

Challenging toxic hegemony: repression and resistance in Rossport and the Niger Delta

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Abstract

Serious discussion about controlling the petroleum industry requires analysis of the balance of power between corporations, states and social movements. The article examines the “toxic hegemony” constructed by corporations and the state and explores two related movement alliances aimed at controlling the industry, in Ogoniland (Niger Delta) and Erris (NW Ireland). It asks how we can understand the relationship between states and petroleum interests and how movements can challenge this; examines the goals and operation of state repression and movement strategies to contain this repression; and concludes with a discussion of the wider chances of movement success beyond the local.

Keywords

Social movements; petroleum industry; repression; hegemony; ecology; Niger Delta; Rossport; Shell

Introduction: how can David defeat Goliath? ⁱ

Discussing the need to control the petroleum industry and possible mechanisms for doing so – without a serious consideration of power relations between corporations, states and popular movements – is academic in the pejorative sense, often representing an expression of despair about the ecological future and the possibility for genuine social control of fossil fuels. True, at first sight the industry – whose major corporations have larger economies than both states considered here – might seem beyond any “mere human” control. Yet if Goliath usually defeats David, on occasion David wins; and one role of research may be to indicate the conditions under which a better outcome is possible. As Raymond Williams observes, “To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing” (1989: 118).

Consider three examples. From the early 1970s a Norwegian oil policy which had hitherto largely colluded with the industry set itself the ambitious goal of bringing it under control for the social good. So successful was this strategy that the Norwegian oil fund is now one of the world’s largest investors and Norway has become an international byword for the social control of petroleum – even if more recently this policy has been increasingly undermined.

In the 1970s and 1980s, large-scale direct action social movements against nuclear power across the global North led not only to its defeat in a number of states (including Ireland) but also raised the costs of building plants, such that the industry was set back for 30 years, with recent comeback attempts less than overwhelming.

Thirdly, in recent years what were once critical science discourses allied to social movements – notably sustainable development and climate change – have become mainstream aspects of the global political agenda, which major industrial states pay at least lip-service to and which may serve as points of leverage for more critical economic and ecological policies.

My point is not to celebrate any of these ambiguous outcomes as simple victories. What I want to observe is, firstly, that these were achieved in the teeth of bitter opposition by major corporations and powerful states; it is by no means impossible to defeat Goliath, even if movements “fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other [people] have to fight for what they meant under another name” (Morris 1886).

Secondly, these represent three very different strategies: Norway a left social democracy, with movements firmly institutionalized within a reforming state; resistance to nuclear power one of the first flowerings of left-libertarian (grassroots, bottom-up) movement politics after 1968; and the changing of official discourse an outcome of NGO politics in these neo-liberal end times. Whatever *other* distinctions we might make between these strategies, then, the potential for effective outcomes against toxic hegemony is not the property of one movement approach alone. Given the “ecology of knowledges” underlying global movements for change (de Sousa Santos 2006), and the likelihood that movements in different places and contexts will adopt different strategies, it is no bad thing that all may have *some* possibility of winning.

Understanding and defeating toxic hegemony

Understanding and tackling “toxic capitalism”, as in this issue’s title, entails attention to the power relationships which underpin it, what for these purposes I will call “toxic hegemony”. By this I mean the institutionalization of “alliances for growth” between ecologically destructive industries, multinationals and states, backed up not only by supportive media and professional expertise but also by much wider coalitions of popular forces, whether organized as consumers, as right-wing opinion politics, as growth-centric trade unions, or as popular demands for development. Following Gramsci (1971), I understand hegemony as entailing (1) “theoretical and directive [organizing]

leadership” by elites defining a conscious energy strategy, as distinct from backroom conspiracies for resource acquisition etc.; (2) consent to this leadership by a wide range of subaltern groups who see some of their needs as met by this strategy; (3) the coercion of other social groups who oppose this strategy or whose consent is not worth bargaining for.ⁱⁱ

Thinking in this way – *politically*, rather than focusing on the scale of energy corporations or the brutality of state repression alone - makes it possible to conceptualise the conditions for defeating Goliath. Coercion is not the opposite of consent; rather, the consent of some is required for the successful coercion of others (Cox forthcoming), which is why legitimacy is a central battleground for movements facing state violence. Similarly, corporations’ capacity to grow and acquire power is fundamentally dependent on their alliances with supportive states and (as Norway shows) can be massively constrained by a determined political alternative.

Stated more broadly, the problem of defeating toxic hegemony boils down to the *disaggregation* of the alliance underlying it, and the *construction* of an incipient alternative hegemony, an alternative strategy supported by various social actors. Some of these will be “outsiders”, previously the objects of coercion; others will be social groups who have been detached from the previously-hegemonic alliance (such as trade unions reconsidering their support for growth at any price).

