



---

## **Book Review**

**Jen Schneider, Steve Schwarze, Peter K. Bsumek, and Jennifer Peeples, *Under Pressure: Coal Industry Rhetoric and Neoliberalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; ISBN: 9781137533142.**

Reviewed by

**Violeta Stojičić**

University of Niš, Serbia

E-mail: [stojiciviki@gmail.com](mailto:stojiciviki@gmail.com)

As the authors say in the Preface, once you hear of the Mountaintop Removal process (MTR), it is impossible not to care about it. It is the process in which the tops of mountains in Appalachia are literally dynamited open so that coal can easily be extracted. Undoubtedly, the name of the process itself provokes the readers' concern, not to mention the devastating environmental and health impacts it causes. When we come to think of such an example of what an industry does to exploit available resources for profit, it is no wonder that a group of smart and concerned people sat down to write a book on rhetorical instruments utilized by coal industry to justify its actions.

In Chapter 1: *Under Pressure*, the writers methodically describe the concepts, notions, subject matter and the methodology in the study. They investigate the rhetorical strategies used by the coal industry in the US by which it advances its interests while under economic and environmental pressures. In the investigation, they rely upon environmental communication, rhetoric and cultural studies. The five rhetorical strategies identified and discussed are the following: Industrial Apocalyptic, Corporate Ventriloquism, The Technological Shell Game, The Hypocrite's Trap, and Energy Utopia. The focus is on the coal industry's advocacy in the US because there is a shared opinion that the lack of US leadership on climate change is the reason why the international community has failed to reach an agreement on climate change. Most importantly, coal has hindered the progress on climate change action, which is why its advocacy is rhetorically significant. Coal industry advocacy is explored from a rhetorical perspective; the authors analyse how the advocacy contributes to concrete outcomes and at the same time shapes the beliefs and values related to cultural common sense of neoliberalism. The writers have noted that coal's corporate rhetoric is not only counter-environmentalist, but that it has a strategy of presenting itself as constructive.

Chapter 2 deals with Industrial Apocalyptic. In the rhetoric of coal industry, Industrial

Apocalyptic is an aggressive rhetorical move by which the industry strives to deny public rhetorical space to alternative voices, which makes it the voice of reason in a moment of crisis. Furthermore, the move known as the burlesque turn in industrial apocalyptic has become a strategy that makes neoliberalism the favoured mode of rationality because opponents are ridiculed by making their actions seem absurd.

In Chapter 3 the writers discuss Corporate Ventriloquism, a rhetorical process by which corporations transmit messages through other entities, which they have themselves produced, in order to construct alternative ethos, voice, or identity. In this manner, the industry adopts elements of neoliberal ideology and adapts them to specific cultural and economic circumstances. Taking the example of the corporate ventriloquism used in Appalachia, it is found that symbols and language associated with *neoconservatism* are used to construct the corporate voice under *neoliberalism* so that such free-market ideologies seem inseparable from patriotism, “family values,” and the “American way of life.” (p. 54). This enables the coal industry to ease the tension between corporate citizenship and corporate profits.

Chapter 4 examines The Technological Shell Game. This is a rhetorical process of misdirection that rests on ambiguity about the feasibility, costs, and successful implementation of technologies. It is used to divert public attention from pollution and health concerns through aspirational rhetoric in order to inspire confidence in technology as a solution to carbon emissions. The shell game is not only mystification, but it rhetorically constructs industry as responsible and innovative. The three rhetorical moves used by clean coal are the following: (a) claim that a technology exists, is already in use, and works to solve the problem; (b) point to the importance of technological innovation as a risk-management strategy; and (c) erase conflict from regulatory history, so as to emphasize the industry’s willingness to regulate itself (p. 93).

Chapter 5 is concerned with The Hypocrite’s Trap. It is a set of interrelated arguments intended to disarm critics of industries that provide particular goods or technologies based on the critics’ own consumption of or reliance on those goods. There are three aspects of this strategy. First, the rhetoric represents divestment activists as ignorant of how the world works. It makes them seem naïve, but at the same time positions market knowledge as the only form of knowledge that matters. Second, divestment activists are represented as supportive of fossil fuel use due to the fact that they themselves consume fossil fuel-based products as individual consumers responsible for sustaining the fossil-fuelled world. Third, the industry shames divestment activists as “hypocrites,” stripping the movement of its moral power, whereby the industry reclaims its moral authority. The hypocrite’s trap is central to delegitimizing collective action against fossil fuel consumption.

Energy Utopia is discussed in Chapter 6. It is a set of rhetorical appeals that depicts a particular energy source as crucial in providing a “good life”, which rises above the conflicts of environment, justice, and politics. Energy utopia offered by coal industry highlights the hope of eradicating global poverty through the expansion of coal-fired energy production; at the same time, it wards off anxieties about climate change and obscures issues of energy

justice. It appeals to a “cultural politics of life” that identifies coal use with moral progress. In ideological terms, the moves transform the market’s failure to provide affordable electricity for some parts of the world into an opportunity for heroism of the elites, who then appear capable of solving the problem of poverty by expanding markets for coal. However, utopian rhetoric masks the fact that market-driven solutions cannot solve social problems of those who do not have the resources to participate in the market.

In Chapter 7 the writers propose how neoliberalism can be contradicted. Namely, while coal’s corporate advocacy has turned to neoliberal rhetoric to resist pressures, the analysis of the rhetoric suggests the ways in which scholars and activists might undermine both coal and neoliberalism. The authors also indicate that the identification of the rhetorical strategies that advance fossil fuel interests through neoliberal ideology can provide a shared vocabulary for scholarly criticism and public resistance not only in relation to the coal industry but also in relation to the project of neoliberalism.

To conclude, this book is engagingly written. It is the result of *a methodical and exhaustive research process and should represent an example of the best practice in scholarly inquiry*. As for the content, it could be interesting for European audience, who are stressed not only by economic or environmental worries, but by a looming energy crisis.