CRITICAL DIMENSIONS IN URBAN LIFE

Energy Extraction and Community Collapse in Wyoming

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY LIFE must address the processes by which institutional arrangements dominate the material choices and value structures of people, to the benefit of interests far removed from their everyday lives. It must seek to develop a clear understanding of the means by which such domination is effected, sustained, and can be eradicated. This article is an attempt to explore the critical dimensions of everyday life through the analysis of occupational communities of miners and oil extraction workers in the northern Great Plains.[1] The basic intent of this analysis is to illustrate how the use of field methods can be applied to understanding the study population in such a way that a critical analysis can be achieved. By focusing on basic concepts of the critical tradition—alienation, exploitation, and cultural hegemony—this article may be seen as a demonstration of field methods in the critical mode. An examination of the impact of energy extraction in Wyoming, using these concepts, helps us see the collapse of community and the emergence of the impersonal, fragmented urban center.

THE METHOD

Since May 1976, the author has been involved in field research in energy-impacted communities in Wyoming.

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During the summers of 1976 and 1977 the work included full-time participation in the communities as a resident and a member of the labor force on energy-related operations: mining, oil exploration, and construction of a gas processing plant and a coal-fired electric generating plant. During the winter months periodic visits to these and other towns allowed the collection of additional data, follow-up interviews, and the conduct of formal interview surveys. Additional data sets on workers in energy operations from others' research efforts were also analyzed.[2]

The goal of the work was to present a descriptive accounting of the newcomer population in these areas. The work focused on the ways major structural conditions impinge on newcomer choices and activities, structures that (it became increasingly apparent) were those designed by the energy-extracting and -processing corporations. Thus, the field methods consciously involved an attempt to find linkages between social structure and everyday life, using a combination of information-collection techniques in as reflexive and critical a manner as possible.

The reflexivity of the research entailed frequent feedback to subjects of what the accumulated information seemed (to the author) to indicate. Their responses, interpretations, and suggestions for further research efforts were then guides to be followed. Interaction between the data collected and the subjects' responses to the data made possible an accounting of energy development that made sense to both the researcher *and* the subjects.

The critical approach takes as its primary concern a critique of the domination of peoples' lives by forces beyond their control. Part of the research effort, therefore, involved an examination of these forces: how they operate and how they encroach on everyday life. One means of "revealing" these forces is by exploring the problematic situations of everyday life.[3] The researcher examines what structures combine to create problems and how structure is adjusted, or adjusted to, in order to solve the problematic.

The other, more critical means is to explore the research situation in terms of the concepts that have been developed in the tradition of critical theory and research. They are designed to make visible the processes of domination that may exist. If these concepts are found to be applicable in a situation, if the hypothesized processes are found to exist, the situation is then justifiably understood as being one involving domination. The critical mode makes apparent how and to what degree domination is a part of everyday life.

THE SETTING

In the northern Great Plains, and increasingly throughout the southern reaches of the Rocky Mountain region, massive energy extraction and processing operations are under way. The immensity of these efforts is difficult to overestimate: Exxon, Amax, Kerr-McGee, Getty Oil, and nearly all of the other major U.S. energy companies are involved in the coal, oil, trona, and uranium extraction operations. The Northwest's major utility company, Pacific Power and Light, and one of the largest midwestern electric utilties, Missouri Basin Power, are building coal-fired electric generating plants in the region, with more in the planning stages.

The sites and size of the plants and mines are awesome. By 1982 Campbell County, Wyoming, may see two and possibly three trains—continuously on the move—being filled with coal without interruption. Three 620-foot smokestacks tower above a massive structure of cooling towers and generators at a power plant in Platte County, Wyoming, that will soon generate more electricity than Japan could produce in 1918. And, it is but one of many.

Agricultural communities of two to six thousand people that, at best, had been holding constant in population since 1950 have found themselves doubling, tripling, and occassionally quadrupling in size since 1970. The initial shock felt by many residents of these communities is now being eased

somewhat as this process of growth becomes better understood and as tax dollars from this development find their way back to the communities. Still, the change is massive and frequently dramatic, not just in its pathological aspects but in its manifestation (in accelerated form) of basic processes of social change.