This paper explores the politics of challenging toxic hegemony in relation to two specific movement experiences. One is the conflict in the Niger Delta, in particular that within Ogoniland since around 1990; the other the conflict in Erris, NW Irelandⁱⁱⁱ since around 2001^{iv}. The two conflicts are on very different scales: in Ogoniland a population which has grown from perhaps 500,000 in the early 1990s to 750,000 – 1 million today (Owens Wiwa, pers. comm.) is affected by a plethora of oil and gas projects, part of a wider complex of struggles over the petroleum resources of the Niger Delta, home to many different ethnic groups and part of a complex and corrupt Nigerian state. The population of Erris is small (under 10,000 in total) and remote, and at present facing a single pipeline project – although the refinery may well be intended as a central node for future oil and gas drilling off the coast, and the conflict has served as a trial ground for resisting fracking elsewhere in Ireland and drilling for oil off the cities of Dublin and Cork.

In both cases, however, a (relatively) small and marginal population has paid the price for living where the bulk of a state’s known petroleum reserves are located; in both cases, too, a notoriously corrupt state whose citizens are poor while the powerful collude with the wealthy. The results are situations where security forces apparently have *carte blanche*.

The key moment in Ogoniland was the execution, by the then military regime, of MOSOP leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists (Birnbaum 1995), during a campaign of repression which saw troops shoot demonstrators, extrajudicial executions, widespread rapes, the destruction of villages and mass displacements of population (Human Rights Watch 1995, Corby 2011); the full total of deaths is unclear but estimates range up to 2,000. In recent years Shell settled out of court for over \$15 million with the families of those executed, while court and Wikileaks documents have demonstrated the broader connections between Shell and the Nigerian state during this period. In Erris, too, it was Shell’s use of court injunctions to secure the jailing of 5 locals for 94 days for resisting access to their lands for an experimental high-pressure gas pipeline which gave the movement an international profile; Shell’s private security, along with Irish state forces of the Irish state, have been repeatedly accused of serious violations of human rights (Flood 2009).

Both movements are currently ongoing; or rather these conflicts are undecided. In 1993, Shell was declared *persona non grata* by MOSOP in 1993; it subsequently left Ogoniland and its ownership was handed over to the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation in 2011, with a somewhat higher share of petroleum proceeds now going to Ogoniland. The Nigerian dictatorship itself fell in 1999^v; but conflicts in the Niger Delta continue (Agbonifo 2011) and Ogoni challenges to Shell in international courts remain in the news.

Similarly in Erris the fact that a project approved in 2001 has still not been completed 13 years on is remarkable internationally (Helge Ryggvik, pers. comm.); repression has cost the Irish state dearly in terms of legitimacy, most recently when a student researcher recorded police joking about raping protestors; and much effort has gone into ensuring that what has been learned in Erris will be shared by communities now facing fracking projects across Ireland's west midlands (Grassroots Gathering 2012).

The two movements are linked, by the loose solidarity and information networks of the international anti-Shell and anti-petroleum campaign, but also by a long-standing use of the Ogoni conflict by the self-identified "Bogoni" of Erris, who have made the anniversary of the 1995 executions a central point of political memory. Here the role of Sr Majella McCarron, one-time solidarity worker in Nigeria and recipient of Saro-Wiwa's final letters before his execution (Corley et al. 2013), has been particularly important.

Exploring these two, linked campaigns, their successes and limitations and their future possibilities offers a concrete alternative to *de*-politicised, purely economic or ecological analysis and to ask what might need to be the case for David to defeat Goliath. This article explores three aspects of the question^{vi}.

Firstly, how can we understand the political strategies of toxic hegemony; more specifically, why do resource-weak states make so much effort to hand over resources to multinationals? Similarly, what can be said about attempts to construct social movement alliances for an alternative future in this context?

Secondly, I focus on repression and its management, which is a central aspect of both conflicts and one where issues of legitimacy, coalition-building and -breaking are particularly visible. How can we understand the particular forms repression takes in toxic hegemony, and why do movements sometimes achieve successes despite seemingly overwhelming odds?

Finally, what does all this mean for the broader chances of winning? Can these histories of struggle offer wider hope: is it possible to even imagine delegitimizing the petroleum industry, building an effective counter-hegemonic alliance, and ultimately asserting popular control of energy strategies? Or should we say, with Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of life on earth than "a much more modest radical change in capitalism"?

I. Understanding toxic hegemony

It is commonly held (Ryggvik 2010) that petroleum creates a "resource curse". As a large-scale natural "windfall", whose profits are out of all proportion to the scale of labour or investment needed (Ryggvik 2009), securing control of petroleum resources promises immense rewards. Powerful actors therefore concentrate their efforts on doing so. The resources possessed by the main petroleum corporations are larger than those possessed by most states; a point made particularly visible in Nigeria, where court documents have recently shown that military units operating in the Niger Delta were funded and actions instigated by Shell (Guardian 2011). In Ireland, matters work somewhat differently: the state has itself paid vast sums to police Erris, including deploying the navy to "protect" the world's largest pipelaying vessel from protestors in kayaks; but the main hard evidence of corporate financing of repression to date is the bizarre story of contractors told to reward police with €35,000 worth of alcohol, which came to light when the contractors sued Shell for unpaid invoices (Vulliamy 2013).

