Giving consent in the petrostate: Hegemony and Alberta oil sands

RANDOLPH HALUZA-DELAY, Ph.D

Associate Professor, Sociology, The King’s University College, Edmonton, Alberta.
Email: randy.haluza-delay@kingsu.ca

Responses
Please consider writing a response to this paper in the WePaste forum for JASTE 4.1 (www.wepaste.org).

INTRODUCTION

As an Albertan social scientist, the orientation of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu seems apt. According to Loic Wacquant on the occasion of Bourdieu’s death in 2002, this orientation was “to use the coolest, most methodical approach to reframe the hottest, most burning matters of the day” (McLemme, 2002). Living in an oilsands-dominated province illustrates the perpetuation of the symbolic violence that “there is no alternative” to current patterns of ecological degradation and human inequality.

Environmental problems result from how our society is organized. The usefulness of social science begins with what scholars are trained at – careful analyses of what’s going on. We begin by collecting and unpacking data systematically, testing and applying theory to explain. In the process, especially in the social sciences, we uncover what is hidden. Environmental issues are social – they are because of how we have organized society, how we use energy, who has the power and how is it used vis à vis specific ways of interacting with resources, energy and the rest of creation. According to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence, Domination works by the misrecognition of power structures on the part of those who are being dominated. In advanced democracies, corporate executives or government actors would not say that they “dominate” – this must be drawn from sociological analysis.

Alberta’s oil sands are contentious within and outside of the province. Oil is a primary driver in the contradictions of expansionary capitalism, extracting embodied energy at production rates rapidly eroding existing supply, and polarizing civil society between wealth accumulation and ecological and social concerns. Given the extensive social and environmental effects of the oil sands (Nikiforuk, 2008) and long-term consequences such as their contribution to climate change, petro-capitalism needs cultural machinery to maintain its existing popular support. Sociological analysis articulates some of the machinery by which hegemonic consent is manufactured by tracing what happens as various actors have engaged the Alberta oil sands.

The struggle against unbridled expansion of oil production from the Alberta oil sands has taken on transnational character amidst escalating contestation by governments, industry and civil society organizations (Audette, 2010). But the engagements of civil society organizations appear to have had little effect on environmental governance, and while they have led to increased legitimacy of a critique of the oilsands have not yet presented an alternative in the public mind. What emerges from analysis of the contest is the way that Albertan self-identification is produced along with assertions that “there is no alternative,” a technocratic closure of the question of the oil sands and a tight partnership of the “oil complex” (Watts, 2005).

Both Bourdieu’s term “symbolic violence” and Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” indicate the structures of thought and practice wherein the dominated recognize and consent to domination such that the elites maintain their position. Besides environmental and social costs, the development of Alberta’s oil sands has been done with extremely low royalty rates, which critics claim amounts to “accumulation by dispossession” of public resources (Harvey, 2003). Contemporary notions of hegemony articulate it as the
ways that capitalism is built into the everyday patterns of living, thinking, talking and feeling (Hill, 2007). Manders (2006) carefully explains how everyday common-sense is relatively “impervious” to ideology critique. In fact, capital’s key elements – a “common sense of a market-driven politics and culture, a neoliberal way of life... an ethically debased ‘possessive individualism’” (Carroll, 2006: 18) – are also those characteristics most akin to “the Alberta Advantage” (a recent provincial slogan). Carroll argues that capitalism is by nature pluralistic, especially in its contemporary forms. Finally, as Raymond Williams argued, hegemony is “continually, to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” (cited in Ekers, Loftus & Mann, 2009).

Scholarship on social movements has been dominated by research focusing on political outcomes (Giugni, McAdam, & Tilly, 1999; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). Yet the effort to constitute an environmental citizenship implies action in socio-cultural domains as well as political ones. Increasingly, social movement scholars are attending to cultural outcomes (Earl, 2004; Hart, 2001; Johnston & Klandermans, 1995). Recognizing social movement action as a form of cultural politics may be particularly salient for environmental movements as they contest political culture and culturally legitimated institutions (Haluza-DeLay, 2009).

