

SUFFERING INTO TRUTH: AESCHYLUS IN APPALACHIA

By Rick Wilson

The coal mining areas of Appalachia are in the midst of a painful transition. While many options may exist to ease their economic transformation, a more immediate need is to address the social impacts of coal-related controversies, which can pit community members and former allies against each other.

This essay will focus primarily on West Virginia, a state which to a greater extent than any other has been yoked to the coal industry for more than a century. It will begin with reflections on coal controversies past and present and briefly review coal's economic legacy before moving to the present impasse. The current position of denial as propounded by many—but not all—state leaders will be critiqued and more positive approaches will be suggested.

The main point, however, is to challenge oversimplified approaches to these conflicts, whether they are presented by supporters or opponents of the coal industry as these will only exacerbate a conflict that already has the potential to turn violent or at least further damage the already frayed social fabric. The situation in mining communities in Appalachia is tragic and has been for a long time. Recognizing this may be the first step towards a better future.

Finally, I write this as a native and lifelong resident of West Virginia who has been both a participant in and observer of coal related conflicts with friends located all across the spectrum.

I. Fights, good and otherwise

The Rev. Vernon Johns is widely regarded as a forefather of the civil rights movement and a forerunner of Martin Luther King Jr., whom he preceded as pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. He also served for a time as pastor in Charleston, West Virginia.

As a child, Johns' father told him, "If you see a good fight, get in it."

I've always loved that. It reminds me of an observation by the psychologist Erik Erikson that people often try to recreate the first fight in which they felt at home.

The first social justice fight I was able to get involved in at more than a superficial level was the Pittston Coal strike of 1989-1990 in support of the United Mine Workers of America. I had just been hired to do economic justice work for the American Friends Service Committee after having spent several years in poverty myself. I felt like a genie that had been let out of a bottle.

It was a good fight and, yes, I felt totally at home. I didn't have a big impact on it, but it had a big one on me.

It had very little moral ambiguity, which is an essential ingredient in a good fight. It was basically miners, their families, and retirees versus the company that "gave" us the Buffalo Creek disaster of 1972, which killed 125 or so people, wiped out over a dozen communities, and left thousands of people homeless. At issue in the strike were retiree benefits and—imagine this—health care. Union miners, environmentalists, and all kinds of people were on the same side.

One thing that is sometimes sadly different about coal controversies then and those of today is that the current controversies tend to divide people who once were allies. And so far the biggest winners are some of those who worked for years to weaken the labor movement and cut corners on worker safety and environmental practices.

I thought about all this last Labor Day as I headed to Racine, West Virginia, for the United Mine Worker's annual celebration. One county away, Don Blankenship, CEO of Massey Energy and a longtime foe of both unions and environmentalists, spent \$1 million or so on a concert/political rally that featured Sean Hannity, Ted Nugent and Hank Williams Jr. (who was probably the big draw).

The Racine crowd was a bit smaller, but more congenial.

It's no secret that labor unions have played a major role in creating this country's middle class. In West Virginia, the union that has made the biggest historical mark was the UMWA. It has had good times and bad times, but its high points were high indeed.

Founded in 1890, it was an early example of an industrial union, one which aimed to include everyone who worked in and around the mines, regardless of skill level. It was always racially integrated and reached out to immigrant labor, often having several different language committees working in the same big mines.

Organizing in the state's coalfields was dangerous work as the powers of coal barons, hired thugs, and the state joined forces to protect corporate interests. People died. The union fought titanic battles (sometimes literally) for the right to organize to improve conditions for miners.

The UMWA helped give birth to the mass industrial unions of the CIO during the 1930s, which eventually enabled millions of workers to earn a living wage with benefits and enter the middle class. It has also often led the charge for workplace safety. Its members led successful grassroots movements for black lung benefits and union democracy.

Unfortunately, the UMWA has been hit by all kinds of changes over the last several decades, starting with automation and the industry's switch to less labor intensive (and, many would add, more destructive) kinds of mining. It has also been the target of a major union busting campaign that began in the 1980s.

Sometimes the union is singled out for not opposing mountaintop removal, but its position is that its job is to represent members, who don't get to decide under what conditions coal is to be mined. Climate change and its effects on the industry are another challenge facing the union, but at least it hasn't taken a position denying it.

It's a tough situation. Whatever the future holds for coal, I'm convinced that the position and interests of people who work in mining and who live in coal communities would be much stronger and better protected in all these controversies if the union itself was larger and stronger. It would be able to take a stand independent of the coal companies who now claim to represent their interests. A tee shirt worn by many attendees of the Labor Day rally in Racine that day speaks my mind: "Mine it union or leave it in the ground."

