



SYMPOSIUM: CORPORATE POWER AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES

Corporate versus Community Power: A Santa Barbara Story

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Abstract

Fifty years ago, a massive oil well blowout and subsequent oil spill triggered community resistance to oil company operations in Santa Barbara county and its surrounding waters. The county has had surprising success in regulating and reducing oil development. That success is due to the combined effects of grassroots mobilization, long-term organization, and the availability of state agencies and laws that legitimize community participation in corporate development approvals. Despite Santa Barbara's relative affluence, its ongoing battle with the oil industry may be useful for formulating a theory of community empowerment globally.

Keywords: Oil corporations; Community power; Environmental movement

My wife and I and our young children came to Santa Barbara, California exactly fifty years ago. We'd spent the sixties in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Chicago, helping to found Students for a Democratic Society, active in opposing the Vietnam War and in helping define the New Left. The end of that decade coincided with the dissipation of the student-based movement, and like many of its veterans, we began to figure out if the New Left's post-capitalist, radical democratic values



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could provide impetus for locally rooted political engagement. “Act locally, think globally” was a very apt formula.

By the mid-seventies, quite a few Sixties veterans were settling into communities and neighborhoods, undertaking electoral organizing and institution-building in a wide range of ventures, aiming to build a new, popular left in the daily worlds of urban America. It was in that period that the term ‘economic democracy’¹ gained currency as way of encapsulating our evolving perspective. We’d sometimes joke (but not only jokingly) that our goal was to make “socialism in one city.” That is, of course, a play on words used in the aftermath of the Soviet revolution, when many Bolsheviks declared that it was possible to make socialism in one country rather than wait, as Leon Trotsky argued, until the workers of the world had in fact united and made revolution globally. Stalin made sure he won that argument—though in retrospect Trotsky certainly had a point.

Santa Monica, where Tom Hayden, who coined the term “participatory democracy” in his draft of the Port Huron Statement (the manifesto of the sixties New Left) lived, had come to be called the People’s Republic of Santa Monica, largely because its strong renters’ rights movement had led to the election of a progressive city government. Berkeley, the town at the heart of the 1960s student rebellion, was probably the first to elect self-proclaimed radical majorities to its city council.

Ed Kirschner, a Berkeley-based city planner, led an effort to spell out for the city’s development a program that was based on a vision of public enterprises that might support themselves and help to finance a wider public sector. If one could municipalize electricity, gas, cable TV, and other utilities and invest public funds in consumer co-ops and the like, one could begin to transform, on the community level, the way the economy works. One could create jobs without the need for corporate dependency and empower community members to make key economic and planning decisions with resources to implement them.²

Such ideas have been the basis for the intellectual and organizing work of Gar Alperovitz. He and his collaborators have exhaustively documented the many ways that U.S. localities have gone beyond conventional market and capitalist rules to solve community problems. He recently launched a political initiative called the Next System Project, aimed at demonstrating and fostering such community efforts. He calls his vision the “pluralist commonwealth.” The phrase may be

¹ The term ‘economic democracy’ came into currency in the 1970s after publication of *Economic Democracy* by Martin Carnoy and Derek Shearer (1980).

² This vision was spelled out in Bach et al. 1976.

opaque but it's intended to overcome Americans' mistrust of the state—to reimagine “socialism” as a decentralized framework that would encourage and be grounded in local initiative.³

In the 1960s New Left, we were sure that “socialism” had to be jettisoned as a label for our dreams. For most Americans, socialism meant an authoritarian system, an importation of unfreedom from foreign and even enemy places. A virtue of “participatory democracy” as a label for our vision is that it sheds the baggage that the word socialism inevitably seems to carry. I like to say that I'm a Socialist on Tuesdays and Thursdays and a Participatory Democrat on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On the weekend, I might be an anarchist or a Jeffersonian Socialist. Underlying all these labels is a vision of social control of the economy that supersedes private power—but insisting that that control has to be democratic, and therefore local and accessible to community will. It seems that the newest Left is emerging with a clearly stated aim of going beyond capitalism. In the current situation, the newest left generation seems willing and even eager to embrace ‘democratic socialism’ as the name for their aims. Bernie Sanders enabled that embrace by acknowledging that he was a democratic socialist, and not rejecting that label for the program he enunciated in 2016 and is rearticulating as this is written.

Ironically, what Sanders called a socialist program was a collation of social democratic goals already implemented in European countries that are not socialist. He avoided discussion of alternatives to private ownership, community control, and workplace democracy which are central to the ‘next system’ way of thinking. Still, Bernie is showing that advocating vision and program beyond politically possible (at least in the near-term) reforms, and therefore normalizing socialistic ideas can, for the first time in our lifetime, be the basis for popular politics. And his campaigns have stimulated many to think about the long-run vision after a couple of decades in which such thinking seemed to have vanished.