THE NEWCOMERS

Among the most visible and important features of this change is the rapid influx of newcomers to these energy development impact communities. The spiraling cost of conventional housing and the inability and occasional unwillingness of communities to meet housing demands have resulted in a proliferation of mobile homes, frequently housing half or more of the newcomer population.

Among the newcomers are service employees, business people, technicians, semiprofessionals in education, health, and social services, and—most obviously—workers: oilfield roughnecks and drillers, miners, construction workers. There are also the surplus population from depressed cities everywhere: pimps, pushers, hustlers, the unskilled and underemployed seeking opportunity, a third chance, and, perhaps, an easy mark. While newcomers in white-collar occupations and their families are frequently well received, the manual workers are often met with a variety of avoidance or hostile tactics. Special zoning regulations or housing projects that isolate newcomers, inflated prices, and police suspicion may be the rule of the day.

These workers are of no single mold. Many come from areas that have experienced recent economic depression; e.g., the cessation of major timbering operations in northwestern Montana. To them the status of "newcomer" is strangely new. Others are in occupations, like most Americans,[4] that inevitably, predictably require movement. This is especially true for miners who are used to mines operating for five to ten years, for technicians tracked into a career

plan, or for others who will change companies as they become redundant through shifts in capital investment policies. Still others, especially the young workers, are establishing their work lives for the first time. Here opportunities abound for those with little experience. To the young and occasional movers, being a newcomer is a skill that is to be mastered. Assimilation into a new community becomes a learned strategy, like safely packing a moving van, developed after a couple of false starts.

Finally, thousands of workers are in occupations that require more than occasional movement. Their particular jobs are, by design, short term. Oil field workers, hardrock miners in small operations, specialized construction craftsmen, and others do a job that is rapidly completed, necessitating frequent moves. For them being a newcomer is a persistent reality, a part of their identity. They may even describe themselves as "transients." Assimilation is unexpected; community ties are seldom developed.[5] It is the everyday life of this latter population, as well as the "occasional newcomer" that is the focus of this article. It is, in particular, the interface of everyday life and the structure of the energy extraction operations for miners and oil field workers that constitute the domain of the following analysis.

ALIENATION: ISOLATION AND POWERLESSNESS

The concept of alienation remains central to a critical analysis of everyday life in mining and oil field communities. For the purposes of this article, alienation is defined as the objective loss of control over significant domains of life. The major forms of alienation here include the destruction of family relations and the absorption of alienation by the family structure, and loss of power over place, time, pace, and length of work by the employee. There is also the alienation of the community itself, as it absorbs the social costs of the capitalist sector itself. This alienation manifests

itself in crime rates as people attempt to reunite production and distribution forcibly; through turnover rates as the indigent move elsewhere for state aid; in fragmented social relations as friends come and go with the wind. The rural town loses its communal character and becomes the impersonal supplier to corporate workers who are moved in and out as capital considerations dictate. Both as a structural condition and as a condition that the newcomers are aware of, alienation is a real phenomenon in their lives. The basis for and the extent of this alienation can best be recognized by looking at the processes of isolation and powerlessness separately.[6]

Isolation is experienced in a myriad of ways for these newcomers. For married women it is probably more salient than for their husbands. They are usually away from "home" and miss the supports of the extended family most acutely. Alienation is particularly strong when marital problems occur and when child-rearing is at a problematic point. The traditional role relations of mot newcomers provide a variety traditional role relations of most newcomers provide a variety of alternatives to the man, from abdication of certain responsibilities in the parent-child relationship to enforcing his wishes in cases of marital discord (especially when the wife has no independent income). Her usual alternatives are extremely narrow when the extended family is hundreds of miles away, hence she may express extreme anxiety over her sense of being isolated.

The youth of the newcomer population means that young children are frequently at home. Energy-impacted communities have been very slow to develop adequate day care facilities. This, coupled with the scarcity of female employment opportunities and again with the traditional ideal of the mother-stays-home-with-children, results in further everyday isolation. Shopping trips, a short chat with a neighbor, an occasional night out, or an excursion on the husband's day off provide the only (and frequently inadequate) means of breaking this confinement to home and child.

Isolation is intensified under conditions of uncertainty about jobs, both their duration and their subsequent location. An oil field driller can never be sure how deep a single operation will go or where the next hole will be drilled. A miner seldom can predict when the company will decide that a mine has been played out. To meet these and other uncertainties, people will commute long distances to the job rather than have their entire family move. This commuting process means that many hours a week are spent on the road away from family, neighbors, and community, increasing both felt and real isolation.