More importantly, perhaps, petroleum profits are so large that Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha's personal wealth could run into the billions of dollars without this driving corporations away (the more so as not all this wealth can be attributed to corporate corruption). In Ireland, things

sometimes operate at a less grandiose scale. Ray Burke, the minister who signed away the state's royalties and its share in offshore oil and gas to the petroleum companies – in a private meeting and against the advice of his civil servants – became the only Irish minister ever to serve a prison sentence for corruption, yet the sums in relation to which he was convicted (not around petroleum access) were a mere £35,000. The scale of profits from oil and gas need not mean that the profits from corruption are correspondingly large.

Either way, with corrupt and weak states, securing natural resources for corporate benefit entails that the often economically and politically marginal populations concerned^{vii} suffer ecological degradation of their economic resource base (fresh water, sea fishing, land) as well as health costs, disrupted development and repression. The vast bulk of Nigeria's GDP and virtually all its export revenue are generated in the Niger Delta, where less than a quarter of the population lives. On the national scale, inequality grows between those elites who can secure some portion of the petroleum revenues and the rest of society^{viii}.

To give a sense of the scale of this: at time of writing a severe austerity programme imposed on Ireland by the IMF / WB, European Central Bank and European Commission is seeking to remove €3bn a year in successive budgets and reduce a national debt of €137bn. The official estimate of the value of petroleum reserves off Ireland's west coast *alone* (exclusive of offshore reserves elsewhere and fracking possibilities) is €750bn (Shell to Sea 2012). Thus resource-cursed states see a massive concentration of wealth in the hands of corporations, the personal enrichment of a small, neo-*comprador* elite, and the relative impoverishment of the bulk of the population. "Toxic hegemony" underwrites capitalism at its most poisonous, literally and figuratively.

Yet corruption alone cannot be a sufficient explanation: it is a mechanism but, as the largely non-corrupt Norwegian example shows, it is not inevitable. Irish and Nigerian politics are not inherently crooked; states, elites and individuals choose (or seek) to become so and may or may not receive offers^{ix}.

Instrumental and non-instrumental explanations

Classic Marxist discussions of the state contrast instrumental and non-instrumental approaches (Miliband and Poulantzas 1976). In one, the state *is* the "executive committee of the bourgeoisie"; its personnel, elected officials and civil service alike, are drawn from the service class and the petty bourgeoisie (only occasionally large-scale capitalists); there is a revolving door between high-level elected and civil service positions and roles in major corporations; close family and friendship ties are normal; and so on.

In the other, the state is capitalist because (whatever the social origins of its office-holders) it has to secure its own long-term interests through an economic alliance with capital (with at times some freedom of choice as between different fractions of capital) – an alliance which is central not only to its tax take (and therefore survival) but also to its strategic interests and relative position vis-à-vis other states.

Corruption is, perhaps, a subset of the instrumental theory of the state: it is the private interests of its office-holders which lead it to side with corporations. Of course it is often or usually the case that office-holders can be bribed; that they have personal connections with corporate wealth; and that they see what is good for Big Oil as good for the state. This "overdetermination" may be a good explanation of why it is rare for states *not* to fall in line^x.

In Ireland, such corruption is regularly seen as endemic (Byrne 2012, Transparency 2012). Ray Burke's conviction has already been mentioned. Other members of the Fianna Fáil party, most commonly in power in Ireland, have been the target of corruption investigations, particularly Charlie Haughey, regularly prime minister between 1979 and 1992 and his loyal supporter Bertie Ahern,

prime minister from 1997 - 2008. More recent politicians in the same tradition may now come under investigation for their role in the guarantee to private banks which provoked Ireland's debt crisis.

An instrumental theory of the state, with less personal corruption, might more schematically be associated with Ireland's other main right-wing party, Fine Gael, to explain why Enda Kenny, the current prime minister from Mayo, has consistently supported Shell; or why minister for justice Alan Shatter, with a distinguished past in civil liberties, should have publicly intervened to defend the police around the "rape recordings" mentioned earlier. Along with their (non-instrumental) views about what might benefit the state, elite members are in any case prone to see things as other elite actors do.

The non-instrumental theory of the state is important, however, in understanding how and why parties which are critical when out of power (not simply flying populist kites), have their origins in social movements and whose members often come from non-elite backgrounds so readily change their colours around petroleum once in power. This is true for many of the leaders of the first generation of independence movements in Africa and Asia; it also holds for members of the Irish Green Party and Labour Party, who were supportive of the Erris campaign while in opposition and loyal members of the toxic alliance while in government – or, in the case of Mayo human rights campaigner Mary Robinson and the campaign's erstwhile supporter Michael D Higgins, vocal Presidents on many issues but silent on Erris^{xi}.

