McDowell County: A Smaller West Virginia

Introduction

The relationship between energy and energy production is one that individuals seldom think about. The process and production is rarely understood by those who don’t go out looking for the information. So often the situation becomes one in which, unless the energy production is “in my backyard,” we tend to not worry about the externalities associated with the production of energy. This is especially true for the production of electricity via coal. Although it is generally understood that coal is not a clean form of energy, the information that is usually readily available is one that speaks to coal and its relation to anthropogenic climate change and not one that speaks to the social implications of coal. Though I am not able delve into the both complex and controversial conversation about energy production in relation to anthropogenic climate change, this is not meant to distract from the concerns behind energy production in the US. Rather, this paper speaks to the more immediate impacts of energy production, specifically those of Mountaintop Removal (MTR) coal mining in West Virginia.

West Virginia, the country’s second largest producer of coal (EIA, 2012) has, over the last century, situated itself within the eyesight of policy makers, the EPA (and similar environmental groups), and multinational corporations. Though it is inherently thought that an abundance of resource equates to upward socio-economic mobility, the opposite is true for coal mining communities in West Virginia. In order to explain this paradox, this essay will look at McDowell County, WV and how coal mining has stunted and limited socio-economic growth within this mining community. Using political economic theories, I will examine the relationship that exists between coal and the mining communities. In McDowell County, an abundance of a resource allowed for a false cosmopolitan view that all problems will be solved, and instead of
allowing for a diversification and proper allocation of economic resources, these abundant resources set the county one step forward and three steps back.

Site Specifics

The early settlers of McDowell County, WV saw an opportunity to purchase cheap land where they would be able to start their lives (Clabough, 2012, p.184). Decades were spent living off the land and it was not until the “arrival of modern coal operation that allowed for [the transformation] of [the] local economy from one of hardscrabble agricultural subsistence to an even more tenuous, crude, and industrial one” (Clabough, 2012, p.181). During the 19th century, McDowell County produced more coal that any county in West Virginia (Gabriel, 2014, April 20). As read in a New York Times article (Gabriel, 2014, April 20), when coal was “king” in that county “everybody worked,” there were movie theatres, more houses, and for the most part it seems as though things worked well.

Over time, as coal became a vested interest of multinational corporations, so too began their acquisition of land. The method by which this was done was “coercively as well as forcibly” (Clabough, 2012, p.184). While more people were now given the opportunity to work in coal mines, the costs associated with these jobs did not come to light until much later. What soon occurred was that corporations gained a tremendous amount of socio-economic power within the area. Though the community now began to see a growth of businesses and homes, these new community resources did not belong to residents, but rather to the coal company. As “people were often paid for their underground labor in scripts, which allowed them to buy goods only from the company store” (Clabough, 2012, p.184) through such ownership of land, homes, and businesses the money always found its way back into the hands of the coal corporations (Bell & York, 2010).
With the aforementioned community’s dependency on the coal corporations, the community saw great change as coal began to decline. As poverty was already a problem during this era because of the concentration of wealth, the decline of coal exacerbated an already existing problem (Gabriel, 2014, April 20). This problem caught the attention of President Lyndon B. Johnson during his poverty tour of the Appalachians states and, at the time, Senator John F. Kennedy (Gabriel, 2014, April 20). In attempts to help mitigate poverty within the area, soon after his election, President Kennedy began the Food Stamp Program and amongst its first recipients were the members of McDowell County (Gabriel, 2014, April 20). Soon after came similar programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and free school lunch that were meant to fight against, what President Lyndon B. Johnson termed, the ‘war on poverty’ (Gabriel, 2014, April 20). Though these multifaceted solutions would target the complex problem that coal brought about in McDowell County, the unfortunate situation is that almost half a century later the same problems subsist.

McDowell County 50 years later has significantly higher levels of poverty, lower per capital income, and median household income compared to the county averages in West Virginia (US Census, 2013). Population levels have drastically changed: during the boom of coal there were about 100,000 residents in McDowell County (Clabough, 2012) and now that number stands just around 21,000 (US Census, 2013). The few lucky ones that had the resources to avoid a failing economic sector made their way out. Unfortunately, McDowell County is still suffering from similar problems faced when coal was around, except now residents have stayed afloat due to government help that was afforded to them by former presidents.

Though the residents of McDowell County seem to be no longer facing environmental impacts associated with sustainability challenges, they are still adversely affected with regards to
the social and economic aspects of sustainability. The community suffers social problems ranging from high illiteracy levels, drug abuse, low levels of employments and social mobility, and incarcerations (Gabriel, 2014, April 20, & Clabough, 2012). These social problems not only limit community development, but also cripple individuals into falling into a cycle of poverty. Through a deep reliance on a coal driven economy, we see parts of West Virginia falling into the same cycle.

