terrain after well-funded corporate campaigns against what industry calls a “War on Coal” (Bell and York 2010).

### Implications for Applied Anthropology

This article analyses synergism between expert specialization, bureaucratic complexity, and corporate power that discourage true cost accounting of industrial and energy production, and weakens regional capacity for economic diversification. Our goal is to develop more democratic knowledge and power structures for bottom-up policy making.

Applied anthropology is uniquely positioned to contribute to this. First, many emerging models for sustainable development are multisectoral, networked, and collaborative in ways that blur boundaries between government, experts, and community/local knowledges. They unsettle the relationship between *governance* and *government*. This could be a democratizing, post-bureaucratic transformation of top-down policy and planning, or it could be dangerous entry point for neoliberal globalization as corporate powers sidestep the authority of national governments under

the cloak of multistakeholder collaboration. Anthropology has unique tools for understanding the nation-state that can clarify these challenges.

Second, anthropological methods and theory can help to nurture a civic professionalism that facilitates the collaboration and knowledge commons that will be

the Alliance for Appalachia (Alliance for Appalachia 2014).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Our methodology draws from collaborative and participatory action research methods central to applied anthropology

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needed for economic transition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Puckett, et al. 2012).

Third, applied anthropology should aggressively push back against the tendency to decontextualize questions of development in many policy regimes. A key feature of the neoliberal corporate state is a tendency to dismember reality by decontextualizing and abstracting knowledge in ways that objectify nature and people so that they are easier to move into, and around, global markets (Reid and Taylor 2010). New forms of bottom up participatory knowledge and governance offer viable alternatives to neoliberal knowledge and power structures because they replace things and citizens within their multi-causal, multi-scalar, and multisectoral contexts where they are available for, and intelligible in, democratic deliberation and lived worlds.

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in which the primary goal is to set up an iterative cycle between action, reflection, and documentation that brings together diverse voices for public deliberation about issues in the public interest.

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