Nonetheless, while we can distinguish cases which are more plausibly explained by personal corruption, by class sympathies, or by commitment to the actually-existing state, commonly all three overlap, among state elites supportive of the petroleum industry even if not always in the same individuals; and it is rare to find a combination of factors that would actually lead to internal conflicts, let alone a state acting in the interests of society (although the Norwegian example reminds us that it can happen).^{xii}

Finally, perhaps, we should distinguish the non-instrumental theory of the state from the official proposition that supporting the petroleum industry is in fact the best thing to do *in the interests of society as a whole*. This is one of the key claims challenged by social movements, and the *ultima ratio regum* deployed against them indicates the state's vulnerability here: beneficial to elites in various ways, the petroleum industry is usually bad news for society as a whole, but the state (democratic or otherwise) draws its legitimacy from a claim to be acting in the best interests of society, and must therefore demonstratively punish those who effectively challenge this claim, whether by executions and reprisals in the Niger Delta, by public violence and private intimidation in Erris, or otherwise.

Indeed one of the first *journalistic* demolitions of the Irish state's relationship to the petroleum companies (Connolly 2005) – was followed in short order by a leak from the minister for justice and the claim that Connolly posed a threat to the state. This was sufficiently effective to cause Chuck Feeney's Atlantic Philanthropies to withdraw funding from Connolly's Centre for Public Inquiry. More recently, but with fewer repercussions, a report by Ireland's largest trade union SIPTU (2011) updated Connolly's challenge to Irish petroleum policy and called for a thorough-going review; while a recent doctoral thesis by Amanda Slevin (2013) has done much the same academically.

If at an intellectual level there is no serious argument that the Irish state's subservience to the petroleum industry is good for Irish society, the broader hegemonic alliance underpinning the relationship between state elites and the oil multinationals remains politically important. This plays itself out, as we shall see, around the legitimacy of state violence in Erris and the Niger Delta; it also plays itself out around nostalgia for the developmental state.

If toxic hegemony involves "theoretical and directive leadership" constructed by alliances for growth between major corporations and states, this leadership is consented to by a wide range of subaltern groups who see (some of) their needs as met by these energy strategies, and entails the coercion of

other groups. It represents an alliance between currently-dominant “fractions of capital” and elements of the state, supported to some degree by other such fractions and elements out of a mixture of interest politics and legitimacy, which posits the extraction and production of petroleum products by private interests as central to the national interest. More or less enthusiastic support is given by other “consenting” groups – organised as consumers (car and energy users in particular); as right-wing opinion politics (hostile to environmentalism, ideologically in favour of capitalism etc.); as uncritical popular demands for development; as growth-centric trade unions; and so on.

Social movement alliances against toxic hegemony

All this is familiar to ecological movements, which have found that at times these alliances can be disaggregated in various ways. Most obviously, popular demands for development can and do question *who* “actually-existing development” benefits (Nilsen 2010) and the uneven distribution of its costs (Tovey 1993) and call for a different development; this is characteristic of community-based campaigns against extractive industries.

In the 1980s in Nigeria, environmental movements revolving around the key resources of land, water, forests and so on challenged the state and multinational capital and connected this to the wider struggle for a people-centred democracy (Obi 2005).^{xiii} Around the same period in Ireland, community-based campaigns in Ireland played a central role in opposing multinational development, particularly within the chemical industry (Allen and Jones 2009).

When, as in Ogoniland and Erris, the communities in question identify on cultural (indigeneity) or economic (subsistence) grounds as having a way of life directly threatened by the industry, this makes for very powerful local mobilizations (Osha 2006). However, in Ireland as in Nigeria, the popular memory of developmental nationalisms runs deep and can easily be tapped by populist state rhetoric. It is difficult to highlight *both* the extent to which neoliberal states have abandoned national-developmental strategies *and* the extent to which the benefits of these were always unevenly distributed at best – in other words to challenge state populism, avoid a purely nostalgic politics and argue for a different future. This is perhaps the deepest level on which toxic *hegemony* operates, and challenging it has been fundamental to anti-nuclear power and roads protest campaigns, among others.

More specific identifications – by trade unions of industry with jobs, or by consumers with cars – lie somewhat closer to the surface and can be challenged in more specific ways. In Norway, for example, critical figures within the energy trade unions have long argued that the best strategy for continued employment has been to resist the financialisation and internationalization of Statoil (running down a skilled industry in Norway while investing abroad) and to turn the existing skill base to good use, not only in decommissioning plants but in tail-end production, continued extraction from existing fields with lower profit rates etc. (Ryggvik 2009).

