

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Gwen Ottinger, *Refining Expertise: How Responsible Engineers Subvert Environmental Justice Challenges*, New York: New York University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780814762387 (paper); ISBN: 9780814762370 (cloth)

In 1996 the privately owned Enterprise Oil Consortium announced that it had discovered a significant offshore gas reserve, later to become known as the Corrib Gas Field, about 80km from the Mayo coastline in Ireland. Shell was and is one of the leaders of this consortium. As the scale and potential profitability of the discovery became apparent, various agencies within the Irish state, including government departments, ministers, and local authorities, worked to ensure that Shell and its partners would be facilitated in their efforts to “situate a gas-processing refinery and associated high-pressure pipeline nine kilometres inland” (Garavan 2010: 132). Unsurprisingly given the health risks linked to such a project, its likely impact on indigenous agriculture and fishing, its destructive consequences for habitats, wildlife, and the natural environment, and the failure of the Irish government to protect the economic interests of its population as it negotiated this “great oil and gas giveaway” (Dublin Shell to Sea 2009: 2), a community based campaign of opposition centred around the rural parishes and town-lands of North Mayo was born. The campaign has been on-going for over a decade, despite peaks and troughs of solidarity, alliances, and public attention, and in its ability to shape the actions of key corporate and state decision-makers.

In other places and in other communities, each with their own specific environmental, social, and cultural dynamics, broadly similar campaigns have been emerging. Big pharma, oil, gas, and other extractive industries become the focus of resistance and opposition as the by now “familiar story of David vs Goliath, of truth vs power” (p.2) plays out. However, the Shell/North Mayo narrative complicates that familiar story somewhat. Instead of two unequally proportioned or resourced rivals facing up to each other in direct combat, community campaigners and their supporters have had to contend with a range of

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adversaries; among them, fickle political allies, unsympathetic journalists, and, crucially, various arms of the state and its forces of law and order. With the state inserting itself in the conflict, as Ralph Miliband (1973) might have said, decisively on one side rather than the other, protesters have experienced arrest, imprisonment, assault, and intimidation. As noted by human rights academic Vicky Conway in 2010, “serious questions are emerging about how the Shell to Sea Campaign is being policed but more broadly about how the campaigners’ actions are being criminalised while Shell can continue to breach laws and regulations without sanction”.

Gwen Ottinger’s *Refining Expertise: How Responsible Engineers Subvert Environmental Justice Challenges* also upends the conventions of the David vs Goliath story. Introducing a “plot twist” on page two she explains that in her case-study the “corporate Goliath had seemingly become a trusted friend” to campaigners who were previously its most vocal critics. This is an elegant account of why and how some residents of New Sarpy in Louisiana took on the Orion refinery in a (comparatively) short-lived campaign that ended in 2002. The Concerned Citizens of New Sarpy (CCNS) established alliances with an environmental activist group, the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, in order to gather evidence of industry-generated pollution in their backyards. Their tools were personal testimonies of illness, bad smells, and strange soot-like deposits on cars, plants, and property, and they availed themselves of buckets and plastic bags as “inexpensive, easy-to-use air-sampling devices” (p.12). While they demanded financial compensation from Orion to allow them to re-locate away from the neighbourhood, to move beyond the reach of the pollutants, they also recognised that some members intended to remain in the community. Therefore they simultaneously lodged a Clean Air Lawsuit that pursued the kind of “improved environmental quality that would benefit everyone” (p.63). As it turned out, they won neither. Instead the CCNS eventually conceded to a package that included home improvement loans - interest free and with the “principal forgiven at a rate of 20 percent per year” (p.79) - as part of a

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‘Family Enhancement Plan’, and participation in a new deliberative forum or ‘Community Advisory Panel’. This deal was premised on the condition that CCNS drop the lawsuit. It was also designed to stop the drift of residents away from the neighbourhood, a drift that would focus unwelcome attention on the difficulties associated with being a ‘fenceline community’ for the oil industry.

Making a judgement on whether CCNS secured a victory or defeat is tricky, and the accounts from activists that are featured in this book rationalise or deconstruct the deal in varying ways. Ownership of the Orion refinery was subsequently assumed by Valero and there has been an apparent improvement in both air quality and in corporate-community relationships even if the risks and uncertainties posed by the industry have not disappeared. In this part of Louisiana community-engagement with refineries appears to be unavoidable but the terms of that engagement are not consistent. Ottinger contrasts CCNS’s achievements with those of the nearby Concerned Citizens of Norco (CCN). Through a combination of direct actions and bold negotiation strategies, it forced Shell into a partial buy-out of houses affected by industry emissions and committed it to a community improvement plan for those left behind. As Ottinger’s nuanced analysis shows, campaign outcomes are influenced by differences in corporate cultures, the rationalities of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the legacies of ‘race’ and presumably class, and the forms of community organising that become hegemonic within particular locales. But it is not just the micro or the particular that matters in this case study: Ottinger also explains why the New Sarpy experience of campaigning is a distinctively neoliberal one.

