

# Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia

By Steven Stoll

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There has been a surge of interest in Appalachia in recent years, especially in the wake of the 2016 presidential election and President Trump's pledge to revive the coal industry. While a variety of books have sought to explain Appalachia today—including Rebecca Scott (2010), Shannon Bell (2016), J. D. Vance (2016), and more recently Elizabeth Catte (2018)—Steven Stoll's *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* constructs a much longer-term, materially and historically grounded analysis of Appalachia.

Although the title focuses on Appalachia, Stoll's goal is much broader:

the central event in Ramp Hollow is the scramble for Appalachia, or the rapid onslaught of joint-stock companies to attain the rights and ownership needed to clear-cut the forests and dig out the coal. How this happened and what was lost is the subject of this book. This book is also about country people throughout the Atlantic World over the last four hundred years ... My purpose is to unite the experience of backcountry settlers of the southern mountains with that of agrarians elsewhere (p. xiv).

Stoll traces the history of Appalachia over the centuries, beginning from what he sees as its origins in the Enclosures in England as capitalists dispossessed small agriculturalists and transformed marshland and other marginal landscapes into capitalist farms. This process would be repeated in Appalachia from the 1800s onward as small agriculturalists were displaced by logging and coal mining. Some aspects of this history are well-known, including the importance of absentee landlords who received land titles even before the first white settlements were built, the resulting conflict and confusion over land ownership and separation of surface and mineral rights, the national government's efforts to incorporate Appalachia into the nation via taxation and force, the role of coal as the center of the economy since the late 1800s and its negative impacts on the land and people, coal companies' use of multiple distinct racial and ethnic groups as miners to make unionization more difficult, and the role of company stores and company scrip as means of labor control. Stoll presents an engaging analysis of these factors while focusing as

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well on other key factors in the evolution of Appalachia that we emphasize in this review: the political economy and ecology of Appalachia, the role of dispossession of Appalachian agriculturalists, and the parallels and connections with processes in other times and places in the world economy.

Stoll highlights the *process* of dispossession of agrarians—“settlers, peasants, *campesinos*, smallholders”—or simply “country people” (p. 65) by looking at their mode of reproduction of everyday life. Stoll argues that backwoods settlers maintained a healthy relationship with mountain ecology in their use of swiddens (clearings) created using fire (p. 69), a process also known by other names like *forest fallow*, *burnbeating*, and *shifting cultivation* (p. 107). These practices are common today, Stoll notes, among the rice-planters in Mindoro, the Philippines, where shifting cultivation subtly restores and reproduces the ecological base (pp. 251–252). Stoll offers an engrossing account of Appalachian country households in relation to their “own provision ground,” often a two-acre garden space for growing vegetables and fruits (p. 141); and in relation to provision grounds hidden in the woods (p. 84). These provision grounds are part of a wider ecological base, the name for that “vast renewable fund of resources that provides spaces for fields, food for gathering, fodder for cattle, and habitat for wild game” (p. 33). Ramps and hollows are part of this ecological base. Stoll explains that the term *ramp* in its old English sense refers to bear onion, wild leek, and *ramson*; foraging for ramps and other plants was a seasonal event and a cherished custom in common. Stoll also relates “ramp” with the German *rampen*: a platform that connects two uneven surfaces: “Ramps provided a subsistence bridge between spring and summer. They represented the role of the forest in providing direct subsistence in addition to commodities” (pp. 142–143).

In a somewhat different but related sense, the term “ramp” serves as a metaphor for a bridge that spans two different transactional realms. Like peasants in the Andean highlands, whose social relations within the village community grounded their transactions without confining those transactions to the village, but in fact extended them to a realm of impersonal exchanges and trade beyond the mountains (p. 72), Appalachian highlanders also transacted in two realms. The Appalachian backcountry “*churned with exchanges*” of goods like furs, whiskey, ginseng, iron, glass, salt, and spices, as well as glassware and books (p. 113, italics in original). Exchanges between Appalachian households and the ecological base resembled the working of a “subsistence economy” but *without* the poverty that often tends to attach itself to that term, as Pierre Clastres (1989) has forcefully observed about Amerindian civilizations. Since the concept of “subsistence economy” often mistakenly suggests poverty, Stoll offers the more adequate concept of *makeshift economy* to represent Appalachian households, insofar as makeshift means “to do the best that one can with whatever one has” (p. 67), and to “live within limits imposed by land and labor” (pp. 75–76). However, taking full advantage of environments

and opportunities for exchange also extended household participation into the wider commercial world, outside of the mountains, where money played an important, but not a determinant, role (p. 75). Stoll invokes Braudel's concept of market economy (pp. 63–65) to observe that “no one has ever willingly lived without exchange” and “market-less households do not exist,” but the household's integration into the market was always partial, and money a mere means for participation in the circuit of simple commodity circulation (Marx's C-M-C circuit), “to sustain and reproduce the household without end” (p. 68). Mountaineers sought money only to acquire useful goods like “dishes, dresses, candy, guns, toys, and tools” (p. 145). Agrarian entrepreneurs emerged in these makeshift economies—like “the farmer who distills whiskey from his own rye, harvested by his family and neighbors, and uses the money to improve his fences or buy a new rifle” (p. 75). The use of money could wreck agrarian systems through a combination of debt and taxation on the one hand, and through the destruction or enclosure of common resources on the other (p. 74). Although Appalachian households willingly participated in this second transactional realm as a matter of convenience, Stoll explains how capitalist coercion and state violence forcibly alienated highlanders from their fundamental ecological base. This political economy and ecology of Appalachia over the past three centuries is compelling and insightful.