I found myself missing the "good old days" when a militant union could shut down coal production in most of the state and when coalfield conflicts united residents and workers against an external opponent rather than pitted them against each other.

But the good old days were never that good.

2. Poverty amid plenty

The paradox of vast natural wealth and human poverty has often been noted in discussions of West Virginia and other resource-rich areas.

The state motto is "Montani semper liberi," or "Mountaineers are always free." But as historian John Alexander Williams wrote in his landmark book *West Virginia: A History*, "Whether or not mountaineers were always free, they were almost always poor." (1)

Many students of West Virginia have traced this poverty to the state's essentially colonial economy, the traits of which Williams described as:

...a high degree of absentee ownership, which took on a new and increasingly controversial form as large corporations displaced the smaller firms and individuals who pioneered in industrial development; heavy dependence upon extractive industries oriented to distant markets; and a relative lack of those manufacturing industries that provided the greatest stimuli to material growth and welfare in the nation at large. (2)

As Jeff Goodell wrote in his recent book, *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future*, "...if coal mining were the sure-fire ticket to wealth and prosperity that many in the industry claim, West Virginians would be dancing on gold paved streets." (3)

The reader may have noticed this has not come to pass.

If it's any consolation, West Virginians aren't alone. Many places rich in natural resources are also poor. As Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano put it in *Open Veins of Latin*

America, "The division of labor among nations is that some specialize in winning and others in losing." (4)

Thanks to the work of Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, there's some pretty hard science to back up the claim that resource-poor countries often have stronger economies than those "gifted" with natural wealth. Their study, first published in 1995 and subsequently updated, is called "Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth."

Sachs is director of The Earth Institute at Columbia University and is a special adviser to the U.N. secretary-general on the Millennium Development Goals of global poverty reduction. He has practiced what he calls "clinical economics" in countries experiencing economic crises around the world and may be best known today as author of books such as *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* and *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*.

Sachs and Warner compared economic growth rates in 95 countries between 1970 and 1990. The opening words of the study lay it out:

One of the surprising features of economic life is that resource-poor economies often vastly outperform resource-rich economies in economic growth... On average, countries which started the period with a high value of resource-based exports to GDP tended to experience slower growth during the following twenty years. (5)

The negative relationship between resource abundance and growth "is present after controlling for a number of other variables introduced in previous growth studies." (6)

Maybe Williams summed it up best:

In its repetitive cycle of boom and bust, its savage exploitation of men and nature, in its seemingly endless series of disasters, the coal industry has brought grief and hardship to all but a small proportion of the people whose lives it touched. (7)

And let's not forget the legacy of corruption and control that usually accompanies a colonial economy and the opportunity cost of a focus on this aspect of the economy at the expense of others.

There's no way at this point to un-ring the bell of 100-plus years of coal colonialism. But there is a danger that the near future of coal country may be even uglier than its past.

3. *History rhymes*

Part of Mark Twain's function in American folklore is, like Yogi Berra, to be the source of many quotations which he may never in fact have written. One such quote applies to the current situation: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

In current coal controversies, which center upon the two different but often intermingled issues of mountaintop removal mining and climate change, the rhyme may be regrettable.

With some notable exceptions, I fear that West Virginia's deciders will react to climate change legislation and any attempted regulation of the coal industry in much the same way rulers in the Deep South responded to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. I'm not suggesting that the issues are similar, but the pattern might be.

First, industry supporters will fiercely resist any changes to our peculiar institutions.

Second, many political leaders will try to outdo each other in posturing as defenders of the status quo--even some who know better.

Third, those inflamed by overheated rhetoric may turn violent.

Fourth, when it's all over, people will wish they'd done things differently.

One state leader who has challenged this approach is Senator Robert C. Byrd, who in December 2009 issued a powerful statement titled "Coal Must Embrace the Future." In it, Byrd stated several truths:

First: "No deliberate effort to do away with the coal industry could ever succeed in Washington because there is no available alternative energy supply that could immediately supplant the use of coal for base load power generation in America. That is a stubborn fact that vexes some in the environmental community, but it is reality..."

Second: "It is also a reality that the practice of mountaintop removal mining has a diminishing constituency in Washington. It is not a widespread method of mining, with its use confined to only three states. Most members of Congress, like most Americans, oppose the practice, and we may not yet fully understand the effects of mountaintop removal mining on the health of our citizens. West Virginians may demonstrate anger toward the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) over mountaintop removal mining, but we risk the very probable consequence of shouting ourselves out of any productive dialogue with EPA and our adversaries in the Congress..."

