

REGIME OF  
**OBSTRUCTION**

HOW CORPORATE POWER  
BLOCKS ENERGY DEMOCRACY

EDITED BY  
WILLIAM K. CARROLL

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# Contents

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 3

## Part I The Organization of Fossil Capital

1 Boom, Bust, and Consolidation: Corporate Restructuring in the Alberta Oil Sands 35

*Ian Hussey, Éric Pineault, Emma Jackson, and Susan Cake*

2 Lines of Work, Corridors of Power: Extraction, Obstruction, and Counter-obstruction Along Fossil Fuel Production Networks 61

*James Lawson*

3 Landscapes of Risk: Financial Representations of Catastrophe 91

*Mark Hudson*

4 Who Owns Big Carbon? Mapping the Network of Corporate Ownership 111

*William K. Carroll and Jouke Huijzer*

5 Canada's Fossil-Capital Elite: A Tangled Web of Corporate Power 143

*William K. Carroll*

## Part II The Struggle for Hearts and Minds

6 Fossil Capital's Reach into Civil Society: The Architecture of Climate Change Denialism 171

*William K. Carroll, Nicolas Graham, Michael Lang,  
Kevin McCartney, and Zoë Yunker*

- 7 “Our Oil”: Extractive Populism in Canadian Social Media 197  
*Shane Gunster, Robert Neubauer, John Bermingham, and Alicia Massie*
- 8 Episodes in the New Climate Denialism 225  
*Shannon Daub, Gwendolyn Blue, Lise Rajewicz, and Zoë Yunker*
- 9 “Doing Things Better Together”: Industry Capture of Climate Policy in British Columbia 249  
*Shannon Daub, Chuka Ejeckam, Nicolas Graham, and Zoë Yunker*
- 10 Petro-Universities and the Production of Knowledge for the Post-carbon Future 273  
*Laurie Adkin*
- 11 The Oil Industry Is Us: Hegemonic Community Economic Identity in Saskatchewan’s Oil Patch 307  
*Emily Eaton and Simon Enoch*
- 12 Indigenous Gendered Experiences of Work in an Oil-Dependent, Rural Alberta Community 331  
*Angele Alook, Ian Hussey, and Nicole Hill*
- 13 Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Canada’s Carbon Economy and Indigenous Ambivalence 355  
*Clifford Atleo*

### Part III Resistance and Beyond

- 14 From Clean Growth to Climate Justice 377  
*Marc Lee*
- 15 Flashpoints of Possibility: What Resistance Reveals About Pathways Toward Energy Transition 399  
*Karena Shaw*
- 16 Toward a Typology of Fossil Fuel Flashpoints: The Potential for Coalition Building 429  
*Fiona MacPhail and Paul Bowles*

17 Fossil Fuel Divestment, Non-reformist Reforms, and Anti-capitalist Strategy 453

*Emilia Belliveau, James K. Rowe, and Jessica Dempsey*

18 Conclusion: Prospects for Energy Democracy in the Face of Passive Revolution 479

*William K. Carroll*

List of Contributors 505

## 11     **The Oil Industry Is Us**

### **Hegemonic Community Economic Identity in Saskatchewan's Oil Patch**

*Emily Eaton and Simon Enoch*

It is no secret that, in the face of public attack, the fossil fuel industry is on the defensive. As the realities of global climate change become ever more apparent, environmental campaigners have turned to “supply-side” activism (Mooney 2015), challenging the very legitimacy of the construction of new fossil fuel infrastructure in a world that must transition to a post-carbon future. How fossil fuel companies attempt to legitimize their operations in an atmosphere of critical scrutiny and growing doubt has been the subject of considerable academic study, much of it focused on industry’s efforts to market itself through the creation of positive images that seek to displace negative associations in the public mind (see, for example, Krashinsky 2015; Matz and Renfrew 2015; Schneider et al. 2016; Wall 2015). As the politics of transition intensify, and as climate change activists target the issue of production, local sites of extraction increasingly become arenas of struggle. For that reason, it is imperative that we understand the mechanisms whereby oil companies garner grassroots support among those who live and work in oil-producing communities.

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In the discursive wars between jobs and the environment, the fossil fuel industry regularly relies on the authenticity of workers' voices. In chapter 7, for example, Shane Gunster and his colleagues explore industry's use of "engagement" campaigns that encourage workers to defend their industry against environmental critics and climate change policies and to amplify their emotion-laden messages through social media. The emergence of anti-industry sentiment at local sites of extraction—that is, the potential growth of a countervailing movement that emphasizes the possibility of building alternative green economies at a local or regional level—clearly poses a significant threat to industry's efforts to maintain its legitimacy. Fossil fuel companies thus have a major stake in preventing people who live in extractive communities from questioning the ecological, economic, and moral viability of the industry on which their livelihoods depend.

In this chapter, we examine how the fossil fuel industry produces hegemonic community identities tied to oil and gas extraction in rural Saskatchewan. Our research indicates that residents of oil-producing communities do more than merely consent to the operations of industry: they actively identify with the oil industry and perceive their interests and the industry's interests as one and the same. This intense identification is further manifest in community members' vocal defence of the industry and in their adoption of industry-propagated frames of reference for understanding wider energy-related issues. We argue that industry practices of direct community engagement and strategic philanthropy are key to securing this thoroughgoing identification of "us" with "them." Our focus is not merely on the discursive strategies that industry uses to gain consent but also on the material benefits that industry delivers in regions that are economically dependent on oil and on the ideological dimensions latent in industry attempts to secure legitimacy in areas where oil is part of everyday life.

