

Extracting Accountability: Engineers and Corporate Social Responsibility

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How should anthropologists understand the ethical claims that circulate within the extractive industries and among its engineers, particularly when these claims are clearly being leveraged to legitimize continuing extraction? In the twenty-first century, the development of mines and petroleum projects has been profoundly reshaped by the proliferation of new conciliatory rhetorics and outreach methods collectively known as corporate social responsibility (CSR). For industry representatives who embrace CSR as part of a new “triple bottom line,” these ideas and techniques offer new terms for defending companies and shaping debates over remediation and reform. For engineers responsible for enacting CSR around contentious developments, however, the elusive promises of accountability embedded in new programs have also generated a multitude of competing responsibilities, complicating engineers’ everyday work and unsettling their senses of self.

In *Extracting Accountability*, Jessica Smith deftly captures these tensions by “treating ... CSR as a dynamic and contested field of relational practice, not primarily as a static set of codes, guidelines, or standards” (p. 31). Engineers experience this field through distinct categories of accountability, defined by Smith as: “1. Formal accountabilities encoded in law, standards, professional ethics codes, and corporate policies; 2. Accountabilities to professional ideals ... [including] institutional pressures to deliver and protect profit for corporate shareholders; 3. Accountabilities to the publics that cohere around engineers’ work; [and finally] 4. Accountabilities that are experienced as ‘personal’ ethical frameworks but emerge from and reinforce broader histories and discourses, including industry” (p. 28). Throughout the book, Smith details the ways engineers seek to reconcile the tensions between these accountabilities. She also defines two distinct “moral architectures” that shape these efforts: the “social license to operate” (SLO), a term first used by extraction company executives to acknowledge public criticisms of their industries, and the “ethics of material provisioning,” a rationale named by Smith to describe how mining engineers link their labor to what they see as fundamental societal needs.

Smith situates these tensions within an institutional history of CSR, first by tracing the emergence of specific outreach methods during the 1970s birth of “regulatory environmentalism” in the United States. Detailing planning discussions surrounding a proposed molybdenum mine in Colorado, Smith shows how employees of AMAX Minerals Inc. strategized to preemptively frame regulatory conversations and mollify potential opposition. They hosted public discussions with relatively sympathetic environmental scientists, proposed a tailings facility multiple miles away from the high-altitude mine site, conducted what they considered the world’s first environmental baseline study, and generally promised to go “above and beyond” in their remediation efforts. Fifty years later, such strategies are commonplace, yet this proliferation was hardly a given: designing and advocating for expanded outreach methods, Smith shows, generated conflicting senses of accountability from the beginning. Through interviews and analyses of internal policy discussions, readers see how these efforts were persistently framed through appeals to both compassion and financial good sense—appeals that, according to the experts who articulated them, generated more resistance among AMAX personnel than among the residents they were meant to appease. Ultimately, most of these precedent-setting projects failed not because they invited meaningful public comment but because commodity prices collapsed. Meanwhile, however, these prototypical CSR maneuvers charted a path for future companies to follow to create a sense of inevitability around new extractive projects.

Following these case studies, Smith deploys interviews and ethnographic encounters from outreach initiatives surrounding gas developments in Colorado to introduce an array of engineers whose careers have become embedded in CSR. Across their far-ranging accounts, Smith identifies a “productive slippage between the corporate ‘person’ and the human person representing it” (p. 103). This slippage includes engineers’ subtle shifts between referencing “we” and “they” while discussing individual projects, industry trends, and remembered confrontations. It also includes their idiosyncratic engagements with specific contradictions, including between personal passions for wilderness recreation, pride in their employers,

and anxieties over environmental damage. Smith also skillfully shows how these internal negotiations change shape when engineers feel themselves or their industries attacked, whether by affected residents or by incredulous family members and friends.

Extracting Accountability should be read closely by anthropologists and engineers alike. The well-organized institutional history of CSR will be useful for scholars studying the extractive industries, but it will also help engineering students who may otherwise apprehend the moral claims of CSR as timeless principles rather than as deliberately formulated policy artifacts. To this end, Smith includes a compelling epilogue detailing her work building a “Humanitarian Engineering” program at the Colorado School of Mines, including longitudinal surveys she organized to track students’ changing career aspirations throughout their undergraduate years. Across these readerships, Smith’s criticisms will resonate clearly: even the most seemingly deferential community-engagement process invariably asks how, not whether, a project ought to proceed. Moreover, the kinds of professional choices and rhetorical strategies created through CSR mean that diverse actors with diverse intentions all ultimately facilitate industrial development.

The central arguments of *Extracting Accountability* are devastating in their simplicity. Yet these arguments also underscore the need for more patient accounts of experts’ complicities, particularly as resource developers grow more adept at absorbing critiques. As Smith says in her conclusion: “to understand the accountability of technoscientific corporations, we must understand the agencies of the people who constitute them” (p. 192). Extractive engineers simultaneously embody and detach from their employers, enacting their industry even as they struggle against it. Importantly, Smith’s theoretical concerns capture emergent demographic trends: few mining and petroleum experts still spend their entire careers with individual companies, and the increasingly peripatetic nature of experts’ professional trajectories is shaping how they reconcile competing accountabilities. The sensitive way Smith engages with engineers who have left for other industries echoes a sense of circumspection that permeates the book, an avowedly feminist reticence against “purity politics” and other prevailing trends of reducing agency to whistleblowing and outright resistance. Nearly all practicing engineers, Smith suggests, would appear too complicit to meet this standard, regardless of how their engagements with these complicities shape their work and everyday lives. *Extracting Accountability* offers urgently needed insight into this broad field of ethical labor and a compelling blueprint for future ethnographies of extractivism.

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