

Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2017.
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Until recently, Appalachia was not a place that registered often in the wider American consciousness; however, the region has gotten more attention as people (read: Democratic voters) try to understand the Trump voter. Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016), Elizabeth Catts's *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018), and, most famously, J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elogy* (2016) all tackle some version of the same question: what made Appalachia Appalachia? Their answers, respectively, focus on the rhetorical creation of class, the diversity of the Appalachian experience, and, regrettably, a culture of irresponsibility. In *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*, historian Steven Stoll gives us a somewhat different answer to this question. His argument is that Appalachia's socioeconomic challenges result primarily from the enclosure of its forests and fields, first by wealthy landowners, then by industry. And Stoll maintains, further, that we should care because this process of enclosure and dispossession has been – and continues to be – repeated around the globe. Indeed, his overarching thesis seems to be that the history of the Appalachian smallholder is the history of peasants everywhere.

Stoll opens *Ramp Hollow* by telling us that “this is a book about an American settler culture, how its people hunted, foraged, farmed, and gardened, and how they lost their land” and its central event is the “scramble for Appalachia” (p.xiii-xiv). But first, he gives us some context for this scramble. Chapter 1 functions as an extended introduction to the book. In it, we learn how Stoll imagines Appalachia (as a region with a shared economic history), how others have imagined Appalachia (as poor region that, depending on your point of view, was either degenerate or charmingly archaic), and why poverty is so prevalent in the region (because the powerful were willing to push those “degenerate” Appalachians to the side). In Chapter 2, Stoll lays more groundwork for the text. He explains how academics have theorized peasants and their

development, he recounts the history of agriculture in the United States, and he provides a remarkably thorough history of capitalism globally.

Chapters 3 and 4 come together to form an in-depth history of dispossession in Appalachia – more specifically, in western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. In these chapters, Stoll describes how Appalachian communities first resisted outsiders’ attempts to reel them into the United States’ increasingly industrial fold (e.g. by rebelling against Alexander Hamilton’s Whiskey Tax). However, by the late 19th century, these same communities were living in a landscape that had been logged, mined, and sold off to coal companies. Stoll does an excellent job accounting for this transition. He details how, exactly, wealthy nonresident landowners such as George Washington acquired millions of acres of land in Appalachia; how squatting became a regional norm and, initially, was upheld by local courts and county records offices; and how the rising political power of industrialists led to a massive transfer of land ownership, as industry bought off judges, lobbied lawmakers, and purchased mineral rights out from under the feet of local farmers. In the end, Stoll argues, this rapid industrialization led to the depletion of the forest commons, which further undermined Appalachian livelihoods.

Chapter 5 is, in title even, an “interlude”. In this chapter, Stoll uses art and literature to examine agricultural change. More specifically, he considers how the paintings of Homer, Hovenden, and Inness, and the essays of Thoreau and Emerson, demonstrate the loss of the 19th century agrarian lifestyle in the broader United States. Then, in Chapter 6, we return to Appalachian history and shift our focus to 20th century company towns – and, more precisely, the household gardens in these company towns. Here Stoll argues that gardens were both sources of subsistence for mining families *and* props for the brutal operations of the company town economy. In essence, Stoll is nodding to regulation theory: social relations and structures, including your cultivated tomatoes, are internal to and a support for capitalism (Peck 2009).

The final chapter, Chapter 7, gives us many things: a summary of 20th century development economics; a history of the Green Revolution in Southeast Asia; an overview of the work of the Appalachian Regional Commission; evidence of Appalachia’s current socioeconomic and environmental marginalization; a case study of land-grabbing in Mali; and,

perhaps most interestingly, Stoll's bold, unconventional proposal to reinvigorate Appalachia. He calls this proposal "The Commons Communities Act". In it, he advocates for a "reconstituted commons", wherein people live "by hunting and gardening as part of a social project that ... [encourages] political participation" (p.271). The act itself is fairly detailed, creating commonly-held land, conservation easements, public services and education paid for by a tax on the top 1% of American households and an Industrial Abandonment Tax, and local food systems (p.272-274). And, as much as it reads like a policy document, Stoll maintains that this proposal is a "thought experiment" intended to "reconnect communities and landscapes in a structure for sustaining both" (p. 275).

In sum, *Ramp Hollow* covers a lot of ground. Indeed, perhaps the most impressive thing about the book is Stoll's breadth of research. He clearly knows his way around an archive – he digs up everything from an obscure play performed in 1805 in Charleston, South Carolina to logging data from the turn of the 20th century to bolster his arguments. He also jumps back and forth across disciplines with dexterity. His analysis of Winslow Homer's painting *Veteran in a New Field* is just as meticulous as his explanation of the enclosure of the commons in 18th century England. The book, therefore, is a treat for polymaths.

