

***After Coal: Stories of Survival in Appalachia and Wales* Tom Hansell – 2018.**

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Intended as a narrative companion for the documentary film *After Coal* (2016), directed and produced by Tom Hansell, this book is a well-documented tribute to an impressive exchange between coal-mining communities of Appalachia and Wales, confronted in the 20th and 21st century with the challenges of de-industrialization and the pressure to reinvent themselves.

The focus of the “After Coal” project are the mining communities at risk, hit by the decline of coal exploitation, by globalization and free market, and by environmental policies. Impacted by massive job loss, the communities reached a turning point, in Wales after the massive strike of 1984-1985, and in Appalachia after 2000. Now they struggle to find paths for economic, social, and cultural survival, dealing with social trauma, personal and collective identity trauma, and an urgent need for reconstruction.

The starting point of this new phase of the ongoing transatlantic connection is a question that haunts the author and the Appalachian communities as well, addressed in the “Introduction:” in a place dominated for generations by a single industry, what is to be done when this industry fails to provide jobs? Other important questions, developing from this one, arose during documentation, signalling a state of serious social tensions in coal-dominated communities: What can be done if federal legislation on clean air and clean water make coal mining too expensive, therefore impacting miners’ jobs? How to survive on a global market dominated by cheaper coal, extracted with little to no safety measures? How would a post-coal economy look like? The book investigates not only several survival strategies, as examples of success and good practices, but also the

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willingness of people and communities alike to undergo profound changes in their core identity.

The main research question, uttered by miners, also echoes Tom Hansell's personal quest from individual self-sufficiency to collective self-sustainability, illustrating a classic case of applied anthropology. Although not an anthropologist *per se*, Tom Hansell conducts a thorough field research, employing participant observation, extended interviews, life history of relevant people, and conversations, building ample spaces in his book for us to hear people's voices. The visual aspect of the book is outstanding, contributing to a better experience of life in coal communities, whether as stills from his documentary, or as historic photographs.

The *After Coal* documentary took more than five years to create, implying a shift from searching a concrete solution to encouraging ongoing conversations about regeneration in former coal-mining communities, supported through mutual participation in transatlantic meetings, projects, conferences, festivals.

It is important that the reader understands why this comparison between Appalachia and Wales was made in the beginning, and what the roots of the current project were. Tom Hansell dedicated to these matters two well-informed chapters, "Why Appalachia and Wales?" and "Historical Context," explaining the connection with the previous project, developed in the 1970s and conducted by two American scholars, John Gaventa and Helen M. Lewis, together with Richard Greatrex, a British cinematographer. The incentive for videotaping the miners' everyday life was the Welsh miners' strike in 1974. Back then, it was intended as a document to initiate an exchange with American striking miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. As John Gaventa recollected his experience in a short documentary *Keep your Eyes on the Scale* (2015), a video by Tom Hansell, Pat Beaver and Angela Wiley, at the beginning was indeed a matter of exchanging videotapes between the communities involved, followed a few years later by actual visits of Welsh miners to the United States, hosted by the Appalachian State University. "The Welsh Tapes," documenting the last generation of Wales's mining communities, were donated by Helen M. Lewis to Appalachian State University and constituted the foundation for the "After Coal" project, with a team formed by Tom Hansell, Pat Beaver, from the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University, labor historian Hywel Francis, and Mair Francis, founder of DOVE, who introduced the author to the Welsh valleys.

Two additional instructive timelines about the comparison between the histories of Central Appalachia and South Wales from 1750 to 2014 (by Angela Wiley) and the Welsh and Appalachian coalfield exchange (2010-16) visually emphasize the historical landmarks of these two regions, revealing a delayed

recognizable common pattern: the intensive exploitation of resources triggered an economic boom and better wages, but as more efficient mechanized means of extracting coal developed, jobs already started to decline. Fluctuation in wages and union rights depended also on important historical events, such as the two World Wars, where there was a significant increase on the demand of coal, or the oil embargo in the 1970s, showing that the future of coal communities is always intertwined with global events. In the current dispute between globalism and localism, dangerous for channeling existing social tensions, easily inflamed local pride can benefit from the exchange with communities in similar conditions, as exerting a “constructive internationalism” (Unger 2012).