## **Saskatchewan's Oil Boom**

The oil industry is not new to Saskatchewan: commercial production dates back to the late 1940s and intensified during the 1950s. Over roughly the past two decades, however, new extraction technologies—notably horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing (fracking), as well as thermal recovery, miscible gas injection, and chemical flooding—have enabled the recovery of oil trapped in shale and sandstone. These techniques have, in turn, expanded the scope

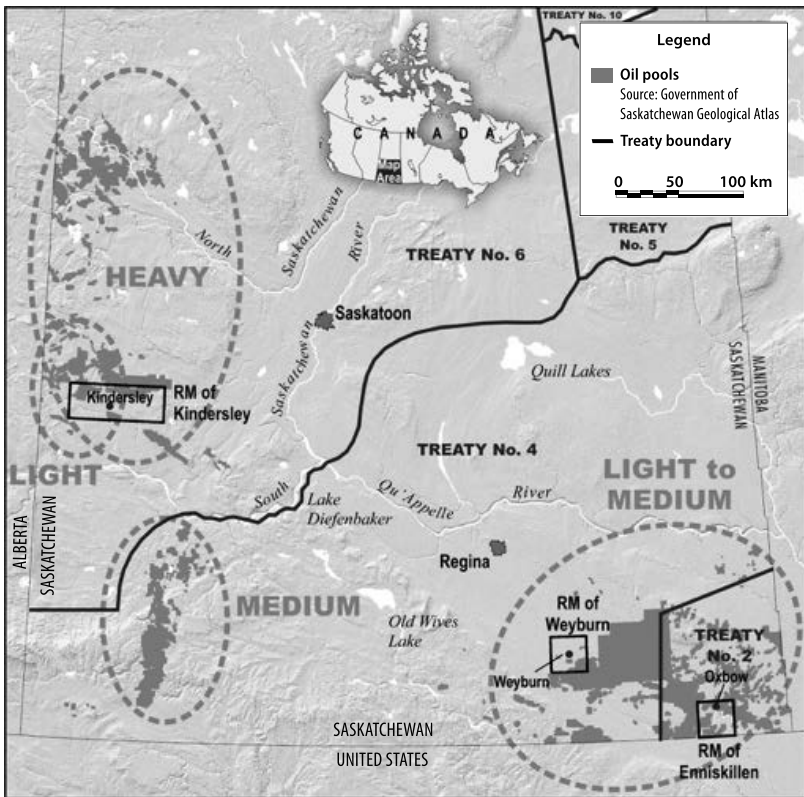
of oil recovery, leading to increases in both the pace and scale of drilling in many parts of the world, including Saskatchewan. In the mid-2000s, at a time when many rural areas were undergoing economic decline and depopulation associated with agricultural consolidation and corporatization, oil-producing communities in the province were instead catapulted into a period of frenzied economic growth that slowed only when oil prices crashed in late 2014. For the better part of a decade, these communities found themselves in the midst of an oil boom characterized by high rates of employment, along with explosive population growth that strained social services and sent rental markets soaring as vacancy rates plunged. In addition to influxes of oilfield workers, the boom in production also fed the development of secondary businesses to service both drilling sites and the workers themselves. These, too, required staff, and new arrivals included a large number of temporary foreign workers destined for the restaurant and accommodation industries.<sup>1</sup>

Shale oil development has been met with significant social opposition in many areas, largely in connection with the fracking technologies used to recover the oil (see, for example, Smith and Richards 2015, 82–83). In 2011, public opposition prompted France to ban fracking, and, in 2015, more than twelve hundred groups from sixty-four countries participated in anti-fracking actions coordinated by Global Frackdown (Fusco and Carter 2017, 276). Several US states have outlawed fracking, while, in Canada, Nova Scotia and, more recently, Québec have banned the practice. In New Brunswick, a moratorium has been in place since 2014, and opposition is also intense in Newfoundland and Labrador (see Carter and Fusco 2017).<sup>2</sup> Saskatchewan has, however, seen little organized opposition to oil extraction, whether from members of rural oil-producing communities or from urban-based environmental movements (Olive and Valentine 2018)—despite the very real grievances that people living in the province's oil-producing communities have voiced about environmental contamination from oil-related activities (Eaton and Kinchy 2016; see also Jackson et al. 2014; Steinzor, Subra, and Sumi 2013).

Our research focused on three oil-producing communities in Saskatchewan, each comprising a city or town and the surrounding rural municipality (see figure 11.1). Two of these communities—Weyburn and Oxbow—lie in the southeastern corner of the province, atop the shale of the Bakken Formation (which stretches south into Montana and North Dakota). The third, Kindersley, is located in west-central Saskatchewan in an area rich in petroleum reserves and, to a lesser extent, natural gas. For each community,



we identified philanthropic contributions from the oil industry and from oil advocacy organizations via a content analysis of local newspapers from 2007 to 2016, as well as company websites, annual reports on corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and newsletters. Donations made by oil production and oil-well-servicing companies primarily came from the regional or local offices of firms headquartered either in Calgary, Alberta, or from more locally based firms headquartered in Saskatchewan. The oil advocacy organizations included two service clubs (the Oxbow Oilmen’s Club and the Weyburn Oilfield Technical Society Oilwomen), as well as the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.



**Figure 11.1.** Oil pools and study areas. RM = rural municipality. *Source:* Map drawn by Weldon Hiebert. Contains information licensed under the Open Government Licence—Canada. Base map courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech.