In the day-to-day of local progressive political activism, one doesn't think in such visionary ways. In fact, that day-to-day is often frustrating—there's an enormous amount of petty detail about procedure and policy that one has to know about, and unexpected blockages and sidetracks are almost always going to happen. In the midst of such frustration, I not infrequently wonder whether we who have been practicing community-based activism since the sixties are spinning our wheels while the world spins out of control. Still, I want to suggest, our experience over half a century in Santa Barbara, suggests that ‘thinking globally, acting locally’ is essential for any hope for transformative change.

We arrived in Santa Barbara just a few months after the great oil spill of January 1969. Major oil companies were actively engaged in drilling the huge oil deposits in the ocean waters of the Santa Barbara Channel; a Union Oil drilling rig blow-out led to the leaking of some 3 million

³ Alperovitz' work can be accessed at <https://democracycollaborative.org/>

gallons of oil across the beautiful beaches. Images of oil-soaked seabirds flooded the world's media.

Santa Barbara is a world class tourist mecca because of its climate, its beaches and its natural beauty. The oil spill threatened deep damage to its character and its economy. Resistance to oil and other industrial development was a feature of the region's history. In the wake of the spill, new organizations to promote environmental values suddenly emerged and helped undermine the control that oil-friendly Republicans had maintained in local politics.

The founding organization of the emerging environmentalism was called "Get Oil Out (GOO)". As I write this, GOO has celebrated its 50th anniversary. In these years, oil has not "gotten out" of the Santa Barbara Channel – there are still oil rigs out there, drilling going on. But the anti-oil movement in Santa Barbara, a movement which now encompasses the entire coast of California, has succeeded in preventing new development of oil lands off the coast in both federal and state waters. This stoppage is not permanent—and the Trump administration is seeking to renew oil development off the California coast. But it is a political achievement that further development of oil in the coastal waters of California has been at least put on hold despite some intense efforts by oil companies to restart it.⁴

It is clear that at least in the coastal region of Santa Barbara County the great majority of people will support politicians only if they are determinedly anti-oil. The County as a whole presents a bizarre political mix. The much more conservative North County area, which controls at least two of the five seats on the County Board of Supervisors, is politically dominated by those who are willing or eager to see further oil development. Two county board districts are solidly in the coastal zone and typically safe for anti-oil environmentalists. One seat spans both regions and has been hotly contested but has been held by anti-oil candidates for the last couple of decades. Oil interests recurrently seek new development when oil prices rise or new extractive technologies make new investment tempting.

Oil threatens the south coast economically as well as environmentally. The economy of the South Coast is highly dependent on it being maintained as an attractive place. It's a tourist haven. There's a vast tourist industry that depends on this, but so does the University and its capacity to attract students, and faculty. In short, there are powerful local interests inherently opposed to oil development.

Given the power of multinational oil companies, however, one might predict that local resistance would be outweighed—especially given frequent Federal support for domestic oil development. Still, for the last half century, Santa Barbara county government and environmental

⁴ Two leaders of the Santa Barbara environmental movement have recently published memoirs. See (Relis 2015) and (McGinnes 2019) that provide detailed accounts of the story.

organizations have been able to halt the growth of the oil industry in the region, and veto or regulate its modes of operation.

Here's one case I witnessed first hand. In the 1980s, ARCO announced plans to develop an oil lease it controlled that was five miles off the beachfront of the University of California Santa Barbara. Chancellor Robert Huttenback undoubtedly thought that the University could benefit from some of the money that the oil company would dole out in compensation for the noise, the air pollution and the threat of oil spill that their industrialization of the coastal waters would produce. As the ARCO plan became known, many people in the community as well as students, faculty and some in the administration, thought Huttenback was trying to make a fool's bargain.

As the ARCO plan was coming to fruition, the chancellor had to leave office (for unconnected reasons). In the year between his departure and the appointment of a new Chancellor, retired UC Irvine Chancellor Robert Aldrich was put in charge. I was then a leader in the academic senate, and so participated in meetings among faculty and administrators that threshed out a campus position on the ARCO project. Aldrich heard the voices of the community and the campus and agreed to reverse the university's acceptance of the oil project and to work to ensure that state government would deny necessary permission for it. A complicated political dance ensued which resulted, finally, in a vetoing of the oil drilling proposal by the State Lands Commission. I was struck by this particular episode, given the power of the oil corporations and their usual capacity to control such political bodies. My instincts as a political sociologist made me privately expect that big oil would win, even as we worked hard to stop the project. Somehow the politics of resistance to oil had gained sufficient weight that the voice of the community, in partnership with the voice of the University administration and faculty, and aided by some key Democratic figures in the state government was sufficient to stop this particular oil proposal.