Third: "To be part of any solution, one must first acknowledge a problem. To deny the mounting science of climate change is to stick our heads in the sand and say 'deal me out.' West Virginia would be much smarter to stay at the table."(8)

Yet at this writing, West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin successfully urged state legislators to pass a resolution opposing climate change legislation. (9) In the immortal words of former CIA director George Tenet, it was a "slam dunk."

4. The limited utility of denial

West Virginia's rulers for the most part have embraced denial in the face of growing concern about climate change and national opposition to mountaintop removal. Given the nation's shifting political landscape, they may meet with some success for a time in delaying or defeating actions aimed at addressing either.

But as powerful as those interests are, they don't control the whole world or the whole nation. Nor do they reflect the opinions of all businesses, even of those connected with the industry.

Michael Morris, President of American Electric Power, has gone on record as supporting climate change legislation and the company has taken its own steps to experiment in reducing emissions. (10) And, while the United Mine Workers has not endorsed any specific legislation, it accepts the reality of climate change.

Preston Chiaro, Chief executive for Energy and Minerals for Rio Tinto, the second largest coal producer in the US, told Congress last year that "Unmanaged climate change is a threat to our assets, our shareholders, and our employees, and also to civil society and political institutions in many of the countries in which we operate and across the globe."(11)

A number of corporations have either broken with or distanced themselves from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce over its resistance to addressing climate change. As of late 2009, the list included Apple, Pacific Gas & Electric, PNM Resources, Nike and Exelon.

James Surowiecki, writing in the New Yorker on Oct. 19, suggested that the new attitude may reflect an understanding that "global warming is simply too big an issue to get wrong, both economically—few companies are really going to benefit from the melting of the polar ice caps—and from a public-relations point of view...global warming isn't just bad for the planet; it's bad for business."(12)

The strategy of denial is likely to be bad for places like West Virginia in the long run, whether it succeeds or fails. You can put Galileo under house arrest, but you can't stop the earth from moving.

Rather than wishing it away, places like West Virginia would be better served if we started thinking and talking now about policy options that would do the least harm to the state, its people and its economy while also limiting the amount of overall damage caused by climate change.

There are no simple solutions to easing our transition to a newer and cleaner economy, but if West Virginia is to take the high road for a change, we need to focus on talent, technology, tolerance and quality of life issues. This means investments in education and infrastructure as well as ensuring that we preserve and protect an environment in which creative and productive people will want to live, work and play.

We could also start taking full advantage of existing opportunities for job creation under the Abandoned Mine Lands program and newer federal initiatives while we're trying to figure out everything else. It might also make sense to consider devoting a portion of severance tax revenue to economic development projects in the coalfields.

State leaders could also vastly improve the situation by calling for calm and not pretending that every questioned permit or proposed regulation is an outright declaration of war.

And instead of blindly denying climate change, we should face up to the probability that the world is going to get serious about it (preferably before it gets serious about the world). A more sensible approach than obstructionism would be to try to get the best deal possible under climate change legislation.

If an eventual carbon tax or cap and trade system is adopted, it would be important to set aside revenues from to offset increases in energy costs to families with low and moderate incomes; provide compensation and retraining to workers who lose jobs in declining energy sectors; and assist areas like southern West Virginia which sacrificed so much during the coal age.

But on the ground in these contested areas something more immediate is needed.

5. Needed: a new narrative

Benjamin Franklin characterized humans as tool-using animals. Since then, we've found we're not the only ones. I'd amend that to say that we are story-making animals. Our minds are hard-wired for narrative. We often tend to fit things into a limited number of pre-existing story forms.

The kind of stories a culture tells itself shapes the way the people within it view the world. We've been overfed on a diet of action movies, where there are definite good guys and bad guys with little or no ambiguity. The good guys usually win and the bad guys lose and there's a happy ending.

The ancient Athenians were wiser. The dominant art form in the heyday of that early democracy was tragedy. Attending them was a religious obligation and a duty of citizenship. While tragedies often used mythic themes, their basic message was more realistic than our standard fare.

In the words of classical scholar Martha Nussbaum, tragedies are about "the fragility of goodness." (13) In them, good people are often undone by forces beyond their control or are caught up in a long chain of events that they don't fully understand or only recognize too late. Tragic conflict is less about good guys versus bad guys than about people caught between conflicting but valid motives that can't be reconciled. The clash is not between right and wrong but between rights and wrongs. The heroes are often flawed and their

opponents often have some right on their side, although both may invite disaster through excess and hubris.