In addition to collecting publicly available information about the three communities, we conducted twenty-five semi-structured interviews in the summer of 2016 with municipal and town councillors and administrators, farmers, representatives of landowner associations, members of conservation groups, representatives from community organizations, human services staff, schoolteachers, local business owners, and representatives of oil companies. Interviewees were chosen on the basis of their experiences with the oil industry and with a view to ensuring a diversity of perspectives and geographic locations. To protect privacy, we have omitted any reference to organizational affiliation and/or community of residence.

## The Construction of Hegemonic Community Identities

Originating in discussions of the mining sector, the concept of a “social licence” to operate is perhaps the most common academic approach to understanding the role of communities in sanctioning the activities of business. The notion of a social “licence” reflects the recognition that a company (or an entire industry) requires broad and sustained approval from society in order to conduct its activities successfully. Don Smith and Jessica Richards (2015, 89) describe social licence as “an ongoing social contract with society,” one that “derives from communities’ perception of a company and its operations” and allows companies to “manage socio-political risk by conforming to a set of implicit rules imposed by their stakeholders.” Jason Prno and Scott Slocombe (2012, 347) further observe that, while social licence may be “issued by society as a whole (e.g., governments, communities, the general public and media), local communities are often a key arbiter in the process by virtue of their proximity to projects, sensitivity to effects, and ability to affect project outcomes.”

As Smith and Richards (2015, 93) explain, Ian Thomson and Robert Boutilier (2011) argue that, in order secure full social licence, a company must establish its legitimacy and credibility as a business, and it must also gain the community’s trust. Thomson and Boutilier accordingly identify four levels of social licence: withdrawal, acceptance (that is, the recognition of a company as a legitimate operation), approval (the level at which both legitimacy and credibility are established), and psychological identification—the highest level of social licence that a company can achieve. At this level, which companies rarely attain, a community demonstrates “full trust” in a company, to the extent that a sense of partnership emerges and the community actively

defends the company against criticism (Smith and Richards 2015, 95, citing Thomson and Boutilier 2011, 1786).

A key means of building social licence is the adoption of CSR initiatives, an umbrella term for a host of practices in which businesses voluntarily engage in an effort to demonstrate that they operate “in a manner that meets or exceeds the ethical, legal, commercial, and public expectations that society has of business” (UNCTAD 2004, 22).<sup>3</sup> In attempting to gain social licence, companies operating in extractive communities commonly rely on two CSR practices in particular: strategic philanthropy and community engagement (see, for example, Ellis et al. 2015; Smith and Richards 2015, 126–27). Unlike ordinary altruism, strategic philanthropy is designed to be “synergistic with a firm’s missions, goals and objectives” (Foster et al. 2005, 3). Such philanthropy deploys funds in the community with a view to achieving certain business-related goals, whether material or discursive. For instance, oil industry support for fire and emergency services is pervasive in North American oil-producing communities because it ensures that these local services will have the equipment and personnel needed to respond adequately to oil-site accidents or emergencies (Ellis et al. 2015, 14–15). Industry may also dispense philanthropy to garner community goodwill and positive publicity (see Foster et al. 2005; Logsdon, Reiner, and Burke 1990).

Community engagement strategies focus on building relationships with key stakeholders in the communities in which businesses operate. These encompass a wide range of initiatives, such as company-sponsored open houses, employee-volunteer programs, community consultations, public tours of company facilities, school field trips, and awards events. Community engagement enables firms not only to showcase their contributions to the community but also to proactively manage risk and respond to community concerns (Kytte and Ruggie 2005), while these initiatives also enhance the overall legitimacy of their operations (Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi, and Herremans 2010).

While the social licence and CSR literature demonstrates how firms can build and maintain consent for local operations, it has less to say about the potential ideological dimension of these strategies. As we hope to demonstrate, the practices used to build social licence assist in the production of what we term a “hegemonic community economic identity,” in which the interests of industry and community are so tightly bound up that community members actively police criticisms of the industry and adopt ideological

perspectives on wider energy issues that align with those of industry. While this phenomenon can be described as psychological identification, we find that Gramscian conceptions of hegemony offer a more theoretically useful means of understanding how the material and discursive practices of industry work to produce this degree of identification.

Antonio Gramsci used the term “hegemony” to connote a “congruence of material and ideological forces that enables a coalition of interests to maintain a dominant position in society” (Levy 1997, 129). This dominant position is primarily maintained not through force—although the power to compel through coercion is always readily available—but through an ideological and cultural dominance that is capable of securing popular consent. The ability to mobilize and maintain hegemony requires not only certain material concessions to subordinate groups—such as an industry’s provision of jobs, revenue, essential services, and infrastructure—but also “discursive frameworks that actively constitute perceptions of mutual interests” (Levy and Egan 2003, 807). In other words, a hegemonic social structure must make the interests of the dominant group appear as the general interest. As we will see, the goal of creating a perception of mutuality is particularly well realized in communities where the “community interest” and the interests of industry are so thoroughly blurred as to become almost indistinguishable. Gramsci suggested that insofar as the views of the dominant group are internalized by subordinate groups, they become “common sense,” a taken-for-granted conception of the world, rarely challenged, that equates the status quo with the “natural order of things” (Boggs 1999, 161; see also Enoch 2009, 18–20).

