

Oil Spills and Communities

The oil industry has been a huge contributor to almost every type of pollution. Drilling pollutes the air, water, and land with toxic chemicals, greenhouse gasses, and frequent oil spills. Despite the environmental drawbacks, economies around the world have determined that oil is a valuable enough resource that the industry has the power and financial influence to go virtually unchallenged in many countries. This paper will examine the relationship between the oil industry and the populations of third-world countries. Many new governments have turned to rich industries like oil, which promise both connections to richer countries and funds to develop their own. However, poorer communities are often taken advantage of for drilling and extraction, ruining the environment around Native populations and those who do not have the political power to oppose the system. Neoliberal, colonialist politics often do not consider side effects of a consumption based economy and force the assimilation of people in the area, making them dependent on money from oil companies along with education, work, and housing. Often, the efforts of Indigenous populations and activist groups go unnoticed by people and governments of the richer, northern countries, but when they are able to draw enough attention to the harmful environmental activity of extraction and oil companies, regulations can be enforced, protecting the area from some of the disastrous outcomes. By highlighting areas of inequality as activists and scholars have done with the indigenous populations within South America and the United States, I hope to reveal similarities and differences in the way that these people and places are affected by the pollution and power of oil companies.

Looking at inequality through the lens of industrial disasters is one way to understand the systematic problems with capitalism and consumption based economies. The largest oil spill in the United States was the BP Gulf of Mexico spill. This disaster killed eleven workers and leaked

over four million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico along the southern coast of several U.S. states over the course of almost three months (*Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill - Cleanup of Gulf of Mexico, Marshes, and Estuaries* | *Britannica*). An explosion took down BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig on April 20, 2010, but the damage to the marine ecosystem and economy can be seen to this day. Fishing along the coastline was impossible, tourism saw a sharp decline in these areas, and animals were coated in oil, large populations of birds, fish, turtles, and other marine life were killed. The aftermath of this spill was further proof of the dangerous effects of oil drilling. Despite efforts from the company and government to compensate for clean up, removing oil from some areas was impossible or could cause further environmental damage. It took a few months to cap the well, and longer to clean up the oil that escaped. Meanwhile, permanent ecological damage was affecting reefs and sea life. Because of failures of safety measures, poor engineering, and lack of regulations, oil spills like the Deepwater Horizon spill can cause serious damage. Given the importance of the Oil Industry economically, especially to developing countries, these dangers are not going away in the near future.

The Deepwater Horizon Spill was relatively prominent in the media and scholarly worlds. Because of the governmental regulations in place for American oil companies (despite the legal challenges that occur after a large spill), most concerns surround wildlife protection and lasting impacts on the environment or economy. An article from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service discusses the lasting effects of the Deepwater Horizon Spill and what the area looks like today along with a personal account from the author about her experience with the disaster. She reports, "I head outside in the heat to a trailer to meet with the helicopter and aircraft surveillance operators, many of whom are retired or active wildfire pilots. They fly over the Gulf of Mexico reporting on the oil slick, oiled or dead wildlife and boom placements. Their reports are quite

grim. The pilots work with the Service and partners to search for affected birds and lead wildlife rescuers to their locations,” (“After the Spill”). Another article talks about the lasting health effects experienced by cleanup workers (*Deepwater Horizon: The Costs Continue* | *WorkBoat*). Although BP is financially responsible for short-term medical problems, the hydrocarbon gasses released during the spill have lesser known long-term effects like cancer, respiratory problems, and more. This article provides evidence of the long lasting effects of the extractive industrial disasters despite the seemingly strong financial and legal protection of a first-world country like the United States.

In contrast with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, looking into the Texaco oil spill in Ecuador in 1990 is much harder to find information on. The company took advantage of the lack of regulations in the country, dumping millions of gallons of toxic chemicals and crude oil into the Amazon and its rivers. ChevronToxico’s campaign for justice in Ecuador states, “Contamination of soil, groundwater, and surface streams has caused local indigenous and campesino people to suffer a wave of mouth, stomach, and uterine cancer as well as birth defects and spontaneous miscarriages” (*ChevronToxico* | *The Campaign for Justice in Ecuador*). Although there are campaigns like this one trying to spread information on the damage that oil companies are doing in Ecuador, there is little to no acknowledgement of how the oil industries became so prevalent in South America and why the communities are both dependent on and being destroyed by the extractive industry.

