



# Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley

*John Gaventa*

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Explains to outsiders the conflicts between the financial interests of the coal and land companies, and the moral rights of the vulnerable mountaineers.

## Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley Details

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## From Reader Review Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley for online ebook

### Andrea says

A fascinating and useful way to look at power--how it is formed and how it impacts those who do not have any. As any organizer, I have long struggled with my anger at other people's blame of the poor for apathy or ignorance, this is a framework to more critically think through quiescence and its many levels. It is clearly much grounded in practice and the daily lives of individuals (you'd know that even without knowing Gaventa's role as the director of the New Highlander Center), and also serves as a rather gripping narrative of Appalachia's coal mining town and hollers. It builds on Freire a bit as well...highly recommended.

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### Tom says

This book was assigned reading in a course on Political Culture. Many of the books were impenetrable (but then again I am positivist) but several of the books were quite good. And the one that made the biggest impression on me was this one. Gaventa is a passionate and lucid writer, and this book--about the powerlessness of Appalachian coal miners vis a vis both the coal company and their union--is one of the finest explanations of the subtle "third face of power" that is more likely to characterized power relations in liberal democracies than are typical coercive types of power (the "two faces" commonly discussed). This book helps us explain not only why some people are powerless, but how their very powerlessness reinforces their inability to gain some power against those who limit their actions. A remarkable and readable work of social science.

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### Miranda says

"Rebellion, to be successful, must both confront power and overcome the accumulated effects of powerlessness."

Yeah. That.

This book doesn't solve anything -- the quote above might be the closest you get to a "what next" payoff -- but that's not the point. The point is that people who are poor and uneducated are not stupid or weak. It really tried to set out what you know is true if you work in poverty realms at all -- that each aspect of poverty and powerlessness reinforces every other aspect. And that for the powerful to maintain power takes not a lot of effort.

It's not just the powerful setting the agenda. It's them writing the language the agenda's written in.

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### Jeremy says

I was expecting this book to be a good, informative analysis of working class Appalachia, but it completely exceeded my expectations in every way. To say I was blown away by it would likely be a bit of an

understatement.

If you can make it past the theory- and jargon-heavy first chapter (which ends up being tremendously useful later on) you will be rewarded with not only a history of Central Appalachian working class struggles, or their often apparent absence, but also with a new and unique way of looking at power relations and the theory behind them. The primary question the book seeks to explore is why, in the face of obvious abuse, oppression, and exploitation of coal miner at the hands of the coal companies, their local governments, and the unions that allegedly represent their interests, do the coal miners and other residents in the Clear Fork Valley NOT rebel. Not just that, but often they seem to be complicit in the very processes that keep them in a position of powerlessness and poverty. This opens up Gaventa's ideas of a new way of analyzing power relations, called a third-dimensional approach, that suggests the miners and their neighbors aren't idly accepting their fate and gives some hope that, if they are ever able to strike at the roots of the power structure in their environment, there can be hope for meaningful change.

It's, at times, a dark, frustrating, and deeply upsetting book. It also offers, however, a beacon of hope for the struggles the people of Central Appalachia, and indeed the millions of working class people around the world who find themselves in strikingly similar situations.

If you are at all interested in the post-Foucault theory of power relations, working class struggles, or Appalachian history, you NEED to read this book. Borrow mine if you must, but read it, and read it now!

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### **Sharon says**

This was such an interesting perspective on how the people who have power keep it, even when they don't have numbers or moral authority on their side. Gaventa shows how the powerful dominate the powerless not just through sheer force, but by actually using the strengths of the powerless (in this case, their strong family loyalties and attachments to the region) against them. It's dense, but very worth reading, especially during an election year.

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### **Amanda J says**

Read this for a Political Science senior seminar on Power in Politics. Really enjoyed the class and this book fit the material nicely as a case study.

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### **Nigel Tskitishvili says**

lacks any real discussion of race (or even why race is not important)

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### **Ronald Barba says**

Thought about this book today while reading (another) article on Trump and the working class. Read this book for a graduate-level political theory course (for which I was not at all qualified to take as an undergrad) and it was definitely one of the more standout books on social and political authority.

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### **Kirsten says**

Compassionate and thought-provoking account of the interlocking nature of power and powerlessness. it has strong theory, creative methodology, and real respect and concern for the people at the center of the study.

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### **Tom Birkland says**

This is a wonderful book that explains why people in an Appalachian coal mining region were unable to break free of the power exerted over them by the mining company and the mining unions. This book is one of the best discussions of political and social power I have ever read; those who have read work on the "third face of power" will find this book extremely interesting and useful. I will write more about this when I have time, but I can say this: this is one of the most interesting books I read during my graduate school career.

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### **Flint says**

This book changed my whole world view when it came to politics. It had a profound effect on me, giving me a better idea of who I was, where I came from and what created the situation of the community around me. In addition to giving me tools to understand what had happened and was happening, it gave me the first suggestions of the kind of things needed to do to change things. Most importantly, that understanding also gave me something very important... hope.

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### **Tracy Gwendolyn says**

Great, ultimately uplifting, study of power.

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### **Adamskmckenzie says**

Gaventa performs well at providing an academic analysis of the development and maintenance of power relationships in the Appalachian region. With equal skill, he provides a qualitative history of the relevant aspects of the region, such as they way in which capital based in London and New York inserted proxies in to the local political and cultural institutions to maintain their control of the region's resources.

The nature of capital's control over property is nothing new. Gaventa is most poignant when he outlines the way in which cultural stereotypes of hill people have been, and remain, useful in deflecting attention from injustice in the region.

That said, for those not interested in social research methodology (congratulations, you probably can form meaningful relationships) the later chapters will be more enjoyable and don't necessarily require the methodological buildup of the early chapters.

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## Heather Noggle says

My first solid understandings of unions and where they're effective...and necessary.

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## Jack says

I first read Gaventa's *Power and Powerlessness* for an undergraduate political theory class. It left a mark on me then, as I took this class during the 2008 Presidential campaign. The book spoke to a question that plagued me during that time, namely why it seems that so many people vote and act in a manner that appears contrary to their interests.

Now, in the 2012 campaign season, I decided to reread the book. Gaventa touches on that question in it, but he hardly limits his analysis to that. The focus of his book is the effect power has on those who don't have it. He breaks his analysis down into three dimensions of power: the first is direct bargaining and participation, the second is the exclusion of the powerless from that bargaining process and/or agenda-setting by the powerful, and the third is the internalization of the ideals, values, and preferences of the dominant by the dominated. All of this is enveloped in a case study of a Central Appalachian coal mining community.

The analysis is compelling. Power is portrayed here as a shaping force, capable of producing its own legitimacy - whether it be wielded by mine owners, absentee corporations, local elites, or even union bosses. Gaventa goes to great lengths to demonstrate how the miners' acceptance of their miserable lot is not a natural or inevitable state of affairs, but rather one imposed and maintained through the operation of power.

To quote some of his conclusion: "...the total impact of a power relationship is more than the sum of its parts. Power serves to create power. Powerlessness serves to re-enforce powerlessness. Power relationships, once established, are self-sustaining."

This is a compelling book with analysis which remains relevant 30 years after it was first written. The particular circumstances of the miners may have changed since then, but the overall points being made about power, powerlessness, and the maintenance of inequality is a lesson for us still.

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