

Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh of Appalachia: A geography of power and extraction

Executive Summary

Politicians, policy-makers, city boosters, and others tend to promote Pittsburgh as representative for the entire Appalachian region or to ignore the many ways that the city and region are connected. But historically and today, powerful public and private interests based in Pittsburgh shape environmental and economic outcomes in Appalachia. This uneven power relationship affects who benefits and who loses across the region.

The histories of coal and water in the industrial era of the late 1800s and the Pittsburgh Renaissance in the mid-to-late 1900s illustrate a pattern where powerful interests based in Pittsburgh transformed the region to their benefit. They extracted value from the land and labor while avoiding the immediate social, environmental, and health costs of resource extraction and water management. Areas in the region became “sacrifice zones” for the city.

The recent expansion in natural gas extraction demonstrates a similar pattern where the region acts as a sacrifice zone for companies based in or near Pittsburgh or out of state. Over the last 10–15 years, natural gas extraction has grown substantially throughout northeast and southwest Pennsylvania, north-central West Virginia, and southeastern Ohio. This industry ties the region together through new and expanded infrastructure. Natural gas companies based in or near Pittsburgh or outside the region altogether have transformed communities and environments far away from their headquarters. Those companies and their white-collar workers have reaped the benefits of this extraction without suffering its direct and immediate negative impacts.

The expansion of the natural gas and petrochemical industries threatens the city and region’s future. More multinational corporations based outside of the region (and country) are investing in new large-scale petrochemical facilities and infrastructure. This expansion will transform the entire region—including the city—into a sacrifice zone for the global petrochemical industry.

Pittsburgh, the Paris of Appalachia, is not Paris, a global metropolis. Instead, Pittsburgh is the Pittsburgh of Appalachia, a city of medium political and economic power that dominates the region around it. Thinking about the city and region in this broader way forces us to rethink how we are connected environmentally, economically, politically, and socially. Such an interconnected approach also requires recognizing how Pittsburgh and the region fit into national and global processes, and how we can build alliances between the city and region to push for a mutually beneficial future.