That is why the Welsh example is so powerful, not as a lesson to mimic, but more as an awareness of the attitude needed. Tom Hansell’s book also represents a profound understanding of how factors like culture, place, and politics influenced the profile of the mining regions he is documenting. The differences seem to be more important than similarities in the attempt to develop a post-coal economy. Appalachia poses even more challenges through its geography, coordination of local governances with the federal government, lack of powerful miners’ unions, and land owned by outside corporations.

Yet communities willing to reinvent themselves have found solutions, carefully documented by Tom Hansell in two concurrent chapters, “Exploring regeneration” and “Back in the USA.” In Wales, the grass root initiatives that coagulated the social fabric in the mining communities, heavily disrupted after the 1984-85 strike, focused on women empowerment (DOVE Workshop, Limited, founded by miners’ wives supporting their husbands during the strike, offering social services like education, nursery facilities, small catering, a café), environmental regeneration (Call of the Wild, a training development company; other tourism and mountain bike centres), miners’ empowerment (miners bought Tower colliery with their severance money, operating the mine until all coal was extracted in 2008).

More important are the concepts highlighted by Tom Hansell, used to define the possibilities created by the political and economical decisional factors for regeneration, possibilities consistent with the difference in political status of Wales compared to Appalachia, such as: community regeneration (the communities should benefit from the investments, social enterprise and community funds), social justice (the collective responsibility that people should have a decent quality of life), and grass roots initiatives (where the government is not imposing, is facilitating). As in Appalachia, societal tensions are likely to appear in the context of environmental changes, over decisions connected to the installation of wind farms over Wales’s ridges. But through community regeneration, the government can

request an investor to develop long term benefits for that community affected by the impact of the project.

Discussing life after coal in Appalachia proves to be extremely difficult, as demonstrated by Tom Hansell's powerful first-hand account of participant observation at a rally promoting coal jobs. The political rhetoric of "war on coal" makes almost impossible to openly discuss what is best for the mining communities. Putting food on table through mining but also respecting the environment seem to be two opposite stances and actions. Through a careful investigation, Tom Hansell proves that the pro-coal and anti-coal rhetoric can be surpassed. The project and the documentary *After Coal* are not about finding or imposing solutions, but about documenting the solutions communities themselves have already found, as well as making space for conversation to increase the diversification of the Appalachian economy.

Art can be such a safe space, where participants can share their different stories, can talk about otherwise taboo subjects, and, ultimately, re-discuss their individual and collective identity to be more than just connected to coal, as it is the case of Higher Ground of Harlan County, launched in 2001. Founded in 1969, Appalshop (Appalachian Community Film Workshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky) provided not only arts and media education, but also careers, transforming Appalshop in a creative hub that survived more than 50 years, more than any coal company, linking art to economy in an intriguing way. Southern Appalachian Labor School, SALS, created in 1977 at West Virginia Institute of Technology in Fayette County, is running infrastructure projects as response to the need of affordable and safe housing in the region. Grow Appalachia project from Berea College, promotes food, nutrition, and sustainable farming practices in former mining communities from Ohio to Tennessee, but it still needs to surpass the tensions between miners and environmentalists.

The final chapters of the book introduce responsibility as an important factor in approaching these communities at risk, as the miners' social group has a cohesive force, with a disruptive potential owed partially to their work culture. These in-depth documented responses of community regeneration prove that society would benefit if all decisional factors, local and federal, in Appalachia, Wales, or elsewhere, would adhere to the principle of "just transition," celebrating local culture and investing in communities, developing opportunities for people, not abandoning them.