A few years later, a similar incident concerning the University and oil occurred, when new Chancellor Henry Yang came on board. Mobil Oil Company had a plan to drill on land near the campus and to do this they required campus approval. Of course this proposal was seen as outrageous by many faculty and people in the surrounding community. Yet Yang was being pressed by members of the legislature and UC Regents to go along with Mobil Oil. He at first handled the matter by appointing a faculty committee to advise him on what policy he should take, but in the midst of these deliberations Yang decided to veto the proposal altogether. It was a bold move because it was contrary to some important political pressure. To this day, Yang speaks with pride about having made it. I think both Aldrich and Yang realized that the threat of oil industrialization of the coast would be destructive to the University. Its capacity to continue to grow as a globally significant research center, to attract faculty and researchers and graduate students, really depended on its ability to maintain the quality and beauty of the environment

surrounding it. That rather direct interest merged with the strong environmental consciousness present in the student body and in the community and the faculty as well.

Grassroots collective mobilization is an essential ingredient in the process of local empowerment vis-a vis corporate development plans. In Santa Barbara, such mobilization has included episodes of civil disobedience, and mass demonstrations. Mobilizations in response to immediately threatening corporate actions have been followed by longer term organization. In addition to GOO. The anti-oil movement led to the creation of two longstanding community-based organization. The Community Environmental Council was formed to promote environmental consciousness and practices; it has been the seedbed for alternative vision and practice, including a pioneering recycling enterprise, community gardens, solar and other alternative energy projects, and the like. At the same time, the Environmental Defense Center was founded as a law firm for resisting development that threatens environmental values, and EDC litigation has been a crucial feature of local resistance.

The fact that a legal strategy can be effective against large corporate development reveals that, alongside grassroots social movement—and as a result of such movement—a panoply of laws and regulatory bodies came into being that provided crucial leverage for local challenge. In California, these include the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)—which requires environmental impact review for all development projects receiving government approval with full opportunity for public hearings and challenges—and the California Coastal Act, which established the Coastal Commission as a regulatory body overseeing all development within one mile of the coastline. These two measures, dating from the early Seventies, provided a legal basis for environmental activists and local communities to scrutinize, debate, and modify or block environmentally threatening projects despite the property rights of those promulgating them.

A third pillar of local empowerment in Santa Barbara is the electoral process. In California, government policy can be instituted or overturned through ballot initiatives, in which measures can be put up for public vote if sufficient petition signatures are achieved to qualify. The process of signature gathering and of winning such elections can be very expensive, especially given the ability of corporations to invest huge amounts to defeat measures they oppose. Still, important ballot propositions in Santa Barbara county and state wide have advanced community control in the face of corporate opposition—and the dollars spent by corporate interests to pass measures they favor have not always won the day. Meanwhile, in Santa Barbara, and elsewhere in the state, bloc voting by environmentally conscious voters has helped bring dramatic change in the political leadership over the last 50 years. Santa Barbara and the south coast, once governed by bankers and land interests, are now bastions of liberal and environmentalist politics.

In short, the grassroots citizens who mobilized in anger and distress after the oil spill developed organization, and political strategies, that for half a century have checked plans and

projects that would have industrialized this region. Local and state government authority became a resource for that end. The environmental grassroots movement had its own resources. Its participants included a great many people of means and privilege (ranging from wealthy heiresses and landowners to Hollywood celebrities) and there were important economic interests (especially tourism and the knowledge industry) threatened by oil development with power to counter the oil company plans.

Still, despite Santa Barbara's privileged access to power resources, its decades of struggle with respect to Oil (and other predatory corporate developers) seem to me of a piece with community based anti-corporate struggles around the world. The corporate Gulliver, it seems, can be tied down or at least restrained, by thousands of Lilliputian communities.⁵ How localities that appear relatively powerless have been able to win significant gains in the face of powerful global corporations needs to be systematically theorized so that the effectiveness—and the limitations—of struggle based acting locally and thinking globally can be more fully understood.

About the Author: Richard Flacks is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at University of California-Santa Barbara and a long-time community activist in Southern California. He is the author of *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind* and *Beyond the Barricades*.

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⁵ Jeremy Brecher defined the "Lilliputian strategy" for the anti-corporate globalization movement in Brecher & Costello, 1999)