



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

Introduction: The Dynamics and Terrains of Local Democracy and Corporate Power in the 21st Century

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Struggles between local communities and major corporations over resource control, service management, fiscal policy, and police powers are among the signature struggles of the current period. Such conflicts are not new: Wherever has been empire there have been corporations chartered with the extractive purposes of empire—purposes with which local communities inevitably come into conflict. But particular to the struggles of today is a renewed and increasingly networked politics of local democracy in opposition to global corporate power. With the five urgent essays in this symposium we bring these politics into a world-systems space, considering specific community conflicts with corporations over water and petro-carbon as part of larger translocal struggles, and taking up broader strategies for asserting democratic control over economic life. Here, with this introduction we relate each essay to widespread dynamics of local democracy and corporate power. We then go further in identifying terrains through which these



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struggles are building, including those defined by the translocalization of resistance, as well as contests over sovereignty and federalism, the corporation itself, and alternative global constitutionalisms. We hope these essays set in motion further collaborations between academic and community-based scholars, with the goal of equipping communities with knowledge useful in expanding and deepening democracy.

Many world-systems analysts understand the contemporary political moment as one of U.S. hegemonic decline. In this collection, we put forward instead the notion that hegemony is wielded not by any state but by the owners and managers of global corporations (which of course act both in collusion with and through the institutions of various states). This framing points to the state-centrism and methodological nationalism that prevails in most popular discourse and social research and prevents us from fully understanding the operation of power in the world-system. Indeed, our motivation for this collection was the observation that so few scholars—even world-systems scholars—were analyzing or even discussing the implications of, for instance, Amazon’s staging of an unprecedented inter-urban bidding war to win concessions for its second headquarters. Our collection of papers interrogates the roles of both corporations and popular movements in struggles to shape the world-system. While corporations have substantially defined and work to maintain the existing hegemonic order, a growing set of popular movements is challenging that hegemony and working to realize alternatives to capitalism. In the course of their struggles to protect communities and local spaces from corporate exploitation, people’s movements have deepened their analyses and advanced shared understandings of the global sources of local problems. They are developing strategies to alter global rules in ways that provide the spaces needed for the emergence of projects that further local autonomy, democracy, and wellbeing.

In this vein, Theo Lequesne’s essay in our symposium draws from Timothy Mitchell’s concept of *Carbon Democracy* to highlight a basic idea in world-systems analysis—namely that nominally democratic institutions embody a fundamental contradiction between the world-systemic logic of endless wealth accumulation—which necessitates exploitation of people and the environment and fuels inequality—and the legitimating ideology of this system, which valorizes ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Carbon democracy points to the specific ways that the carbon dependency of the modern world-system shapes patterns of exploitation and obstructs democracy. Lequesne’s concept of “petro-hegemony” thus illuminates the role of the fossil fuel sector in this world-system. Indeed, the fact that a large and growing majority of the world’s leading economies are corporations rather than states, and the fact that fossil fuel-related industries are best represented among the world’s richest companies suggest that petro-hegemony will outlast the hegemony of the United States or any other state, so long as the capitalist world system

persists.¹ If petro-hegemony offers an appropriate way of understanding the organization of power in our world today, then Lequesne's use of the term "carbon rebellion" to describe contemporary activist challenges against extractive industries provides a useful framework through which to consider the forms that antisystemic movements take. Lequesne's analysis of cases of carbon rebellion in British Columbia, South Dakota and northern California makes explicit another important concept that orients all the essays in this symposium: the idea of dual power. Dual power refers to the strategy of operating both within existing institutional frameworks while at the same time enacting alternative institutions that challenge the dominant system.

Caitlin Schroering's essay addresses another critical resource issue: water. Some have described water as the "new oil," as corporations have increasingly commodified and privatized this essential resource. Describing her observations at the Summit on the Human Right to Water in Abuja, Nigeria, Schroering illustrates how dual power operates in this context. Water activists are engaging in translocal activism that is both helping them develop their understandings of how global trade rules affect the operation of local water utilities and fostering the development of a global movement aimed at the "creation of a world where rights are centered above profit." She describes the Summit as a translocal learning network, where activists from Flint, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and from communities in Nigeria and elsewhere were strategizing across locales and across national contexts as they confront some of the same corporate entities that threaten local livelihoods. As they engage with and learn about each other's experiences, they develop ties of solidarity that are helping galvanize this growing global movement. In some ways, the *water rebellion* she describes parallels the "carbon rebellion" seen in Lequesne's and other essays in our symposium. Together, these cases suggest new ways of thinking about today's resource struggles and their world-systemic nature.