The argument about roads and public transport is a fairly straightforward one, although its effectiveness may depend on the existing level of public transport (the more car-dependent a population, the harder to imagine an effective public transport system). Despair about widespread “car culture” did not prevent a powerful roads protest movement in Britain (Wall 1999), which in turn laid important groundwork for the ecological-left alliances of the global justice movement (Flesher Fominaya 2013).

In terms of opinion politics, the larger-scale argument about climate change is a significant one and an interesting battleground in many ways, not least because of the use of mainstream science against the industry-funded climate deniers; a situation distinct from both the alternative technology challenges to nuclear power and fossil fuel (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) and that of critical scientists against official ones. Ytterstad (2011) has done fascinating work on how the struggle between “good sense” and “common sense” plays itself out in journalistic and blog discussions here. At the widest

level, Neale's (2008) argument that we must change the world to stop global warming seems less welcome than in the 1970s, no doubt both for ideological reasons but also because of the apparent prospects for winning both the climate change argument and some actual policy choices. However, since the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen summit this is changing.

Counter-hegemonic alliances entail *both* the disaggregation of toxic hegemony *and* the construction of alternative linkages, and repression plays a particular role. The indigenous / subsistence character of Ogoniland and Erris simultaneously facilitates large-scale and radical community mobilization and poses specific challenges in terms of wider alliances. Unlike movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan or the Zapatistas, neither campaign has focused on transversal alliances with other specific campaigns nationally, but rather both have sought (and found) a combination of national-level allies and international solidarity.

There is a compelling logic to this, given by the immense concentration of resources and power represented by petroleum extraction; it is hard to imagine a movement in this area which does not rapidly find itself in a close engagement with the national state, and hence engaging with nationally- or internationally-organised actors. In the cases discussed here, these include movements for democracy (under the Nigerian military regime) and human rights; socialist and trade union groups; republican (Ireland) and indigenous solidarity (Nigeria) movements; and the non-hierarchical / direct action left (Ireland) – as well of course as sister campaigns, such as the anti-fracking campaign in Ireland or the international alliance of anti-Shell and anti-petroleum campaigners^{xiv}. This highlights the potentially strategic nature of such struggles (Cox 2011).

Part of the difficulty for a counter-hegemonic alliance formation in this context is the diversity of goals, most schematically the divergence between groups whose goal is either continued extraction for the public good (nationalized or with higher royalties, more state oversight etc.) and groups who seek an end to petroleum extraction (on environmental or community / indigenous grounds). Given this, opposition to repression provides a very useful bridging mechanism on which all can agree. Furthermore, as in the campaigns to support the "Ogoni nine" in 1995 or the "Rosspart five" in 2005, it enables the subordination of different political viewpoints under the control of those most directly affected by repression, and hence the deferring of political conflicts. There are limits to this, and neither movement is conflict-free; however holding the alliance together could be far more difficult^{xv}.

Repression also enables the inclusion of groups who might not otherwise have become involved, such as literary figures in defence of Ken Saro-Wiwa or feminist groups in opposition to rape culture in the policing of Erris. It also opens new arenas for campaigning, as when Norwegians, whose national image also involves west-coast fishers and farmers, were horrified to see TV footage of police attacks on such groups on behalf of a consortium including Statoil. Thus for a variety of reasons, state coercion of those who are not (or no longer) part of the hegemonic alliance *and* movement campaigning around repression are key aspects in terms of the future of toxic hegemony.

II. "Consent armoured by coercion": repressive strategies and movements containing state violence

The Ogoni and Erris movements have faced what by local standards is strong state repression, attempting both directly to coerce insubordinate actors and to retain the consent of subaltern supporters of toxic hegemony by redefining socio-economic, environmental and political issues as public order problems. In this section I attempt, firstly, to understand the goals and operation of state repression in this specific context^{xvi}; secondly, to assess movements' strategies of resisting and containing such repression.

As Arrighi (1994) notes, corporations rarely control substantial amounts of territory or physical force directly for any long period of time (exceptions include the East India Company); more commonly, they enter relationships with states which provide the legal and coercive framework within which they operate. States and capital, then, operate according to different if compatible logics. As the earlier discussion of hegemony implies, “the ruling class” consists of elements of state elites allied to fractions of capital, supported to a greater or lesser degree by other elements of both as well as wider social groups.

Such alliances, however, can change: military regimes can be ousted, states can switch their support between national and international capital, or between industrial and financial capital, and so on. As Norway shows, the chances are very high but not certain that states will enter privileged relationships with the petroleum multinationals; and indeed a large number of majority world countries have national petroleum corporations set up in opposition to the multinationals, with a wide variety of current positions.