The factors of uncertainty are even more profoundly isolating when workers choose to live closer to their job, apart from their families, returning home only on days off. This occurs especially when children are in school or when wives have "laid down the law" that they will "no longer live like gypsies." This adaptive strategy for workers and their families both separates members of the family from each other and isolates the family from many of the normal affairs of the community, affairs predicated on the availability of one's marital partner or on the constantly intact family.

Powerlessness is a more serious part of the alienation in the everyday lives of miners and oilfield workers. The productivity of these workers is extremely high. The highly capital-intensive approach taken in modern (especially surface/strip) mining and oil extraction, combined with the skilled work force, makes investment returns very high per worker. High profits are reflected only partially in wages and benefits. Primarily, these wages are set at the rate that ensures that the job will be done. In a way that Marx so clearly enunciated, as workers on these operations have created more and more wealth, they have correspondingly increased their own powerlessness.

By enriching the companies, the means of acquiring massive, sophisticated technologies are made increasingly possible. These technologies have reduced the necessary manpower per energy unit (ton of coal, barrel of oil). The

companies' increased wealth has provided various obstacles to unionization of workers. Few miners belong to either the OCAWU or UMW. Most workers are either nonunionized (particularly in the oil fields) or belong to company unions. Workers explain this fact by pointing out that the wage and benefit packages they have are approximately union scale. Thus, the threat of unionization "keeps the company honest." The nonunion or company union status of most workers, however, makes them powerless with respect to any serious company prerogatives. As workers, they have no significant power in the work place. When work is the dominant force in one's life, all else follows from the demands of work: e.g., leisure pursuits, consumption patterns, family relations. To be powerless in the work place is, thus, to be powerless in setting the parameters of everyday life.

AVOIDING THE FISCAL CRISIS

In most areas of industrialized societies a fiscal problem is developing, occasionally in crisis proportions, over the costs of reproducing labor and maintaining welfare programs that can effectively diffuse potential political unrest. In the typical capitalist/welfare state society, an increasingly large portion of surplus value extracted by taxation at the work place is needed to provide recognized public services, costs outside the specific domain of capital production. In addition, increasing unemployment, educational and medical costs, inflated defense budgets, an increasingly large, impoverished retirement population, as well as the rising number of other persons effectively barred from participation in the labor market, are contributing to the problems of capital investment that threaten this mode of production in many areas of the United States.

One area where this fiscal crisis is *not* occurring is in energy-rich western states. For a variety of reasons these areas are the best possible ones for exploitation by the

energy and power industries. Contrary to popular ideology, this area is not the center of intensive development because it holds the promise of delivering the United States from "foreign energy blackmail." It is the center of development primarily because of the incredible profitability of the operations, a profitability made possible through the several features that mitigate the fiscal crisis.

The cost of the reproduction of labor in these operations is low principally because of the high capital-intensive approach that is being taken. For example, formerly underground mines (highly labor intensive) are being displaced from above by strip mine operations. One group of miners described their day's work as a fascinating process of peeling off several hundred feet of the roof of an older tunnel mine with a giant bucket. In the next swath they peeled away all remnants of the tunnel itself; the tunnel became part of the pit.

Building power plant may temporarily employ several hundred men. There is a monthly payroll of $1.5 million at the peak building phase of the Laramie River Station near Wheatland, Wyoming. When this $1.6 billion project is completed, however, it will generate 1500 megawatts (a billion and a half watts) of power with scarcely 300 employees.

On a wider frame, the social costs to capital production are low in energy-extraction areas. Welfare benefits have historically been low, due to poor funding from the state and county and the lack of interest in federal programs. Also contributing to this is the ideology of both providers and recipients that welfare and other social services are to be avoided if at all possible. There have been and remain few extensive efforts to help the aged, disabled, or chronically poor. This attitude has meant that many who could not provide for themselves have been forced to leave for areas of the country that are more responsive to their problems or the costs of survival borne by the family or by ad hoc charity.