Richard Flacks explores another case of carbon rebellion—a case involving the California community that gave rise to the first Earth Day mobilizations. Drawing upon his and Mickey Flacks' recently published memoirs, *Making History/Making Blintzes*, Flacks illustrates how the movement in Santa Barbara built upon past struggles for "participatory democracy." His analysis further supports the idea that dual power is a critical strategy for resisting petro-hegemony. In Santa Barbara County, the success of residents in mobilizing against the oil industry is attributed to grassroots mobilization, the creation of laws and regulatory bodies that enabled popular voice, and to favorable electoral rules.

¹ The number of businesses in the top 100 economic entities jumped to 69 in 2015 from 63 in the previous year. Of the 50 richest companies, a plurality of 13 were directly related to energy or automobile production ("10 biggest corporations make more money than most countries in the world combined" Global Justice Now, September 12, 2016. At: <https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/news/2016/sep/12/10-biggest-corporations-make-more-money-most-countries-world-combined>).

The last two essays in this symposium focus on the work of building alternatives to corporate capitalism and carbon democracy. Thomas Hanna draws from his research for his recent book, *Our Commonwealth: The Return of Public Ownership in the United States* to demonstrate the viability of public ownership as a tool for reclaiming community power from corporations. He argues that public ownership has been “prevalent and resilient” throughout the United States for much of its history, providing utilities and water for large majorities of residents. He makes a compelling case that public ownership can unite people across partisan divides around projects that can address pressing problems of inequality, environmental damage, and political corruption. Feldman and Herson-Hord describe a current organizing drive to build dual power in contemporary movements across North America. This initiative seeks to build upon lessons from past movements and to better connect Left analyses with the horizontalist strategies of recent movements, from the Zapatistas to Occupy Wall Street. They describe plans for a congress of community-based organizations in Detroit this Autumn that aims to strengthen the dual power of transformative struggles by building active connections between local communities and creating an “architecture” for movement growth. Key tasks are the work of advancing skills and structures for participatory democracy and helping this decentralized movement be resilient in the face of escalating conflict ahead.

The Terrains Ahead

The essays featured here primarily concern community-based movements engaged in local resistance to transnational corporations or with strategic campaigns to build and federate community power. They deal with two of four terrains—the translocalization of local resistance and contests over sovereignty that we see as significant in the contemporary dynamics of local democracy and corporate power. We think it useful to identify additional examples of contests on each these terrains of struggle, as well as those terrains involving contestation of the corporation itself and of alternative global constitutionalisms, in mapping the dimensions of the developing period of community-corporate struggle.

Translocal resistance by local communities to corporate extraction, privatization, and other projects has created the basis for a terrain of struggle we might call (until a better identifier comes along) the “translocalization of local resistance.” Terrains of struggle are co-constituted between movements from above and movements from below; there is no terrain of struggle without actual struggle (Manski 2019). In this case, we are describing a terrain constructed by contending forces of global corporate capital and local communities, in which local communities network across regional and national borders in order to contest their transnational opponents. In addition to cases considered in this symposium, other examples of social movement campaigns operating through

this terrain in recent decades have included Via Campesina, Human Rights Cities, Kyoto Cities, Mayors for Peace, and Cities for Peace, to name a few (Evans 2002, McMichael 2008, Manski and Dolan 2009, Barber 2013 and 2014, McKeon 2015). Many of the campaigns operating on this terrain are quite familiar to scholars of social movements and global capitalism.

A closely related yet substantively different terrain involves the contestation of sovereignty—of the capacity to exercise legitimate governing power—by communities against higher level state authorities. This terrain of sovereignty and federalism varies radically from country to country and subsidiary state to subsidiary state, but it always involves the invocation of what in the Western common law tradition is called “home rule,” or the principle (related to popular sovereignty) that a particular political community should largely be governed by the people who live there. This terrain has developed markedly in the United States since the 1990s, as communities came into increasing conflict with state and national governments deploying preemption doctrine on behalf of major corporations and against actions by local governments to regulate elections, provide high minimum wages, protect human rights, seek ecological sustainability, and safeguard public health (Bare *et alia* 2019, Barber 2013; Manski and Peck 2006).

Contemporary campaigns in the United States operating on this terrain include those waged through the community rights movement (asserting home rule powers to protect the rights of nature, to ban fracking, etc.), the sanctuary cities movement, various efforts to establish publicly owned energy and other utilities, and the wave of local government ordinances and resolutions nullifying corporate constitutional rights (CELDF 2018). There are parallel movements operating on similar principles throughout the world today, among them the noteworthy rebel cities or human rights cities movements (Holston 2009, Harvey 2012, Caccia 2015; Oömen et al. 2016). These movements draw on rich historical traditions, ranging from the revolutionary (from the committees of correspondence of the American Revolution to the soviets and communes of 19th and 20th century revolutionary struggles) to mainstream reform (various leagues of cities, home rule movements, alliances of municipal political parties). Overall, the primary question operative on this terrain is that of how local communities can scale up and build federated power as a counter to global corporate power? How can communities transition from translocal networks of resistance to regional and global organizations of community power?