Although Gramsci’s insights into hegemony have rarely been applied in studies of communities that are home to extractive industries, they dovetail well with research that examines how, in seeking to secure ongoing community support, companies engaged in natural resource extraction adopt a variety of coercive measures that ultimately serve to promote and maintain a sense of “community economic identity.” In an analysis of West Virginia coal-mining communities, Shannon Bell and Richard York (2010) show how, in the face of both economic decline and environmental challenges, the coal industry draws on culturally iconic images of masculinity and works to maintain a high level of visibility in an effort to establish itself as integral to the economic and cultural identity of the community. These efforts at “economic identity maintenance” (112) function to bind the community to the industry even as

employment wanes, as well as to thwart environmental opposition by framing it as a threat to economic security.<sup>4</sup>

Importantly, in Bell and York's analysis, economic dependence is positioned not only as material fact but also as an active ideological construction in the service of power. As Gramsci's theorizing of hegemony suggests, discursive power is essential to the ability of elites to construct and maintain their domination. Following Steven Lukes's (2005) description of the third dimension of power, where power is used to shape people's perceptions, thoughts, and preferences, Thomas Shriver, Alison Adams, and Chris Messer (2014) investigate the tactics employed by corporations, government officials, and regulators to shape the way that grievances surrounding environmental contamination are perceived (or not) by local populations. By controlling information and intervening in environmental assessments, as well as by pursuing community engagement practices and mounting public relations campaigns, industry is able to mute complaints and produce a state of community quiescence. Similarly, in a study of a public relations initiative undertaken by the oil and gas industry, Jacob Matz and Daniel Renfrew (2015) examine industry's efforts to "sell" fracking to local communities by mobilizing discursive frames of patriotism, environmental imagery, and technological and scientific innovation designed to emphasize the benefits of shale development to the community, while casting those who opposed the extraction of shale gas as "irrational obstructionists." Indeed, fossil fuel industries regularly pursue a series of rhetorical strategies, including "astroturf" campaigns, that portray critics as naïve, reckless, and dangerous, while representing industry as moderate, rational, and even progressive (see, for example, Schneider et al. 2016). At times, the vilification of opponents provokes open confrontations, and, as Amaranta Herrero Cabrejas (2012) demonstrates, can conspire to produce a "culture of silence" that serves to stifle dissent.

In short, through a variety of rhetorical tactics and interventions, the fossil fuel industry builds the ideological foundations of a community identity founded on the perception of shared economic interests, such that industry is woven into the very fabric of community life. The hegemonic nature of such constructions of community economic identity is evident in two convictions that pervaded the communities we studied. First, people overwhelmingly understand their community as having a singular economic identity, rather than as home to competing economic interests. Second, people assume that the general interests of the community are indistinguishable from the

particular interests of the oil and gas industry. So embedded are these two notions that they have come to seem like a matter of common sense. In other words, they have become hegemonic.

## Evidence of Psychological Identification

Residents of the communities we studied demonstrated a high degree of trust in and identification with the oil industry. As we noted earlier, “psychological identification” is the highest level of social licence that a firm or industry can achieve. At this level, “rather than ‘us and them,’ the relationship between community and company represents a ‘we’ marked by co-ownership” (Smith and Richards 2015, 95). We observed this level of identification in our interviews, where community residents regularly represented industry not as an intruder or outsider to be tolerated but as a valued member of the community itself. Indeed, the notion of “industry as community” was widespread among the people to whom we spoke, regardless of their relationship to the industry—this despite the fact that some also gave voice to serious grievances.

The local roots put down by many of the companies that make up what people understand to be “the oil industry” help to entrench the image of industry as part of the community. One woman—a former administrator at a local oil company and now an active community volunteer—commented, “Big oil—there’s no such thing as ‘big oil.’ It’s all of our friends and neighbours and people running our towns and supporting us.” The multiple direct relationships that people in oil-producing communities have with the oil industry further erode any sense of division between the two. An employee at an oilfield service firm noted that “pretty much everyone” in the area is tied in some way to the oil industry: “Either their husband works in the oilfield or they work in the oilfield somewhere along the line. [. . .] Usually everyone has some sort of a connection.”

A production superintendent at a local oil firm highlighted the tight connection that has developed between community and industry:

Years ago, there were no donations; there was no nothing. I think there was a “we and they.” But now, through donations and a lot of people that I know that are in the oil patch—they volunteer either for the fire department or a lot of volunteer hours coaching for kids’ sports and stuff like that. So that helps as well, right? It’s no more a “we and they”: it’s really come together.

As his remarks suggest, this sense of support and connection is grounded in industry's local philanthropic and community engagement initiatives.

## Philanthropy and Community Engagement

The oil firms operating in Saskatchewan regularly engage in strategic philanthropy and community engagement efforts that provide material benefits to communities while reinforcing discursive frameworks that contribute to the prevailing conviction that industry is simply part of the community. Both activities reinforce the perception of a mutuality of interests that is required to forge a hegemonic community identity. They also serve to present the industry as virtually indispensable to the prosperity, if not the very economic viability, of the community.

While firms in these communities regularly engage in the types of corporate philanthropy that one would expect—such as sponsoring sports teams, contributing to food banks, and making charitable donations to local hospital foundations—we found that oil-producing communities also rely on industry for the provision of public services and infrastructure that many would consider to be the sole purview of government. Indeed, oil-producing communities rely extensively on oil industry money for the maintenance of a host of crucial public services, including fire and emergency response, health, education, and human services, as well as for recreational facilities and other community infrastructure. That many of these necessities are perceived as being supplied—or at least supplemented—by industry rather than by government is another reason why communities view their interests as inextricably tied to those of the oil industry.