Readers may want to roll their eyes at the inevitable reference to neoliberalism. It has become commonplace to see all kinds of issues, developments, or conflicts being loosely attributed to this amorphous force. Almost as commonplace is the assertion that we need to explain, clarify, and demonstrate the actual and often contradictory outcomes of neoliberalism in real places. The great strength of Ottinger’s book is that this is exactly what

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it does. Drawing on the work of Nikolas Rose, she expertly illustrates how conceptions of the responsible citizen, the responsible corporation, and the entrepreneurial community have been shaped by her “nation’s liberal traditions and neoliberal practices” (p.71). For example, I am struck by the absence of the ‘state’ as a significant actor in the New Sarpy case-study - not least because it seems so forcefully present in the alliance that seeks to subdue North Mayo’s Shell to Sea campaign. Evidently, in Ireland the state’s function is to grease the wheels of private investment, to hurry the process along, and to manage unruly locals who are seen to stand in the way of development. We do not read about arrests and court appearances in New Sarpy. Instead the state, in both its regulatory and disciplinary forms, seems content to let communities and corporations quite literally work it out between themselves. In Louisiana we thus find another case of what Jamie Peck (2004: 403) calls neoliberalism’s “hybrid formations”. State withdrawal from the role of watchdog for the environment or upholder of democratic forms of accountability, is the sideshow to Orion, Valero and Shell’s strategic performance of deliberation or dialogue in their *voluntary* CSR and community programmes. It is within these non-state forums, which effectively suck the vestiges of conflict out of the public sphere, that the details of clean air monitoring and social expectations of corporate accountability are worked out.

Ottinger’s analysis is at its most persuasive when she considers how activists seek to self-identify as responsible citizens and when she outlines some of the troubling implications for the building of solidarity within communities. When she speaks publicly about the New Sarpy campaign she is usually asked “who was there first, the refinery or the community?” (p.29). Of course it shouldn’t matter but obviously it does; not just to student engineers or fellow academics, but even to some activists within the CCNS. The subtext to the question is that if the residents were there first then they did not actively *choose* to live next door to a refinery and they had not behaved irresponsibly. If, however, the refinery was there first then clearly residents had made some bad choices regarding housing and are implicitly judged

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responsible for any negative after-effects. Zygmunt Bauman (2007: 92) has observed that “concepts of responsibility and responsible choice, which resided before in the semantic field of ethical duty and moral concern for the Other, have shifted or been moved to the realm of self-fulfilment and the calculation of risks”. When New Sarpy activists asserted and detailed their long-standing or prior associations with the area, they sought to trump Orion’s claims on the local environment. However, they also undermined the rights of those other residents, the ones who came after, to be heard. Ottinger contends that New Sarpy campaign strategies thus approximated and reinforced some deeply problematic assumptions of neoliberal rationality. Firstly, that within a region pockmarked by oil-refineries, it is possible to have sufficient advance knowledge regarding health or environmental risks to make informed choices about where you live. Secondly, that choosing is not a messy and complex affair that is undercut by emotional, personal, temporal, and structural factors. Thirdly, that once it is publicly known that corporations might pollute or make daily life a misery, that it becomes somehow acceptable for them to do so.

This book offers some very powerful insights into community development and how it, too, has been afflicted by neoliberal rationalities. While the concerned citizens of New Sarpy or Norco regarded themselves as members of communities, their more adversarial approach was countered by alternative groupings in their localities, such as the St Charles Terrace Neighbourhood Association or Norco Civic Association that received financial support from the oil companies. Rather than engaging with the industry as an enemy or irritant, they regarded the refineries as potential resources and supporters. This model of community development was constructed on a narrative of consensus: theirs were good communities and positive places in which to live; they were entrepreneurial citizens willing to take advantage of whatever opportunities the market put their way; and campaign activists were talking down their areas, damaging property prices, and chipping away at communitarian spirit. Clearly this narrative is not only ideological, it’s also strategic. In the

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entrepreneurial climate of neoliberalism, community development organisations must show a positive and optimistic face if they are to find private-sector partners and attract resources. Even among activists within Norco's and New Sarpy's campaigning organisations, critiques of local environmental conditions were juxtaposed with the ambivalences, antinomies, and positive experiences that come from being connected to a place. Ultimately the combined pressures to "secure investment and put forth images as nice places to live also pushed residents to sideline their critiques of the petrochemical facility experts" (p.95). Similarly, when Shell (nd) boasts about its social investment programme in North Mayo – "a voluntary contribution by Shell and its partners to communities and the wider society in which we operate. It involves working in collaboration with the local community to help achieve local social and economic development objectives" – it is talking about the kind of community development that abandons critique and conflict and finds a way to rub along nicely with corporate power. The courage and resilience it takes for community activists to resist the associated moral and pragmatic imperatives should not be underestimated.

