

Commentary on Research Ethics and the Norwegian Oil Industry: Anonymous

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The conclusion reached by the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology (NENT) committee challenges an ideology and ethics of inevitability present in fossil fuel industries. The anthropologist Laura Nader first identified an ideology of inevitability during her service on the US National Academy of Science's Committee on Nuclear and Alternative Energy Systems (CONAES). Her observations led her to identify the implicit cultural assumptions animating much policymaking, from 'group think' and a rejection of energy conservation and 'soft paths' like solar energy to an 'inevitability syndrome' that excluded from consideration models that did not rest on ever-expanding resource use.

Since then, anthropologists such as David Hughes and Chelsea Chapman and historians such as Matthew Huber have similarly found professionals in the oil and gas industry, including scientists and engineers, expressing positions that defend fossil fuels on the grounds that our society will always require them. Hughes in particular argues that this position is an ethical one. He starts with the position that oil is immoral because the 'contemporary great evil of dumping carbon dioxide into the skies' hastens global climate change that harms the environment and vulnerable populations (2016: 14). Therefore, he argues, treating oil production and consumption as inevitable is also an immoral position, since it allows climate change to continue unabated without considering how energy can be conserved or produced in more carbon-neutral methods. By concluding that petroleum research would be indefensible if it hindered transitions to sustainable energy, the NENT challenged prevailing assumptions that continued reliance on oil is inevitable. But rather than discourage petroleum research in its entirety, the committee also acknowledged that petroleum research 'still has a role to play in the transition process, for example by establishing a defensible balance between research on various energy sources in which the key constituents are research on renewable energy and on how negative impacts on the ecology can be reduced.'

The challenge and opportunity lie in the nature of the 'collaborations' between industry and universities, given the conflicts of interest that exist when academic research is funded by companies such as Statoil. In their statement the NENT found it 'striking that the universities do not reflect to a greater extent on their own role in possibly preserving the status quo through their collaboration with the petroleum industry,' by prolonging and legitimizing the oil age, for example. The committee called for efforts to ensure that 'the universities' research and education and the special interests of business sector actors are independent of each other.' This raises the crucial question of how university scientists and engineers could collaborate with industry to make more sustainable technologies and techniques.

References

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