It is no exaggeration to say that many public services in oil-producing communities simply could not be provided at current levels without direct funding from the oil industry. For example, local fire departments rely on industry for an extensive array of vital equipment, including fire trucks, ambulances, rescue airbags, hydraulic rescue tools, automated external defibrillators, self-contained breathing apparatuses, and hydrogen sulphide gas monitors. Similarly, industry funding enables rural communities to purchase expensive medical equipment needed for diagnostic services such as digital X-rays, ultrasounds, and electrocardiograms. Industry philanthropy is equally important to critical infrastructure in both health and education, with donations from the oil industry supplying the majority of private funding for local

hospital construction and school improvements in the three communities we studied. Human services—often taxed to their limit by the economic and social crises inherent in a boom-and-bust commodity cycle—also rely to a large extent on industry, with programming and expanded service provision frequently contingent on industry largesse (see the examples in table 11.1).

**Table 11.1.** Selected industry contributions.

Donation	Company	Recipient
\$4,500,000	Crescent Point Energy	Weyburn and District Hospital Foundation
\$250,000	Penn West	Penn West Diagnostic Wing at the Kindersley Hospital (digital X-ray and ultrasound equipment and hospital renovations)
\$250,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Triple C (Community, Culture, and Convention) Centre
\$150,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Fire Department (safety training trailer)
\$100,000	CNRL	Oxbow New School Fundraising Committee (construction of Oxbow Prairie Horizons School)
\$100,000	Encana	Weyburn Leisure Centre (outdoor pool)
\$100,000	Red Hawk Well Servicing	Oxbow New School Fundraising Committee (construction of Oxbow Prairie Horizons School)
\$50,000	MayCo Well Servicing	Oxbow New School Fundraising Committee (construction of Oxbow Prairie Horizons School)
\$25,000	Valleyview Petroleum	Weyburn Wor-Kin Shop (support services for intellectually disabled)
\$20,000	CNRL	Sun Country Health Region, Weyburn (ambulance)
\$20,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Care-A-Van Society (wheelchair-accessible van)
\$10,000	Enbridge	Oxbow/Enniskillen Fire Department (fire truck and other equipment)
\$10,000	ARC Resources	Sun Country Health Region (electrocardiogram monitors)
\$10,000	Longhorn Oil and Gas	West Central Crisis and Family Support, Kindersley



Local residents were keenly aware that many of the things they enjoy in their communities are the direct result of oil industry philanthropy. One of the teachers we interviewed attributed the success of efforts to raise funds for a new school to the presence of oil wealth in the community, commenting that “we raised about a million dollars, and, had it not been in oilfield country, that million dollars likely would not have been raised.” Similarly, a local fire chief discussed the difficulties experienced by non-oil-producing jurisdictions, where the oil industry cannot be relied on for funding and equipment:

I know if you get north of #1 highway, the oil revenue runs out, and it's very hard for them to fund the fire department and to buy good graders for the roads, and to pay the maintenance crew decent money. And so I can see that being a challenge, to fund a fire department or to get them the equipment that they need.

The community volunteer formerly employed at an oil company echoed the same theme: “We had a giant flood that wiped out the ball diamonds, and they got rebuilt—and that didn't happen because of the teachers at the school, because the teachers wouldn't be here if the industry wasn't here. No one would be here.”

As these comments demonstrate, community members are acutely conscious of how much they rely on the oil industry, to the point that some cannot imagine their communities existing without it. Oil industry philanthropy quite literally allows people in these communities access to health, education, recreation, and other services that they might not otherwise enjoy. One can easily see how industry philanthropy encourages a community economic identity that equates community welfare with the oil industry.

Most of the larger oil firms also regularly host a variety of community engagement efforts. As a production superintendent at a local oil firm explained,

One thing that we used to do—and [name of company] has done it a couple of times—is have open houses. We open it up to the public, so if you have some questions or concerns, bring it up, and we'll provide you with the answers and stuff like that. So that's helped kind of bring the local people together and understand what the oil patch is all about.

As the literature on community engagement suggests, industry typically characterizes such efforts as a means to build relationships with the community

and other key stakeholders (see Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi, and Herremans 2010, for example). In addition to allowing firms to highlight their contributions to the community, these events provide an opportunity to disseminate information about operations and performance, as well as to reinforce industry viewpoints.

For the oil industry, schools are a particularly attractive site for community engagement efforts that can enhance social licence for the industry overall. Working in partnership with both major oil companies and local oilfield companies, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) began bringing its “Energy in Action” program to schools across Saskatchewan in the mid-2000s (see Eaton and Enoch 2017). Described as “an energy and environmental literacy program for students primarily in grades four to six in under-serviced schools in rural communities, where there are oil and natural gas operations” (CAPP 2012a, 2), the program consisted of classroom presentations that provided industry perspectives on topics such as the use of natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable, to meet energy needs, energy development, and environmental stewardship, coupled with an outdoor project such as building bird boxes or planting trees. As CAPP explained in a promotional video: “Energy in Action is community engagement in action. Building understanding, growing roots in the community, reinforcing reputations, ensuring our social licence to operate. Skilled educators and a curriculum linked to energy realities opens eyes and opens minds. Energy in Action works” (CAPP 2012b, 0:30–1:00). Given that the program was clearly designed to present the oil industry in a sympathetic light, it amounted to a powerful tool of advocacy—an intervention in the daily lives of children that, under the guise of educational curriculum, sought to instill an industry-friendly ideological orientation and further cement the relationship between industry and the community.