**Larger Context**

McDowell County is not your typical site for observation of potential environmental justice movements. This section is not meant to invoke attention due to an unsustainable method of energy production, but rather to position the conversation about the present and future of West Virginia coal production within the proper context. Coal is no longer mined in McDowell County, but as coal reserves begin to become depleted in West Virginia (Strobo, 2012) one questions what will happen to these coal mining communities once coal is no longer a viable resource. In order to understand where the West Virginia coal mining communities stand it is critical to understand the energy-related, political, and socio-economic aspects of coal mining in West Virginia.

As technology has advanced, so has the production of energy. Using coal miners, such as the example of McDowell County, was a way in which companies used workers to derive the low hanging fruit that is coal cave mining. But as much of that fruit has been picked, technology has allowed producing coal that relies less on human labor and more on machines. Through this advancement has come Mountaintop Removal (MTR), which is here explained by Bell and York (2010):
“Under the mountains in these areas lie thin layers of low-sulfur coal, which are extremely valuable and are too narrow to be mined by more traditional methods of deep mining. In order to reach this coal, mining operations must remove the ‘overburden’ (which includes the tops of mountains, forests, etc.) to expose the coal seam below.”

As a result of this method of mining much attention has been concentrated on the heavy environmental impacts that range from health impacts, sludge by-products, deforestation, and other externalities associated with mountaintop removal (Strobo, 2012). As a response, companies have stated that the environmental degradation is minimal when compared to the jobs and energy this form of mining produces (Strobo, 2012). Although environmental degradation is a serious problem, the communities would likely be able to mobilize and act against such actions if they were not being degraded at the same time. In order to understand the degradation of community development it is critical to understand how politics come into play with MTR.

Similar to McDowell County, a significant amount of the land in the Appalachia, to this day, was acquired through the “subjugation and domination” (Bell and York, 2011) of the Appalachian people. Much of this domination has been done through the corporate ownership of land. Richardson et.al. (2014) references the Appalachian Land Township Task Force of 1981 in stating “[out of] 80 counties in the Appalachian regions [its was] found that about 75% of surface lands and 80% of mineral rights were controlled by out-of-country or out-of-state owners.” Unfortunately, this is not the only factor that comes into play when explaining the social, political, and economics behind MTR. Bozzi (2012) raises a critical piece of information in order to understand politics behind MTR land:

“[MTR] requires an exemption from the federal reclamation requirement that mine sites be returned to their ‘approximate original contour (AOC). In order to receive this AOC variance, the coal operators must meet certain requirements in their mining permit applications… these requirements center on the proposed post-mining land… which must be deemed ‘an equal or better economic or public use’… compared to its pre-mined use”
Here is where the opposition lies, within legal understanding of MTR. Much of the mining in West Virginia, which would seem as though it would be categorized as MTR, technically falls under the legal category of large scale surface mining and thus the accountability that would be held for MTR site restoration is minimized (Bozzi, 2012). One cannot be surprised that environmental degradation is tied to the degradation of community development when there is a combination of political and corporate responsibility that has been neglected. The way that politics have been framed and developed have allowed for the transition into a form of energy production that removes responsibility from stakeholders and prevents future economic growth on land with great renewable potential (Bozzi, 2012; Richardson et al., 2014).

There exists a wealth of information to indicate that coal reserves in West Virginia are on the decline (Bell, 2009; Strobo, 2012). Claims that multinational coal companies made with respect to job creation and energy production are starting to become less and less accurate. The problem that has been found in the current economy of West Virginia is similar to that of McDowell County in the 1950s: an undiversified economy (Gabriel, 2014, April 20). And even though a significant amount of jobs have been loss due to technological advancements in coal mining (Richardson et al., 2014), coal is still a significant contributor to West Virginia’s economy because no other industry has replaced it (Bell, 2009). Between property taxes, severance taxes, and gross state taxes, there is a significant amount of total state income coming from coal (Richardson et al., 2014). But as prices of coal increase and producing coal continues on track to no longer be financially viable, it seems as though the economy of West Virginia has little alternative but to transition to a more diversified economy.
The coal-driven economy has led the treadmill of production to mechanize coal mining; the increased production of coal is no longer translating into a larger human workforce (Perdue and Pavela, 2012). And as rates of employment in coal mines decrease we see instances of a similar trend in individuals’ reliance of the coal economy with respects to job opportunities, while the state still heavily relies on coal (Bell & York, 2010). This is in part due to the type of industry that coal is: a significant amount of it ends up being pulled from the ground and cleaned elsewhere which in turn prevents these mining communities from the high-wage specialized jobs and additional tax revenue associated with the secondary processes of coal (Perdue and Pavela, 2012). With this in mind, it is imperative that West Virginia take advantage of this decline in coal economy in order to diversify their economy and begin to move away from coal.