Tracing the complex and nonlinear processes of hegemony requires drawing on a variety of data regarding social movement actions and counter-responses. It includes ethnographic participant-observation and interviews of key figures related to the oil sands. Participatory action research, content analysis of media responses to social movements’ actions and focus groups with Albertans are also represented in this research (Haluza-DeLay & Carter, forthcoming; Haluza-DeLay, Ferber &Wiebe-Neufeld, forthcoming; Kowalsky & Haluza-DeLay, forthcoming). The approach resembles what Gellert and Shefner (2009) call “structural fieldwork” wherein “the deep familiarity with people and locales” offers analytic traction on the political-economic world-system.

While discursive practices have sometimes been overemphasized, such campaigning is part of what Gramsci termed the “war of position.” Discourse – whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic – “shapes [people’s] ability to imagine how [their socio-political world] might be changed, and whether they see such changes as feasible or desirable” (Crehan, 2002: 71). The problem is that it is easy to apprehend the specific discourses presented, harder to discern their relative impact, and even more difficult to discover the everyday representations of hegemonic consent. Since we are mostly concerned to extricate how hegemonic consent is achieved in the general populace – the famous “Marthas and Henrys” that former Premier Ralph Klein once referred to – what follows is a very limited depiction of the shifting trajectory of consent and its resistances, part of a much larger project on the political ecology of Alberta (Adkin, Miller & Krogman, forthcoming). Central to this depiction is the way that the oil and gas sector interpellates Albertans. The result is a provincial identity narrative: Homo alberticus becomes homo energeticus.

CONTESTATION

Both industry and government are apologists for the oil sands project in Alberta. We should expect this of industry; the organizational field of industry is a network of think tanks, industry associations, spokespersons and CEOs. More interesting is the common language and positioning by government with the special interests of industry, and opposed to other interests such as broad-based civil society coalitions questioning the trajectory of oil sands development.

Chief among the industry advocates is the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP). CAPP recently launched a new public relations campaign, Alberta is Energy, positioning energy extraction and production as inextricable with Albertan self-identity. In launching its campaign, CAPP demonstrates its awareness of the war of position, as its press release asserts, “we need to draw a line of sight between our industry and the revenue flowing from it to education, health care,...[emphasis added]” The campaign also presumes “the world needs energy; lots of it” thus creating a situation where there is no alternative.
These features are even more apparent in other discursive presentations of industry actors. Recall that hegemony is secured when a position becomes part of the common sense. Another advocacy group aligned with industry describes its mission as to “challenge all levels of government to make common-sense decisions in the interest of all Albertans” (Bouchard, 2009). This group, Alberta Enterprise Group, coordinated the January 2008 trade mission to promote the oilsands in Washington DC at a time when the U.S. National Mayors were beginning to express concern about “dirty oil.” AEG’s website declares that Energy is “common sense” and “It’s what makes us Albertans…” (http://www.albertaenterprise.ca/). Again mobilizing Albertan identity, AEG’s vice-president of communications stated “Advocating for the oilsands isn’t just about preserving the resource’s commercial value. It speaks to who Albertans are as a people” (Yaffe, 2008). Such strategies resonate with provincial narratives. Leduc #1 and other energy booms contribute the trajectory of history to Albertan energy extraction identities. This energy-producer identity is writ into the education of Albertans as even the Grade 4 Social Studies curriculum focuses upon Alberta’s resource abundance without word of environmental consequences.

From several places on its website, CAPP links directly to another website: http://oilsands.alberta.ca/. Prominently displayed on the first page of the website is a video, produced by the Ministry of Environment. One might presume that this government department is charged with protecting the environment, and an early interviewee comments “I’m one of them [an environmentalist].” Shortly thereafter, another government environmental scientist declares, “Let them [environmentalists] throw rocks at us.” Illustrating the stakes involved and the manner of relations with critics, this same scientist was forced by legal proceedings to retract a claim that independent and peer-reviewed research (Timoney & Lee, 2009) on the harmful effects of the oil sands was “a lie” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, June 21, 2010). The provincial government, further feeling the heat of international displeasure with the oil sands, has also embarked on multimillion dollar public relations campaigns.