So too with repression: while in the normal course of things the police do more or less what the corporations want, there are tensions and complexities which can under some circumstances be exploited. Helge Ryggvik (pers. comm.) notes that often the local, middle-management level of an oil firm will have close relationships with local political (and, where relevant, police) leaderships. Wikileaks files showed Shell managers boasting of their close relationship with various levels of the Nigerian state (Guardian 2010), while court documents from the 2009 Ogoni Nine trial show the extent to which Shell directly funded military operations in the Niger Delta (Guardian 2011). Under these circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that close concertation on a day-to-day level, including around repression, is possible.

However, top management in the multinationals are entirely capable of pulling the rug out from under such arrangements, if necessary ruthlessly disavowing local managers who understood themselves as acting for their bosses (Helge Ryggvik, pers. comm.) Thus whether for bottom-line considerations (transfer of investments elsewhere), PR concerns or dissociation from a regime on the way out, such partnerships can be dissolved from the corporation’s side as well as from the state’s side, in the event of a significant shift in national politics.

Elsewhere (ní Dhorchaigh and Cox 2011) I have explored the changing tactics of the Irish police in Erris, which followed the imprisonment of the Rosspoint five (at Shell’s behest, using contempt of court proceedings) with a long, openly-avowed “no-arrest policy”, geared to not creating further “martyrs” but also conditioned by the police’s own failure to impose their definition of public order around anti-capitalist protests in Dublin. During this period, much intimidation and low-level violence was engaged in off-camera. More recently, policing has reverted to an overtly aggressive approach geared to insisting that the project will be carried out under any circumstances. Thus priorities shift from Shell’s PR to tactical policing to state legitimacy: at present, the pipeline is about the state’s prestige.

It should also be noted that repression in Erris is not simply “delivered” by the regular police. Members of the Special Branch have been identified at the scene. Shell initially made use of private prosecutions; it also has its own security firm, IRMS, which is regularly filmed and photographed operating in close collaboration with the police. As Flood (2009) has shown, there are severe question marks hanging over this situation: other than generalized brutality, the employment of East European fascists and the use of overtly militaristic tropes (such as badges celebrating “Operation Glengad Beach”) raise grounds for concern. Finally, to round off this overkill, the conflict has been militarized with the use of the Irish navy against protesting fishing boats and kayaks.

Two issues in particular dramatise these complexities. One is the shooting of an Irish member of IRMS in Bolivia, who according to Bolivian police was involved in planning secessionist violence (Flood 2009). The other, in this intensely-policed area, where there are routinely more security and police officers than protestors, was the vicious assault by a group of masked men which hospitalised

a well-known local protestor, an assault apparently carried out with impunity within the Shell compound, followed by the sinking of another leading protestor's boat by masked and armed men.

Containing repression: challenging hegemony

It is small wonder that report after report – most recently from Frontline Defenders (Barrington 2010) and from a UN special rapporteur (Sekaggya 2013) - have raised concerns about the situation in Erris. Even the Garda Ombudsman Commission (GSOC, which between 2007 and 2009 acted on precisely 7 of 111 complaints) at one point requested permission to carry out a general investigation into the policing of protest in Erris (permission was refused and the subject was dropped).

GSOC played a particular role in relation to the recording previously discussed. Available with a transcript at, this was recorded accidentally when a student carrying out research with the campaign was arrested and her bag, with her recording device still running, put in a separate police car. With characteristic ineptitude, the bag was handed back to her after her release without charge; she subsequently discovered the recording of police officers discussing the use of threats to rape and deport protestors. This recording^{xvii} highlighted a policing culture geared to the use of rape threats both against women directly and (in other reports) against the female partners of male activists. The story caused a number of women's organizations to openly protest: following a period in which they had celebrated being able to deliver training to the police around issues such as rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence, it transpired that actual policing was far removed from the polite noises made in the classroom context.

In this situation, GSOC chose to target the complainant, demanding possession of the recording device (which of course contained confidential research data), refusing all attempts at mediation (and deletion of the research data under mutually acceptable circumstances), it carried out lengthy and hostile interrogations not only of the complainant but also of a trade union representative who had accompanied staff when the device was handed over, threatened criminal proceedings over the eventual deletion of the data and released an interim report riddled with inaccuracies (Hederman 2012).^{xviii}

If the response from the campaign team and the complainant's supervisors forced an eventual climbdown, in which a GSOC spokesperson defensively claimed to have been doing what they thought was the right thing, the details were by this point unlikely to affect anyone who was still keeping up. However the wider public had been forced to take sides on the recording itself, no doubt interpreting it in light of personal experience of the police, scandals around institutional sexual abuse and the wider extent of sexual violence in Irish society.

As so often, such battles over the state's "monopoly of legitimate force" are fought out in various arenas and at different levels: legal and quasi-legal proceedings such as complaints procedures; mainstream media reporting at technical and opinion level; and activist and alternative media such as Indymedia, one of the key locations for the release of the recording. State and commercial media, which would hardly have publicised the recording independently, were forced to acknowledge its existence and publish edited transcripts once the recording had "gone viral" via social media networks – in turn of course amplifying its resonance.