In a more ad hoc form of community engagement, oil companies also make representatives available to meet with local groups that might have questions or concerns about a company’s operations. Members of a local conservation group, for example, explained that they had invited a representative from Cenovus Energy to make a presentation to the group about the environmental regulation of the oil and gas industry. At a time when Saskatchewan’s regulations were, in fact, the least stringent in the country (Carter and Eaton 2016), members of the nature group praised what they characterized as increased stringency in environmental oversight. Reporting

on their meeting with Cenovus, one member of the group explained that the application for a licence to drill is now “quite involved” and that the company’s applications are “a lot thicker now than they ever used to be, on every project. So, yeah, it’s quite good, I think.” Overall, another said, the group felt that “the oil companies are doing an adequate job. We’re not sure how much they do because we don’t know enough about their work areas, but certainly we’ve been quite impressed with their abilities.” Indeed, community engagement initiatives often target specific community stakeholders, with a view to managing grievances and/or reinforcing industry perspectives. Insofar as such efforts are successful, they broaden industry’s base of support within the community, thereby strengthening the sense of partnership and an alignment of interests.

## Defending the Oil and Gas Industry

The policing of internal criticism is crucial to the maintenance of community economic identities tied to oil extraction. Like Cabrejas (2012) and Bell and York (2010), we found a pervasive culture of silence in oil-producing communities in Saskatchewan. For example, when those we interviewed shared complaints about the oil industry operating in their backyards, they often mentioned that they were reluctant to talk openly about their grievances for fear of censure, which some had experienced in the past. One interviewee, the owner of an oilfield-related company, offered the following example:

A woman I know [. . .] she lives kind of on the edge of [name of the town], and there’s a couple of wells over here. She posted on Facebook, “Is anybody smelling the rotten eggs? I can smell it in my yard, and I had to go in the house.” So a few other people said, “Yeah, I thought that was the sewer.” I said, “No, there’s a well,” and [. . .] I said, “Just call the Ministry of the Economy”—I put his number. That’s all I said, but holy crap you would have thought I committed murder. The oil field guys came at me with a vengeance. [. . .] When you talk about keyboard warriors and online bullies and—well, just horrible.

In another case, a farmer recounted his long struggle to have an oil company acknowledge and address the contamination of his well water with natural gas. As he explained, there was so much gas in the water coming out of his kitchen tap that he had been able light a fire. His daughter, whose bedroom was in the basement next to the main water tank, plumbing, had also been

suffering severe health problems, which he attributed to the gas. It took seven years for the company to do tests and admit to the problem in the first place, and then it was another four years before a permanent solution was implemented. When we asked him whether he talks about this experience to others in the community, he replied, “We’re very careful—well, we don’t really talk about it,” adding that what he had just told us was “the most I’ve talked about it.” In order to have the well water remediated, he said, he had to sign a non-disclosure agreement that forbids him to talk about his experience.

In addition to the “keyboard warriors” and non-disclosure agreements that help to maintain silence, nearly everyone is financially dependent on the industry in some way. Two of the farmers we interviewed explained that landowners who have experienced problems caused by industrial activity are reluctant to speak because they also derive income from small contracts with the industry. “A lot of them have companies that support the industry,” one said. “They push snow; they do lots of work for the industry.” Another agreed: “They don’t want to rock the boat, and it’s a difficult personal decision, because to have that extra revenue on your farm is phenomenal [ . . . ] especially when there’s drought and grasshoppers.”

When things do go wrong, money is spent to keep people from speaking out. One person we interviewed, an economic development officer, remembered a situation in which local rancher lost a number of his calves to what he believed was sour gas poisoning from nearby oil wells and infrastructure. The rancher took the dead calves to a veterinarian to have them examined and then complained to the oil company after the veterinarian was unable to identify a clear cause of death and opined that the rancher’s suspicion about sour gas poisoning was reasonable. As the development officer commented:

He lost all these calves, and they sent him a cheque for whatever the cattle would have been worth as adults and [that] made him happy. They’ve got little kids. They have grandkids out there. I’m thinking I would not have shot my mouth over repaying that. It’s very difficult here, because people are very well aware of who pays the bills.

This reluctance to “rock the boat” or make public space for frank discussion means that residents self-police the airing and addressing of their grievances. When residents do act, they tend to engage in individual, rather than collective, action by, for example, confronting industry on their property or phoning the police (see Eaton and Kinchy 2016). Because such individual

acts of resistance can easily be dismissed as isolated occurrences or chalked up to a grumpy personality, they fail to disrupt the hegemonic quality of a community economic identity.

## Community Adoption of Industry Framings

Although, within the communities we studied, criticisms of the industry were generally suppressed, they were also, at times, acknowledged but actively challenged, especially when they were deemed to emanate from sources outside of the community. We were repeatedly struck by the degree to which community members talked about energy and energy-related issues through industry-sanctioned frames of reference. This phenomenon illustrates a dimension of social licence that has thus far received relatively little attention: an identification so thorough that individuals internalize an industry's ideological position on issues of concern to society as a whole.

The ideological alignment of community with industry was especially evident when those we interviewed were asked about specific criticisms of the oil industry. In discussing such criticisms, community residents adopted many of the frames of reference and rhetorical tactics that have been associated with industry discourse (see, especially, Bell and York 2010; Matz and Renfrew 2015; Schneider et al. 2016). Regardless of their relationship to the oil industry, for example, community members often expressed significant skepticism about the validity of the notion of anthropogenic climate change—a pattern that also emerged in another study of the Weyburn region (Boyd 2014). Regarding climate change, a municipal councillor commented, “I’m not the best climate change person to talk to because I don’t necessarily buy into all of that, and I struggle with [. . .] I struggle with the fact that Canada is taking responsibility for so much of an issue that we are actually a very small emitter in the grand scheme of things.” The idea that Canada—despite having among the highest per capita greenhouse gas emissions in the world—is a “small emitter” relative to other countries has been a favourite talking point of both industry advocacy groups and the Saskatchewan government (Morrow 2015; Oil Respect 2017).