The essays featured in this symposium deal largely with campaigns operative on these first two terrains. However, there are two additional terrains of struggle that we think critical to the larger dynamics of local democracy and corporate power. One of these terrains is the corporation itself. The corporation has been made a contested terrain through the conscious efforts of democracy activists, particularly those activists in the United States influenced by the work of Richard Grossman and the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy (POCLAD) throughout

the 1990s (Grossman and Adams 1993, Coleridge *et alia* 2000, Ritz 2001). The goal as Grossman and others put it, was to show that, “it is not what corporations *do* that is the issue, it is what corporations *are* that is the issue.” By the end of the 1990s, the corporation had been made a focus of contestation, the terrain of the corporation opened up, and a series of mobilizations and organizations began to move across the surface. These included everything from the anti-corporate dimensions of the mass protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 to media projects like AdBusters, Multinational Monitor, and Boycott Quarterly, to the nearly one thousand college teach-ins on corporate power coordinated by the Democracy Teach-In Clearinghouse, to (more recently) the We the People Amendment and related constitutional amendments sponsored by leading members of the U.S. Congress that would end (or at least limit) the ability of corporations to wield the U.S. Constitution against public regulation (Manski 2015). Notably, community-level organizing through local governments has remained a central practice of movements that have made the corporation an issue. For instance, the majority of the over 700 resolutions the Move to Amend coalition has collected supporting the We the People Amendment were adopted through local referenda or initiatives or by votes of local government councils.

Even as corporations have been made an issue, to too have the rules of the world-system itself. One of the terrains that communities and corporations increasingly contest is that of global constitutionalism. We can regard much of the protest in the decades since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio and the 1994 Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle as raising up popular demands for a different kind of globalization. If capitalist globalization has been defined “from above” by government and corporate elites acting against democratic accountability to establish a new global constitutional order through the World Trade Organization and other institutions, antisystemic movements from below have responded by demanding new rules for the governance of the world system. Global capitalism has made it necessary for any local community to “think and act globally” if it is to influence local conditions. Thus, the growing literature on global activism highlights the need for translocal networks that leverage both local and global power. Building unity and coordinating struggles across terrains requires common focal points. Shared analyses, concepts and projects are emerging with time, and their fruits are evident in, for instance, the 2018 draft text for an international treaty regulating corporate practices,² a UN resolution on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas (Smith and Schroering 2018), and legal advances in national and international bodies for the rights of nature and food sovereignty (Smith 2014). Alongside these particular initiatives are a more generalized politics around the democratization of global governance, particularly in the area of climate policy, where a climate

² “Legally Binding Instrument to Regulate, in International Human Rights Law, the Activities of Transnational Corporations and other Business Enterprises.” At: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/WGTransCorp/Pages/IGWGOntnc.aspx>

democracy politics articulated in the Green New Deal and the recent waves of climate strikes has emerged out of the climate justice movement (Manski and Stein 2014, Tokar 2015, Foran 2015). Another example can be found in the area of supply-chain management, where cooperatives and technologists are uniting to build digital platforms to replace capitalist modes of the distribution and exchange (Bauwens and Kristakis 2017, Manski 2017). Each of these advances have required global activist networks, all of them are designed to constitutionalize democratic principles of subsidiarity and participation on a global basis, and all of them pose serious challenges to the regular functioning of corporate capitalism.

Democracy is Subversive Everywhere

Economic globalization has in many respects been a project to disconnect people from place and community. In order to extract profits, corporations must disrupt kinship networks and make workers dependent upon wages. They must reduce communities' sense of connection to their natural environments in order to be able to extract resources and externalize production costs. Although democracy has been coopted to legitimate the contemporary world-system, democracy also necessarily contradicts the logic of the system and thus threatens to undermine its stability. As C.D. Lummis has observed, "democracy is subversive everywhere" (1996). At this political moment of U.S. hegemonic decline, popular insurgencies are among the counter-hegemonic forces seeking to challenge "petro-hegemony" and to reshape the global order. Activists engaged in community-based campaigns against corporate power are generally operating on terrains defined by the translocalization of local resistance, or by contests over sovereignty, the corporation itself, or alternative global constitutionalisms. Demands for democracy are the primary motivation for most of today's global protests, according to a systematic analysis by Ortiz and colleagues (2013). And the centralization of power in the hands of a small (and shrinking) number of transnational corporations is helping provide the fuel that is generating these new demands for and experiments in local democracy, as people work to overcome the dislocations of global capitalism and reclaim their commons, rebuild their communities, defend the wild, and restore connections to place.

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