The social aspects of a changing economy and government are important to understanding the environmental impact of the Oil Industry. In Vandana Shiva’s chapter, “The Impoverishment of the Environment” from her book, *Ecofeminism*, she explains how capitalism and patriarchy work together to deteriorate the environment, which is extremely important to

understanding why coverage and reactions to oil spills and their effects differ between North and South America. Describing the ways in which the concept of poverty has been influenced by globalization and colonialism is vital to understanding how industries like oil take advantage of low income communities. Shiva also makes important connections between gender, femininity, and nature and how these roles make the effects of environmental inequality and poverty are most clearly seen with women and children. She provides an explanation of the developmental paradigm, in which it is assumed that attempting to copy the model of democracy and capitalism that most European and North American countries follow, will lead to development and success should be recreated in third world countries (Shiva, 1993). This idea promotes cheap labor, industrialization, and an abundance of resources. However, this capitalist system can be ineffective for many areas of the world, which often overturn their functioning leadership systems only to become dependent on industries promising wealth, which only increases the wealth of the Global North. By looking at the way that commodifying land and resources, we can learn more about the process of the Rich encouraging dependence of women on men and work, along with their more obvious dependence on large Western companies and how the environmental impacts are more severe within communities with less worldly power.

Although they are not always effective, The United States has many regulations and laws in place with the goal of financial and environmental protection from oil spills including the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, which requires oil companies to have spill response plans in place and provides guidelines for cleanup and liability. Even if a community lacks the money to pay for the clean-up and aftermath of an oil spill, the cost is covered by the government and company responsible. South American countries haven't had the same law enforcement and regulation in terms of the Oil Industry, therefore, when a spill occurs, the communities affected rely more

heavily on international aid. Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable to becoming financially dependent on oil companies because of their connection to their land. When that land is bought or stolen from them by the government for economic, industrial purposes, they are forced to work for the companies that control it. Despite indigenous activism efforts, there are a disproportionate number of these communities suffering because of the lack of regulations on work conditions, environmental degradation, and poverty. Although they cannot afford to live without the oil companies and their funding, jobs, and education in a capitalist society, most Indigenous activists are calling for stronger regulations as they witness their environments be destroyed by oil spills, pollution, and violence.

The differences in scientific and technological capabilities is another disadvantage for Ecuador and other South American communities. Because patriarchal capitalism is so dependent on economic power, it . The scientific advancement associated with American environmental practices allows the country more control along with the feeling of superiority when it comes to standard of living. However, as Sandra Harding discusses in her book, *The Science Question in Feminism*, science is often biased in favor of those doing it, who are often the people already in power. There is almost always a goal in mind and something to prove with research, so the outcome is inherently biased and potentially misleading. For years science has been used to justify racism and sexism through biological differences. “The social use of science has shifted: formerly an occasional assistant, it has become the direct generator of economic, political, and social accumulation and control,”(Harding, 1986). By understanding the ways in which science influences our society and its importance in the industrialization of the world, we can see how and why the damages caused by Oil companies can be downplayed in the media in the name of economical advancement, especially in countries that are financially dependent on extraction.

The incentive to keep discussion and activism surrounding oil pollution at a minimum benefits the oil industry, federal governments, and the economy, making it very difficult for South American communities to stand up for themselves and force their governments to care about the long-term impacts of oil on the environment. As more indigenous groups and leaders question authority and stand up to the Oil Industry, their governments are forced to protect land and place regulations in locations like the Amazon.

The philosophy behind climate activism also differs slightly between the United States and Ecuador. In the U.S. climate change is something that almost everyone is aware of, and being an active voice it is generally thought of as being progressive and free speech and protest is a right that cannot be denied by the government. However, the agendas of South American governments prioritize the International companies that contribute to their extractive economies, sometimes criminalizing protests against oil companies (Sempertegui, 2020). Because of the attempts to cover up neo-extractive intentions, Indigenous people in Ecuador are put at greater risk than activists in America. Amazonian people are at risk for both murder from opposing leaders and death from health problems associated with polluted air and water.

It is clear that the environmental risks that oil companies pose are relevant and important to the rest of the world given the resources within and around the Amazon forest, and despite the growing interest from a wide range of activists, the environmental damage continues due to the social and political pressure to adhere to the values of capitalist, extractive industries. We often fail to acknowledge the responsibility of international corporations, and with it the responsibility of Western politics and colonialism. The Global South's dependence on the North makes it difficult to separate the social issues from the environmental destruction caused by oil extraction.

Oil spills are one of the biggest contributors to ecological damage, so looking into local and federal regulations and where communities are the most vulnerable allows us to see clearly where the origin of the problem lies. Patriarchal Capitalism has influenced the way we do science, the structure of our societies, and our dependence on resources to such an extent that it is damaging our ability to hold people and companies accountable.

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