The doubts about climate change voiced by community members also contained elements of what Jen Schneider, Steve Schwarze, Peter Bsumek, and Jennifer Peebles (2016, 27) identify as the “industrial apocalyptic” strategy: a set of rhetorical appeals that herald the impending demise of an industry assumed to be vital. According to this scenario, powerful but fundamentally

misinformed outsiders use the spectre of climate change to justify imposing onerous regulations or taxation on the oil industry, while failing to recognize the catastrophic economic and social consequences of such constraints. Adopting this line of argument, the community volunteer previously employed in the industry cast ignorant policy makers as a threat to the economic welfare of rural communities:

I would say the prevailing opinion is those who are making decisions about things like climate change are making them on broad-brush-stroke generalities, and I think it's—the opinion is they don't know what they are talking about, the opinion is they've got the data wrong. [ . . . ] It's fear-based, because someone like Justin Trudeau who didn't get any votes this side of the Manitoba border is talking about making broad sweeping changes that are literally going to put our entire communities in financial jeopardy.

Similarly, an employee at an oilfield service company not only expressed doubt about the existence of climate change but also argued that rural communities have been unjustly singled out for blame:

Well, no one really knows what the weather was like how many years ago. I think us being in the rural area see the cities and all the pollution they're creating, right? We feel like we get hounded on for what we're doing, more so than what goes on in industrial areas in other cities. There's lots of pollution there. I think we're fairly regulated, and we abide by the rules. I know I'm environmentally conscious.

Community members drew on other elements of the “industrial apocalyptic” strategy as well, such as the notion that modern life depends on fossil fuels, and that, in the absence of a viable alternative, those who advocate the winding down of fossil fuel use would have us court catastrophe. When asked about the possibility of a post-carbon world, the municipal councillor remarked, “You can't just turn the tap off oil and say, ‘There's no more oil, find a different way to power your car. Find a different way to get some of your plastics. Find a different way to run some of the generating plants that you need to produce hydro.’”

We also regularly witnessed the use of elements of what Schneider et al. (2016, 107) identify as the “hypocrite's trap,” a rhetorical strategy that seeks to disarm opponents of the fossil fuel industry by pointing out that these

critics rely on fossil fuels themselves. Declaring that “the world runs on oil,” the community volunteer explained:

So it's this sense of, how would you get from here to a place where there was no oil? And just that whole sense of betrayal where [...] for somebody who is using what we're producing to actively—to rally, to protest, enact changes against it. David Suzuki with his diesel-burning bus driving across the country telling everybody that fossil fuels are bad. And you go, “That's the problem.” It's that hypocriticalness.

The owner of a local oil company made a similar comment about environmentalists:

So there's lots of these groups that are kind of lobbying or they're sort of lobbyists, but I think they're totally missing the point. I always kind of chuckle—even if it's on Twitter—when you see everybody is in some bay in Vancouver and just up the coast, and there's oil tankers going past them—because it's happening right now as we speak—and everybody is sitting in a kayak that's made from petroleum.

This strategy works by pinpointing what is presented as a fatal logical contradiction: the failure of actions to align with words. Yet the strategy rests on the false assumption that individuals can align their actions to a fossil-free world that does not yet exist or that ceased to exist several hundred years ago. In fact, contemporary economies and lives are thoroughly structured around fossil fuels, but this does not negate the need to transition off them.

Finally, we often encountered the belief that technological advances, particularly those initiated by the oil industry, will render current environmental concerns moot. This conviction illustrates what Schneider et al. (2016, 4) call the “technological shell game”—a “rhetorical process of misdirection that relies on strategic ambiguity about the feasibility, costs, and successful implementation of technologies in order to deflect attention from environmental pollution and health concerns.” As they note, this strategy emphasizes the notion that fossil fuel corporations already stand at the “frontier” of technological innovation and environmental responsibility, making further regulation unnecessary and even detrimental to future innovation (95). The owner of a small business (not one related to the oil industry) offered an ironic description of this technological optimism:

The culture is so married to our ability through technology to master nature. Everybody thinks we'll have no problem—we'll geo-engineer our way out of this climate change issue through efficient fracking technology. We'll be able to extract for years and years without really thinking about the fact that we're burning this shit.

As he observes, and as our research confirmed, a fairly uniform consensus exists in these communities that the oil industry is only getting better and better at reducing its environmental impact. Likewise capturing the idea that technological improvement will automatically improve environmental outcomes, a volunteer with the local conservation group used the example of agricultural practices in the region: "Our machinery is getting better, and our farming practices, with the no-till and what not. So we're getting better. Like the oil companies are getting better, we're getting better." Another member of the group then chimed in, adding that "we're doing it on our own, not because we're mandated to." Here, with respect to safeguarding the environment, regulations are cast as inferior to the self-motivated adoption of new and improved technologies.

## Conclusion

In the case of most industries, gaining social licence to operate primarily entails securing consent from communities at sites where a company plans to set up business. Efforts to obtain social licence are thus typically concerned with the operations of individual firms rather than with defending the legitimacy of an entire industry. Over the past two decades, however, the future of fossil fuel extraction has been called into question by global climate change, coupled with the work of climate justice movements and the development of green-energy alternatives. In such circumstances, the focus shifts from specific companies to the industry as a whole: an individual firm cannot gain social licence if it is part of an industry that has lost the trust of the public at large. As we mentioned at the outset, in the ongoing public debate about the future of fossil fuels, local extractive communities have become key voices of support for industry. It is not surprising, then, that the psychological identification we observed in interviews also manifested itself in a vigorous defence of the industry in the face of criticism, whether from local community members or from those perceived as outsiders.