Analysis

In order to understand some of the environmental injustices and sustainability issues associated with MTR in West Virginia, I will use political economic theories such as the resource curse, environmental cost-shifting, and the treadmill of production. By doing so I will highlight how coal mining has affected the social, political, and economic situation in these coal mining communities.

The resource curse is the theory that states: with an abundance of resources, countries tend to have less economic growth and worse development outcomes than countries with fewer renewable resources (Robbins et.al., 2010). Such a theory can be applied to understand the situation of McDowell county and West Virginia, because although there’s a spatial component that distinguish the two, McDowell county very much speaks to the future of West Virginia. McDowell County, during the 19th century, was the top producer as coal and now stands as one of the poorest counties in the nation (Gabriel, 2014, April 20). This stemmed from an inadequate
distribution of wealth and over-dependency of coal (Clabough, 2012, p.181). While the miners worked to receive payment, the company managed to make it so that money would return back to the hands of the company. A majority of the people were paid in scripts, a currency created by the coal company that would allow members to buy and sell goods (Clabough, 2012). To make matters worse, since the company has used these scripts to create the illusion of a booming economy, it seems as though it was seldom thought, by community members, that another form of economic flow was needed. And to some extent, coal was indeed fueling an economy; an economy that was so tied together with coal that it was almost impossible to distinguish the two. And in the end when coal was no longer a viable resource in the county, it should be of no surprise why the economy crumbled and the community is in its current state.

A similar situation is occurring in West Virginia as a whole, though on a larger scale and with more advanced technology. Though historically West Virginia has relied on coal as a main contributor to the economy, this trend appears to be on the decline. As research in renewables is progressing and coal continues on its track of no longer being a financially viable source (Richardson et.al., 2014), West Virginia must move away from this coal contingent economy. In examining the current trend of the economy and community development we see that West Virginia is on track as a resource-curse driven state. With a significant amount of literature pointing to the undiversified economy and poor community development: with regards to the social, political, and economic there shows a clear need to change West Virginia’s coal dependency. As West Virginia continues to undermine the current state of coal and its transition in the economy’s current state, the story of McDowell County will likely be that of West Virginia.
Much of the explanation for the resource curse is directly tied to capitalism’s treadmill of production (Robbins et.al., 2010). Through this notion of the treadmill of production one aspect that is quite clear within these coal mining communities is the cutback of surplus value from the community and the environment. Historically, McDowell County serves as an example of what occurs when the surplus value, or profits, (Robbins et.al., 2010) are not reinvested back into the community. The example of McDowell County now can be looked at in relation to technology, as it has further pushed the treadmill of production. Mountaintop Removal has allowed for the acceleration of resource production which, as seen through this essay, has machanized the new labor work force. And with a decrease in jobs that historically allowed community development and socio-economic mobility, we now see communities as they are able to only watch as their environment is destroyed.

The case of environmental cost shifting (Robbins et.al., 2010) is one that also allows us to understand the environmental degradation of the area. This relationship between policies and the community development has made it possible for MTR to exist in its current state. In this case, it’s quite simple to see that while the environment of West Virginia suffers the cost of being degraded, a portion of the country’s needs are being met through the production of coal in this area. While the environmental costs associated with such production are shifted heavily to West Virginia. In moving forward, as research shows coal on the decline and energy demands begin to increase, there needs to be a series of multifaceted solutions to solve this problem, and move to a diversified economy.

Conclusion

As this essay has given light to the clear lack of community development via environmental degradation, economic diversification or lack thereof, and social development
these factors are critical in understanding MTR in West Virginia. Though technology has helped us move into an era where we no longer think the case of McDowell County is possible, and more energy can be produced, the case of West Virginia allows us to ask the question: at what cost does this energy production come at? And this question refers to both the environmental and the community related. As downward trajectory is seen in employment levels, environmental degradation, and coal reserves, it is clear that there needs to be a social, political, and economic change within the method of operation in West Virginia.

As for the social capital that seems to have been removed from these coal mining communities, there needs to be support, not only continued from federal governments but as well as local governments to support social growth. This form of social support can be best in the economic and political sectors. As the economy requires change, there is great potential in the land post MTR that lies within renewable energies, especially wind power (Bozzi, 2012). Not only has this movement to renewable allows for a new job market, but a more renewable market that will allow for job creation and possible land reforestation (Richardson et.al, 2014). Similarly, there can be a change in the politics, especially those that currently allow MTR (or large scale surface mining) to be returned to less than that of its original contour. Outside of renewable energies, some of these politics have the potential to allow for a fraction of the profits to be reinvested, or be better allocated in a manner in which allows West Virginia to have a fighting chance as coal begins to decline and as they begin to move away from this coal dependency.
Cited Works