As energy impact occurs, the newcomers are disproportionately of working age, the majority being between 18 and 35 years of age. Beyond their children's basic need for education, they make few demands on outlays for social services. These families, combined with the single newcomers and those whose families reside elsewhere, create a very low dependency ratio for the area. While the population of an impacted community may double or triple, the number of persons dependent on social services—with the exception of school facilities—may virtually remain constant. This justifies keeping property and severance taxes on energy operations low while profits remain high.

Finally, the majority of newcomers match the local population in one crucial respect. They are familiar with and expect a fairly low level of public and social service provisions. Libraries are seen primarily as places for children. Public swimming pools are extravagancies. In areas with abundant opportunities for outdoor recreation (hunting, fishing, hiking, and so on) the idea of more than minimally developed city or county parks seems silly. People of the community tolerate rather than feel a need to provide serious help for persons with problems—mental or physical—who elsewhere would find treatment at public expense. The rural, conservative attitude that one's problems and interests should be handled by each person individually is well accepted in these areas, reducing the demand for publicly funded services. To some extent, United Way funds provide services and subisdize the costs of reproducing the labor force.

CONCLUSION: THE CULTURAL HEGEMONY OF ENERGY

In a variety of ways energy extraction and processing determine the everyday life of the people in impacted areas. Some of these have already been discussed. It is important to focus, at least briefly, on the wider implications of energy

on the culture system of these communities that it dominates. Such massive operations become the modernizing influences on previously traditional, stable communities. They demand that the community and its influentials adjust to the exigencies of a new economic force. The sentiments of most of those affected, whether as onlookers or direct participants of the operations, range from opportunism to resignation.

"The people of this town better get with it, 'cause it's comin' down!" was the way one auto dealer described his own change of attitude. He had initially been concerned about the scope of the extraction activities, but developed a different opinion when the companies failied to acknowledge local opinion and opposition, proceeding full speed with their plans. With its inevitability he had come to look on the population boom as a great business opportunity. He built a new house and was considering running for town office where he could help the town "wake up" to the fortunes of its situation.

Just as the local political groups are losing ground to the well-educated relatively affluent strata of newcomers—technicians, managers, and accountants, for example—the local status system is finding itself threatened by these newcomers as well. Miners' wives may be excluded from card parties with impunity, but managers' wives must be accommodated or they will form their own, competing groups. Whichever route is taken, the social leadership of these communities is increasingly losing its former character and increasingly serving as a reflection of the corporate hierarchy of energy companies. As purveyors of opinion, these social groups become influential organs for the dissemination of corporate ideals and plans.

The "benevolence" of the companies in a variety of small ways, e.g., shirts for a local softball team or a grant for the library, encourages the adoption of an attitude of paternalistic security for the community. People begin to appreciate what the companies, through their symbolic gestures, are

doing for them. Purchase of newspaper space, manufactured news, the use of professional public relations specialists, and encouragements to employees that they "get involved" contribute to the image of paternalistic benevolence. This image has the practical consequences of creating an urban center, economically and culturally, of its own design. It becomes a "good town" for further development, for secondary impact investments, for illustrating to critics that the company and the community can "work together."

Energy-impacted communities are providing energy development operations with necessary labor and are absorbing most of the impact-induced problems. They are potentially the proving ground for the corporate outlook that relegates all interests and culture forms to the requirements of industry. The company towns of Appalachia were reflections of a corporate mentality that treated labor as a process separate from everyday life. The more modern outlook for corporations is to recognize the interrelations of these two spheres and to pursue its management efforts in both. These efforts are what so clearly mark an energy-impacted community in the northern Great Plains from its predecessor in the East. *Someone* is learning.

NOTES

1. Funding for this research was provided through the Center for Studies of Metropolitan Problems, National Institute of Mental Health, Rockville, Maryland, Grant #1 RO1 MH8343-01.

2. A complete accounting of the methodology of the project has been discussed in Massey (1977, 1978).

3. For a more extensive discussion of this approach, see Massey (forthcoming).

4. It should be remembered that the mythical "average American" can expect to move twelve times in his or her lifetime, and that the "average American family" moves every 5.2 years.

5. This "transient" group of newcomers has too often been the only focus of those interested in newcomers, deflecting attention from the diversity among newcomers (Cortese and Jones, 1977; Little, n.d.).

6. This approach was followed by Davidson (1978) in his grounded theory examination of alienation and social impact.

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