Another important level is that of international solidarity and the international media. Following the filming of the baton charge mentioned earlier, Norwegian media paid particular attention to events in Erris. British media, notably the *Guardian*, can report more openly on events in Erris than an Irish media which is largely owned by the State or by major corporations whose owners themselves have investments in Irish oil and gas projects. On a wider scale still, the international anti-Shell campaign plays an important role in researching and sharing information^{xix}.

Movements can rarely choose their terrain when resisting repression: they experience (much against their will) specific transgressions by police and other repressive forces which in some cases may become public issues. Their technical capacity to pursue such issues – documenting events, creating their own media, effectively addressing the mainstream media, and using official and semi-official fora such as courts – is an important determinant of their “reach”, in particular in reaching subaltern members of the hegemonic alliance (and in convincing senior members that particular kinds of repression, or an entire project, cost more than they are worth in terms of legitimacy).

III. Conclusion: consent, legitimacy and the wider picture

This section briefly considers the wider picture of movements against the industry and asks about their chances of success beyond the local.

Movement critiques of repression are one of the most readily-understood challenges to the petroleum industry and toxic hegemony *per se*. For a range of reasons, particularly but not only in the global North, the exercise of lethal violence has become a risky strategy (Cox forthcoming) and the use of deniable third parties and various forms of offstage intimidation and sublethal violence have become routine, tending however to motivate rather than demobilise campaigners. All of this makes repression a potentially effective (if personally costly) battleground for movements against petroleum projects.

However, there is a great difference between winning a battle and winning the war, for both sides. For movements, winning a specific battle against a particular petroleum project may simply mean raising the costs (and hence lowering the profits) to the point where internal accounting mechanisms will lead the firm (or, in the case of “midge” firms, investors) to transfer resources elsewhere. This may satisfy some community concerns but does not change the wider picture.

From the other side, high-profile anti-petroleum movements risk raising not only the costs but also the implementation time to unsustainable levels. This is part of what happened both with the UK government’s roads-building programme in the 1990s and with nuclear power more generally in much of the global North from the 1980s on: although the state could not afford to be seen to be defeated in the most high-profile conflicts, the conclusion was drawn that such projects were no longer feasible because of the level of resistance which could be expected.

These considerations seem most relevant to national states and to the “midge” firms which often carry out the initial explorations (and are often bought out by the major corporations if they find a major field). Major petroleum corporations can afford to absorb costs which still remain miniscule by comparison with the profits (although as noted they may shift to other sites with even higher profit rates); however they too are caught by the logic of extending *time* costs; and there is good reason to believe that the politics of climate change will shift over time.

On the movement side, the challenge is to convert alliances made around particular projects or in response specifically to repression to more general “movement projects” (Nilsen and Cox 2013), in other words to construct a broader counter-hegemonic alliance against toxic hegemony and for a more sustainable future. Here there are two different possibilities.

One is represented by the current state of the Niger Delta, where resource-based conflicts have as yet not come together fruitfully: opposition to the state and extractive industries is widespread, but neither alliance-building nor a future strategy are evident on the wider scale. Indeed MOSOP stands out in the context of Delta movements as a truly popular mass movement aiming to secure popular control of this wealth, which did not simply reproduce the state’s own practices of violence (Neocosmos 2011).

The other is represented by the relationship between the Erris and anti-fracking campaigns in Ireland, where much effort has gone into identifying what has been learnt in Erris (not least about

relationships between communities and solidarity activists, but also in convincing people that they cannot rely on local clientelist politics to prevent unwanted petroleum developments) and making links with the new campaigns.

This too has its limits in that the stakes are larger, as the issue of climate change reminds us. As with the nuclear power industry in previous decades, an adequate challenge to the petroleum industry today has to be on a much wider scale to everything represented by “toxic hegemony”. At its simplest, infinite growth (the presupposition of contemporary capitalism and central to petroleum-based strategies) is simply not possible on a finite planet. This becomes clearer the closer the limits to growth are approached: climate change; ecologically destructive projects such as Keystone XL and oil production in Arctic seas; resource conflicts as in the Niger Delta and basic commodities passing out of the reach of significant social groups.

An adequate answer has to involve reorganising not only production but also consumption, as part of the reshaping of popular needs involved in a new, alternative and ecologically sustainable hegemony. This cannot sensibly be conceived of as separate from practical politics and in particular social movements: put simply, we have to change the world to save the planet (Neale 2008). The failure of earlier strategies organised primarily along theoretical (Red-Green Study Group 1995) or party-political (Kemp et al. 1992) lines does not make the challenge any less significant; it does, however, point to the need for closer attention to issues of collective popular agency in building the right alliances and undermining others (Barker et al. 2013, Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013).