Like real life.

Sophocles' *Antigone* is an instructive example both of conflicting irreconcilable claims and of regrettable responses to them.

Antigone is a daughter of Oedipus. Her brother was slain outside the gates of Thebes for trying to overthrow the ruler Creon. Creon decrees that his body is to be left unburied. For ancient Greeks and other Mediterranean cultures, not being buried was considered to be worse than dying.

Antigone is torn between duties to the state--Creon, after all, was a legitimate ruler and her brother had no claim to power--and those to her conscience, her family and the gods. She can't keep all of them happy. In an act that some have described as world literature's first instance of civil disobedience, she buries her brother but must face the consequences by being buried alive under orders from Creon.

The ruler Creon suffers in turn. His beloved son Haemon was betrothed to Antigone and kills himself when he finds that she is dead, having killed herself in her underground tomb. Creon's wife Eurydice likewise kills herself on learning of the death of her son, cursing Creon with her last breath. In the end, Creon is disgraced and despised by all Greece for his arrogance.

Both Antigone and Creon had their points, but both were over hasty and excessive in their actions.

I assert that the current coal conflicts in West Virginia are more like a tragedy than an action movie. I would like to think that we could avoid an outcome like that of *Antigone*, although that will take some work. But a better outcome is unlikely to happen if people on various sides of the conflict adhere to the action movie frame.

The industry version is that coal mining, including mountaintop removal, is the best thing that ever happened here. Environmentalists or people serious about regulation are serpents in the garden. (Coal is also clean and carbon neutral—a billboard makes it so.) If the industry is allowed to do whatever it wants to, everything will be alright.

On the other hand, I've read essays by environmental writers who, often writing at a safe distance, have an action movie of their own going on. In it, the good guys are a bunch of Appalachian Noble Savages standing as one against the evil coal companies. The assumption is that if the practice just ended today, everything would be great.

I'm not that worried about the evil coal company part (which seems to work sometimes), but the rest is over-simplified. While probably a majority of West Virginians are uncomfortable with the practice to some degree, this issue is contested all the way down.

There are people who work on mountaintop removal jobs who don't like it deep down. And there are people who personally oppose it but accept it for economic or political reasons. Lots of people are conflicted to one degree or another for various reasons.

The happy ending part is also over-simplified either way. I think the results for parts of West Virginia are going to be tragic in any case. If business as usual prevails, there will be more environmental damage, water contamination, floods, coal-related health problems, etc., not to mention more climate change impacts. And if it stops, there will be some job losses and a loss of revenue for public services from coal severance and other taxes.

Some people are going to be hurt either way. Lots of folks are hurting now. Everything is not going to be alright.

This is the realm of the tragic—and has been for the last 100 years or so. Recognizing that is probably the first step to take as we try to figure out everything else.

We're in a tight spot, and the action movie frame isn't likely to help us get out. Nor will hysteria or thuggery.

Greek tragedy may be helpful here as well. The great theme of the Orestes plays of Aeschylus suggests that generations of violence, outrage and excess can finally be brought to an end not by more of the same but by rational deliberation, democracy and the rule of law. If we take that path, there's at least a chance that we may "suffer into wisdom."

It won't be easy. These kinds of things never are. In the words of Aeschylus, "He who learns must suffer...and in our despite, against our own will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God."(14)

1. John Alexander Williams, *West Virginia: A History*, (New York:W.W. Norton, 1984, 1976), p. 200.
2. *ibid*, 150.
3. Jeff Goodell, *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) xx.
4. Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, 1997), 1.
5. Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, "Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth," Center for International Development and Harvard Institute for International Development, Harvard University, 1997, 2.
http://www.cid.harvard.edu/ciddata/warner_files/natresf5.pdf
6. *Ibid*, 2.
7. Williams, 201.
8. Senator Robert C. Byrd, "Coal Must Embrace the Future."
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11. Preston Chiaro, "Testimony of Preston Chiaro on behalf of Rio Tinto Before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Legislative Hearing on S. 1733, Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act," Oct. 29, 2009, p.1.
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12. James Surowiecki, "Exit Through Lobby," The New Yorker, Oct. 19, 2009.
http://www.newyorker.com/talk/financial/2009/10/19/091019ta_talk_surowiecki
13. cf. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 2001).
14. Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964, 1983,1993). p. 52.