The frequency with which those we interviewed adopted discursive frameworks disseminated by the fossil fuel industry points to a phenomenon that extends beyond merely generating consent for industry operations. What we witnessed was the adoption of industry's world view, a form of psychological identification so complete that community members internalize the discourse and come to regard it as their own. Central to this phenomenon is the creation and curation of a hegemonic community identity forged through continuous but subtle reminders of a community's economic dependence on industry for the provision of jobs, revenues, public services, and critical infrastructure. The result is the collapse of boundaries between community and industry, such that the interests of fossil fuel producers coalesce with the general interest of the "oil-producing" community.

In this context, oil-producing communities come to understand their fate as inextricably tied to that of industry. Residents of the three communities we studied routinely reproduced industry discourses on energy that envisage no alternatives to oil and that position the industry and, by extension, the community, as under siege. The active defence of industry, the identification of threats to industry as threats to the community, and the creation of a culture of silence about the negative consequences of fossil fuel production are the predictable responses of communities who see their existential survival as contingent on the survival of the industry. The hegemonic character of this community identity cannot be overstated. The concept of social licence rests on the assumption that communities have agency: a community can grant its consent, or it can choose to withdraw it. Once a hegemonic identity is in place, however, a community is, for all practical purposes, deprived of much of its ideological and moral autonomy. In the hands of industry, such a totalizing form of identity could be used to mobilize resistance in local oil-producing communities and thus pose as a serious obstacle to a post-carbon transition.

## Notes

1. For an in-depth look at this boom and its impact on the social and economic fabric of rural Saskatchewan, see Zink and Eaton (2016).
2. In May 2019, the Progressive Conservative government of Premier Blaine Higgs enacted regulatory changes that would allow fracking to resume in the area

around Sussex, but plans are now on hold as the province failed its in duty to consult with local Mi'kmaq nations (see Magee 2019).

3. The quotation is from a widely adopted definition of CSR originally proposed by Business for Social Responsibility. For a critical evaluation of CSR approaches, especially as applied by Western development experts in countries of the Global South, see Blowfield and Frynas (2005).
4. Along similar lines, in a study of two cities in eastern Spain where formerly dominant industries (textiles, in one case, and shoe manufacture in the other) were in a state of decline, Francisco José Tovar and his colleagues (2011) explore the ways in which industry sought to sustain its importance by positioning itself as an essential partner in a shared cultural heritage around which community identity could cohere.

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**Kevin McCartney** is a PhD student in geography at the University of British Columbia. His work to date has focused on corporate power in climate denialist networks in Canada. His SSHRC-supported master's research examined corporate influence in energy policy development through ENGO sponsorship. His doctoral work, also SSHRC-supported, engages energy workers and resource communities on issues of climate change, energy transition, justice, and dignity, with a focus on petro-cultures and extractive subjectivities. He lives and studies on unceded Musqueam territory.

**Robert Neubauer** is an assistant professor in the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications at the University of Winnipeg. His work explores environmental and energy politics through the overlapping lenses of political economy, media studies, and ideology critique. He is particularly interested in the role of discourse coalitions—networks of civil society,

industry, and state actors jointly advocating shared policy agendas—in promoting populist discourse in Canadian energy politics. His current work uses content, discourse, and network analysis to chart the development of industry-backed, pro-fossil fuel “echo chambers” and alternative media ecosystems on social media. He received his PhD from the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University and is, by most accounts, a pretty decent cook.

**Éric Pineault** is a professor at the University of Québec in Montréal, where he teaches political economy in the Department of Sociology and ecological economics in the Environmental Sciences Institute. His current research focuses on the political economy of the ecological transition in Canada, as well as of the extractive sector in Canada and globally. A core team member of the Corporate Mapping Project, he is the author of *Le piège Énergie Est* (2016), a book that critically examines the proposed Energy East pipeline project.

**Lise Rajewicz** served as a researcher for the Corporate Mapping Project while she was a student at the University of Calgary, where she earned a BA in human geography. She has since worked in a variety of settings that reflect her commitment to environmental stewardship, climate change advocacy, and public education. She recently joined the Calgary office of Bluesource, where she is responsible for coordinating projects designed to reduce methane emissions.

**James K. Rowe** is an associate professor in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria. His interests lie with social movement strategy, which he approaches from the perspective of political economy and political ecology, with a particular focus on the roots of injustice. He is especially concerned with the role of existential fears and resentments in the creation of injustice and the concomitant need for social movements to develop strategies capable of addressing these fears.

**Karena (Kara) Shaw** teaches in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria, where she is also a member of the Institute for Integrated Energy Systems. A political theorist by training, she is particularly interested in the political dynamics of environmental and social change. Past research has engaged with feminist, Indigenous, and environmental politics, all of which are embedded in her current focus on the political ecology

of energy transitions. This research explores how communities are simultaneously resisting and embracing diverse energy technologies and, in the process, how they are reshaping political, social, and ecological possibilities.

**Zoë Yunker** is a student at the University of British Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and a researcher and project coordinator with the Corporate Mapping Project. Her work focuses on issues of climate justice, Indigenous rights, energy politics, and the climate impacts of pension capital. She holds a master's degree in sociology from the University of Victoria.



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