Ottinger's book is lucid, well written, and it analyses with great precision and sensitivity the concessions, compromises, and contradictions that have been generated out of New Sarpy's and Norco's encounters with the oil industry. For readers with a critical interest in governmentality studies, community development, corporate social responsibility, and citizen science there are rich insights to be found. Indeed somewhat counter-intuitively Ottinger demonstrates how easily citizen science and local knowledges can become excluded from Community Advisory Panels. One of the most inspiring aspects of the CCNS and CCN campaigns was how, using the portable and reproducible technology of buckets, they were able to amass evidence of pollution that countered the sanguine and incomplete records of industry scientists and engineers. Likewise, their personal testimonials regarding the prevalence of asthma, breathing problems, and even cancers within the locality were

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sufficiently powerful to raise doubts about professionalised Science's capacity to really know about life and air quality in their communities.

Community activism and concerned citizens' first-hand accounts thus made a vital contribution to the project of democratising science: for some this might have been an aspiration in its own right; for others it may have been an unexpected outcome of a more tightly focussed change agenda. As noted above, in New Sarpy one of the outcomes of this energetic campaigning was the construction of a Community Advisory Panel (CAP) to obviate conflict and promote dialogue between Orion (later Valero) and the locals. Such panels create opportunities for industry representatives to perform their corporate social responsibility, to activate "the idea of the corporation as a moral actor" (p.132), and they push refinery engineers and managers beyond more familiar habitats into the realm of the social. Panels are typically constructed in line with liberal models of deliberation, whereby participants are asked to leave their 'personal' issues and interests at the door in order to commit to an ostensibly egalitarian process of communication. As Ottinger explains, the CAP in New Sarpy presumed "equality among clearly unequal partners" (p.127), with a self-consciously democratic agenda setting process for meetings and efforts to tone down the outer-trappings of officialdom or status on the part of participating industry professionals. However, it was this very enactment of equality and deliberation that stifled dissent: activists were required to abandon their most distinctive and powerful discursive resources, their narratives of industry failure, in the interests of the "common good" (p.111). Concerned citizens' personal issues were bound up with their experiences of ill-health and the traces of pollution in their daily lives, but to invoke them within the CAP would undermine the 'productive' spirit of deliberation. (Notably in advance of joining the panel they were also expected to ditch environmentalist allies such as the Louisiana Bucket Brigade.) Because community members could not present this alternative evidence and were instead reduced to asking questions, the abstracted, 'expert' judgements of industry scientists and engineers were

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given rein to dominate the deliberative space. Industry professionals demonstrated their responsibility and responsiveness by agreeing to participate in forums that rendered them publicly accountable, albeit in processes that evaded intrusive forms of state regulation. Ironically, because engineers and scientists were thus made more down-to-earth or approachable their technical know-how and expertise was actually reinforced. As Ottinger explains, they could offer “their knowledge as a helpful contribution to the discussion rather than pronouncing the facts from on high”. This in turn made their interventions more palatable and “very hard for residents to dispute without violating the spirit of discussions” (p.100).

Refining Expertise shows us that within New Sarpy’s CAP, and within the frameworks of CSR more generally, locals and industry partners show themselves to be ‘responsible’ citizens by acceding to the liberal norms of deliberation and by relinquishing conflict. Mutual antagonisms or the more substantive impacts of refineries on the environment are not on the table: ultimately the failures of industry become re-framed as failures in communication, rather than failures of capital or science. Most depressingly of all, Ottinger suggests that within the constraints of neoliberalism, more spirited and critical forms of community activism risk self-annihilation as activists are almost inevitably drawn into community-industry partnerships. Community activists win respectability and access, while partnerships allow industry representatives and engineers to hone their social work skills, as they learn how to appease, educate, and inform the fence-line residents. Meanwhile the real business of oil goes on, maybe a little more cleanly, or maybe not; if community activists are not able to tell us what it is they know, our own knowledge regarding the real-life impacts of corporations is rendered all the more incomplete and partisan.

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July 2013