Alberta thus appears as a capital-state partnership aligned against social actors who would contest the oil sands (Wooley, 2008). Discursive representations of provincial identity is one feature of the Gramscian “war of position.” It is onto this cultural landscape that social movement actors must oppose the reigning hegemony and present alternatives that are sufficient to evoke acceptance by the populace. To date, it is unclear as to whether the cultural politics have been recognized, and alternatives to the dominant narrative of provincial identity of Homos energeticus have even been proposed (rather than reports on royalties, technologies, or the “new green economy”).

Social movement actors engaging with the oil sands include several types of opposition groups, such as environmental, labour, Aboriginal and church organizations. Earlier strategies by environmental groups often involved lengthy consultation processes whereby they hoped to modify or eliminate the environmental consequences of oil sands projects. Finding this time-consuming and seemingly irrelevant to government decision-making (Masuda, McGee & Garvin, 2008; Parks, 2006), environmental groups have increasingly withdrawn in favour of more direct forms of action. Aboriginal groups such as the Fort Chipewyan First Nation have followed a similar trajectory. As the political opportunity structure in the province seems to have closed, ENGOs and Aboriginal groups have formed coalitions with other civil society groups both locally and transnationally. Aboriginal peoples, ENGOs and religious actors have posed rational arguments and moral objections, yet have faced vociferous counter-response. They have found state, media, and other responses have refused to engage with substantive justice claims. Aboriginal activism has included a myriad of post-colonial, environmental, social well-being, and other articulations, yet media reports have near-exclusively limited reporting to health concerns. Nonviolent ENGO actions have been labeled as ecoterrorism. And following a pastoral letter on the moral issues surrounding oilsands extraction (Bouchard, 2009), the Roman Catholic bishop whose diocese includes the Ft. McMurray area was told by public government and industry he should “stay out of their oilsands business.”

Bishop Luc Bouchard’s pastoral letter concluded that the level and type of oilsands development “cannot be morally justified.” Widely read outside of the Roman Catholic community, Bouchard said that
industry and government representatives responded to his letter “like they were reading from the same page” with similar responses and common language. They ignored the questions he raised. Instead, they described their technical efforts to reduce oil sands impact and increase production. Such technocratic closure is a form of cultural politics as it represents a particular sociotechnical formulation of “the environment” and management (Hajer, 2009).

The result is that any contestation to the dominance of oil production has been decried as contrary to the interests of the Alberta people themselves. The elimination of moral dissension thereby places the entirety of the debate on technical grounds, providing support to the petrohegemonic status quo. Furthermore, as shown by the social distress on systems in Fort McMurray, resistance at the community level is an inadequate match for the translocal scale of capitalism and its state partnership. Labour movements have found themselves in a conflicted position, benefitting from petro-expansion yet struggling to articulate a green work strategy. Hence, church groups and transnational environmentalisms have mobilized along with world-wide indigenous solidarity movements. None of these movements have yet successfully presented an alternative to the petro-hegemony that legitimates the oil sands. For the most part, they have presented political action in the form of individualistic lifestyle analysis rather than examination of the fundamentals of an extractive economy or the cultural politics of alternative identity narratives.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, these contestations to the oil complex have had little traction so far in terms of significant changes in environmental governance. Gramsci would say that they have not offered an alternative hegemony for the Marthas and Henrys of the province. On the other hand, there is an increasing public legitimacy to the critique of the oil sands. Gramsci would argue that this is part of the war of position. He would also caution that this contest is not meant to supplant the material actions to win political power. Nevertheless, for Gramsci, issues of culture lie at the heart of counter-hegemonic political action (Carroll, 2011).

In the Alberta case, while capitalism is generally embedded in the common-sense consciousness, petrocapitalism is fully embedded in lifestyle practices and provincial politics making for a constantly contested terrain. Albertans are controlled not by repressive state apparatuses, but by our very own internalisations, propelled also by the petrocapital complex as it hails citizens. Mobilizing identities, projecting that there is no alternative, and erasure of the moral questions for technocratic mediation are among the means by which this hegemony is materially and discursively maintained. Unpacking these social mechanisms requires the tools of the social sciences. Doing such analysis on the burning issues of our day will make such social science appear activist.

REFERENCES


Yaffe, Barbara. 25 Nov 2008. "'In Fact, Every Canadian Has a Stake in This'; Alberta Oilsands Industry Fights a Public Relations War in Advance of a New Energy Policy in the U.S." *Vancouver Sun.*