There is also a great deal in *Ramp Hollow* for geographers. Geography is, in fact, one of the disciplines Stoll draws from heavily. With all of the references to von Thünen, Semple, Huntington, and Sauer, I almost felt like I was back in my graduate History of Geographic Thought course. The theses of political ecology are particularly well-represented here, both in the book's overarching message and in its finer details. Stoll, for example, describes the loss of the Appalachian commons as one of many accumulations via dispossession:

Enclosure has never stopped. The same lordly families who seized the common lands invested in plantations on the island of Jamaica and in the Tidewater counties of Virginia. What else were the wars against the Cherokee and the Sioux but acts of accumulation by dispossession? Enclosure continues today in Africa, where corporations lease land from financially fragile governments to produce sugar and rice. (p.60-61)

He celebrates swidden agriculture and argues that we need to maintain forest livelihoods, while, at the same time, referencing anthropologist Michael Dove's work to explain that

agrarians use markets. They have sold rubber, whiskey, quinoa, coffee, and textiles without becoming dependent on money. If we are to understand settlers, peasants, campesinos, and smallholders, we have to reject the falsehoods that they lived in isolation and that a makeshift economy is a bubble that bursts whenever it comes into contact with the "outside world". (p. 72)

And his analysis of coal company household gardens would fit right in with Julie Guthman's arguments about capitalism, the food system, and privilege in *Weighing In* (2011). I could keep listing examples, but the point is: *Ramp Hollow* reads very much like a densely-historical political ecology text.

In my view, *Ramp Hollow* is a successful book in this regard. It adds to the work other Appalachian scholars, such as Kathryn Newfont (e.g. 2012), Donald Davis (e.g. 2005), Ronald Eller (e.g. 1982), and Mary Hufford (e.g. 2002), have done to shift our focus to the capitalist accumulation of Appalachia's resources, the privatization of its commons, and the power wielded in it by outside corporations and organizations, which have all helped to quite literally remake Appalachia. To this literature, Stoll adds a wider lens on dispossession. He connects the experience of Appalachian communities to the experiences of Malagasy farmers, Malian villagers, Filipino rice growers, and the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Plains nations in the United States, just to name a few. In this way, he demonstrates how agrarians, who are often perceived as backward, are nearly always bulldozed by "development".

Still, I wish Stoll could have gotten to this thesis more *efficiently*. I am not sure how necessary the deep dives into Daniel Boone's biography, Thoreau's philosophy and legacy, the novels of John Fox, or even von Thünen's geographic models are. And the breadth of his research, while interesting, made a number of the chapters feel a bit disjointed. As I noted earlier,

for example, Chapter 1 touches on everything from the history of capitalism to global peasant livelihoods to the spread of yeoman farmers in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. And if an entire chapter is an “Interlude” to the rest of the text, it is worth asking whether the inclusion of this parenthetical information is warranted. I, for one, would not have missed the 35-page Chapter 5.

The wide-ranging nature of the text also begs the question: who is *Ramp Hollow* for? Sometimes it reads as though it was intended, like Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* and Isenberg’s *White Trash*, for a general audience with interests in Appalachian history and politics – the prose is certainly clear and, often, lively enough for all readers. At the same time, I doubt that most of the public is interested in academic debates about Ralph Waldo Emerson or theories of cultural formation. Meanwhile, most academics who are interested in the enclosure of the commons do not need such a comprehensive explanation of capitalism. I can only assume, then, that the target audience was purposefully left wide open, and Stoll’s hope is that any potential reader will be able to find what they need in the book.

This does not mean that all readers will be convinced by *Ramp Hollow*. I readily admit that, even as a human-environment geographer who studies forest livelihoods in Appalachia (and therefore a sympathetic audience for Stoll’s argument), I found myself questioning some of the book’s claims. For example, some of the evidence, starting with the comparison of “[t]he log cabin in the high meadow and the tar paper shanty in the industrial hollow” near Morgantown, West Virginia in the Preface (p.xvii), seems to be cherry-picked and overly-convenient. Similarly, Stoll explains Alexander Hamilton’s choice to tax whiskey thusly: “He knew that while most things people made stayed close to home, whiskey traveled and money returned” (p.114). Yet his only support for this argument is the presence of James Steuart’s *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy*, which declares that local barter is a primitive precursor to monetized regional trade, on Hamilton’s bookshelf. As such, I often wished that Stoll would have followed the advice I give my students: introduce naysayers into your writing. Acknowledge that there might be opposition to your argument and address it.

This is especially true when it comes to Stoll's characterization of Appalachian people and their perspectives. To be clear, I do not mean to imply that Stoll *mischaracterizes* Appalachian people and their perspectives. Instead, I would say that he insufficiently represents the *range* of Appalachian perspectives that exist today and, I am sure, existed in the past. For example, I suspect that some 19th century Appalachians would not agree that economic development, even in its most predictable, fraught forms, was "something they never asked for" (p.42). Nor do I think all West Virginians today would agree with Stoll's claim that "as long as West Virginians continue to blame themselves for everything and yield their power as citizens, nothing will improve" (p.268). This particular claim follows one of the few lengthy quotes Stoll *does* include from an Appalachian resident: a denouncement of the coal industry by a professor of English at a West Virginia university. All this is to say, I would love to hear from Appalachian people more in *Ramp Hollow*. What did they think of the changes on the landscape? What did they see as the challenges and opportunities of industry? How were they agents in this story, as opposed to people things happened to?

But for all of its weaker points and meanderings, *Ramp Hollow* sends us an ultimately coherent message about dispossession – both in Appalachia and in rural communities globally. The book takes agrarian livelihoods and communal land use seriously, and it forces its readers to see that "we will fail to ask the right questions if we are deceived into thinking that some people have no history, that their poverty is inherent, its causes self evident" (p.31). Here, Stoll does ask the right questions, and I would love to see his answers, which are much more satisfying than the answers provided by Vance's widely-read *Hillbilly Elegy*, inspire discussion and debate in Appalachian homes, churches, and city halls. More specifically, I recommend *Ramp Hollow* – and, in particular, Chapters 3, 4, and 7 – to Appalachian scholars, activists, and concerned citizens, or to anyone with an interest in the commons.

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