Coda

In June 2012, Shell brought their vast tunnel boring machine into Dublin port under cover of darkness. Despite a large-scale police operation activists blockaded and pursued it across the country until, wonderfully, the enormous object found itself stuck in a bog in Co. Mayo (“v. tired camper” 2012). Donal O’Kelly’s one-man play *Ailliliú Fionnuála* highlighted the absurdity of the moment: there are not only natural limits to what the planet can take but corporations themselves – for all the powers we attribute to them – are “only human”; they rely on workers carrying out mundane tasks which are easily disrupted, state violence which can be contested and constrained, and a wider political context which social movements can challenge. As Raymond Williams observed, the chances of success usually remain about 50-50 once we have thought through everything; or in other words, David still has a decent chance against Goliath.

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ⁱ Thanks are due to Tomás MacSheoin and two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier version.

ⁱⁱ Gramsci's broader conception of hegemony applies to a regime of accumulation as a whole; here I apply it to the strategically central subset of energy and resource politics, in particular petroleum.

ⁱⁱⁱ This conflict has become identified with Rossport, the townland (rural district) initially at the centre of the conflict; Rossport is one of several townlands in the Erris peninsula of Co. Mayo affected by the conflict. I use "Rossilport" in the title but "Erris" in the text.

^{iv} The key organisations have been MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People) and S2S (Shell to Sea) respectively; in both cases a wide range of other actors form part of the movement.

^v On the wider relationship between ethnic movements and democratisation, see Olayode 2011.

^{vi} For the Irish situation, I draw on the limited relevant literature and long-standing involvement in Irish social movements; for Nigeria, on the somewhat more developed literature while avoiding comment outside my own area of understanding.

^{vii} In Ogoniland, indigenous ethnic minorities in a largely subsistence economy; in Erris, small-scale fishing and farming with high unemployment and a handful of other occupations such as tourism, schools etc.

^{viii} Ireland is one of the most unequal countries in western Europe, with notoriously high levels of state corruption and clientelist power relations. It is this, rather than (as ministers sometimes claim) some unique physical disadvantage vis-a-vis Norway, which has shaped Ireland's response to oil and gas: a long-standing political commitment to enticing multinationals at any cost, coupled with the determination of local elites to secure small-scale advantages as middlemen in what has been called a "meet-and-greet" capitalism (McCabe 2011), and the defeat and subordination of popular social movements (Cox 2011).

^{ix} As Biodun Jefiyo notes, those who could not be bought were a real problem: "One military dictator, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, defined the true Nigerian this way: Every Nigerian had a price and all you had to do was to find the right price; if however you found a Nigerian who had no price and could therefore not be bought,

he or she was not a true Nigerian and had to be carefully watched. Another military dictator, Sani Abacha, had a far more sinister take on this matter: Every Nigerian had a price; any woman or man that had no price and could not be bought was not a Nigerian and had to be jailed or killed or both.” (Jefiyo 2013)

^x In the Norwegian case the role and politicization of social democracy in this period was such as to install not just a sense of personal integrity but also officials from non-elite backgrounds, with a different understanding of who the state should serve. Organised class politics, in other words, is key to successfully challenging toxic hegemony.

^{xi} A more “Irish” view would be to say that they did what they were told *without* even having to be bribed to do so, simply because they became convinced it was the right thing to do for “the country”.

^{xii} More typical, no doubt, is the situation illustrated by the Irish magnate who could boast of his ability to secure the exploration blocks he wanted thanks to his newspaper ownership (Connolly 2006).

^{xiii} For wider overviews of contemporary social movements in sub-Saharan Africa, see the *Journal of Asian and African Studies* special issue, “Political Subjectivities in Africa” 47(5); Dwyer and Zeilig 2012; Larmer 2010; Brandeis and Engels 2011; Manji and Ekine 2012; and Neocosmos 2010.

^{xiv} Being organised nationally can create other difficulties. Irish environmental organisations are often happy to talk about Erris abroad, it being the main environmental issue reported internationally – but are only too aware that they risk permanent loss of the state funding on which most rely if they take a position on it at home.

^{xv} It should be said that state-centric perspectives regularly overestimate the importance of movement “unity” (always a polite fiction); good cop-bad cop is quite an effective organising approach so long as the “reasonable” participants do not actively collaborate in criminalising other activists. Dalby (1985) shows how the existence of *three* separate campaigns against nuclear power in Ireland did not stop the campaign winning.

^{xvi} On wider changes in the policing of protest under neoliberalism, see Scholl 2012, della Porta et al. 2006 and Cox forthcoming.

^{xvii} Available with a transcript at <http://www.wsm.ie/c/garda-corrib-rape-pipeline>.

^{xviii} I was involved as one of the student’s supervisors.

^{xix} Pommerolle (2010) rightly notes that internationalisation has costs as well as benefits; but few movements facing repressive regimes have failed to appeal to movements and opinion abroad.