Stoll's approach emphasizes Wallerstein's world-systemic relational perspective on the incorporation of peripheral regions into larger worldwide capitalist processes of accumulation—without perhaps doing adequate justice to Wilma Dunaway's works on the incorporation of Appalachia. Stoll's themes resonate strongly with the work of Rebecca Scott (2010) on mountaintop removal in West Virginia. A key focus in Stoll's narrative is the process of “accumulation by dispossession,” a concept introduced by the anthropologist Gillian Hart (2002)—whose work is absent from Stoll's long bibliography—and popularized in David Harvey's (2003) attempt to engage with Giovanni Arrighi's (1994) monumental work on *The long twentieth century*. As Arrighi (2007) explains in his response to Harvey, “accumulation by dispossession” is indeed an effect of the historically recurring process of financial expansions in the world-system, closely related to militarism, wars, and violence practiced on the global South. War-making on American Indians and Appalachian mountain households is central to what Stoll calls “the scramble for Appalachia” (p. xiv) after the US Civil War (1861–1865). The scramble for Appalachia unfolded during one of the historically recurring financial expansions (1870s–1930s) of the world-system that coincided with the late 19th-century “scramble for Africa” by European Great Powers that contemporaries referred to as Imperialism. Stoll's preface claims that his focus is on the Appalachian highlands and West Virginia in particular, whose ordeal he wants to narrate; and yet the net that Stoll casts is much wider than his mark when it seeks to devote almost as much attention to spaces outside of Appalachian America. This may perhaps be both the strength of Stoll's text, in that it offers a comparative historical account that situates the Appalachian ordeal

within a larger world-systemic perspective, as well as its weakness because the global relational perspective that Stoll wants to offer sometimes appears overextended, especially when it dilutes concentration on the Appalachian ordeal itself.

Stoll writes about the situation in which Appalachians find themselves today, as the coal industry continues to fade away despite the Trump Administration's efforts to encourage coal consumption. Ghost towns dot the state of West Virginia, as the population has fallen 40% since 1950 (p. 270). Environmental destruction continues apace, such as the pollution of the Elk and Kanawha Rivers when Freedom Industries dumped toxic chemicals and poisoned drinking water supplies in nine counties (pp. 264–265). Most of the counties in eastern Kentucky, western Virginia, and southern West Virginia qualify as “food deserts”; markets that sell fresh fruit and vegetables are more than 20 miles away or residents lack the means to travel 10 miles to go shopping (p. 269). So what is to be done about all this?

The concluding chapter is rather unfocused and unsatisfying. Stoll argues that Appalachians require “a viable political identity” that requires that “the white working class of the southern mountains ... stop identifying their interests with those of the rich and powerful ... They should also consider abandoning false and imploding racial distinctions” (p. 270). It is difficult to find anything Appalachians have gained by voting for the Republican Party (p. 271). Stoll is familiar with J. D. Vance's (2016) *Hillbilly Elogy*. Stoll suggests that Vance's escape from the vicious cycle of “domestic violence, drug abuse, and hopelessness” in poverty suggests that these problems are rooted in social causes: “They require solutions that do not place the burdens on the sufferers themselves to transcend their circumstances” (Stoll, p. 278). While these are correct assessments, Stoll offers little elaboration on them, especially in the context of the November 2016 presidential elections. Stoll advocates a “reconstituted commons.” He favors democratic socialism as well as “a realm of democratic autonomy” in Appalachia outside of centralized government, sponsored by West Virginia or Kentucky or Tennessee (p. 271). Drawing upon the ideas of various progressive thinkers, including the Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry as well as Lewis Mumford, Gandhi, and Schumacher, Stoll proposes “The Commons Communities Act” (pp. 272–274), based upon collective local governance and land reform. It would preserve and encourage a makeshift economy that mountain farmers are familiar with (p. 275) by emphasizing small-scale food production and recognizing subsistence households as caretakers of ecological landscapes. While these proposals are indeed imaginative, they are not altogether radically novel. Stoll does not connect these proposals with similar proposals made by movements that emerged in 2011 and beyond—like the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Nor does Stoll make connections with a strong anti-prison movement that contests the transformation of the United States into one of the largest prison complexes,

including in the Appalachian highlands. Instead, Stoll concludes, somewhat anti-climactically, that Enclosures are indeed a part of the present moment in the form of a new global land grab gobbling up large expanses of arable land in Africa.

Overall, Stoll develops important new insights into the history and current reality of Appalachia. His work deserves a place among seminal works on Appalachia that complement those of Wilma Dunaway (1996), Shannon Bell (2016), and Rebecca Scott (2010).

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