



# **Introduction: Whatever Happened to Ethics and Responsibility in Geography?**

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As we write, the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ken Sawo Wiwa's execution by the Nigerian Government approaches. Activist, artist and academic, Saro Wiwa and eight other MOSOP<sup>2</sup> leaders were murdered by the corrupt Abacha regime on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1995 because of their opposition to Royal Dutch Shell's exploitation and profiteering in their homeland. Shell has since been heavily criticized for its support of the Nigerian military regime. The following year, the Institute of British Geographers (IBG) merged with the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), prompting scores of Geographers to resign their fellowships due to the longstanding links between the RGS and Shell (see Gilbert, this special issue). Ten years on, in January 2005 in a very different part of the world, five men from the village of Rosspport in County Mayo, Ireland, refused Shell access to their lands so the multinational could begin laying a gas pipeline to a proposed refinery nearby.

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<sup>1</sup> © Paul Chatterton and Larch Maxey, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People see <http://www.mosop.net/>

When the men broke a High Court injunction through non-violent resistance, they were imprisoned for more than 3 months. A year later, 2006, during a peaceful blockade of Shell's gas refinery construction near their homes, local people were baton charged by the police. Turning to September 2007 and to London's docklands, the academic publishing giant, Elsevier, through its exhibition arm, Reed Exhibitions, organized its 4<sup>th</sup> Defense Systems and Equipment International (DSEI) Trade Fair. This, the largest weapons fair in the world, saw 1000 exhibitors selling everything from battleships and attack helicopters to cluster bombs and machine guns to delegates from a third of the world's countries. Elsevier is publisher of some of Geography's leading journals as well as the ground breaking International Encyclopedia of Human Geography.

These events of struggle and oppression were the seed bed for this special issue of ACME. At the 2006 annual conference of the RGS-IBG, members from ten of its research and working groups met to discuss these and other issues which essentially concerned the increasing levels of corporate involvement in Geography and our complicity with the repressive and often deadly activities of multinational corporations. We decided to organize a session at the next RGS-IBG Conference to explore these issues in more detail.

The panel held in August 2007 forms the basis for this special issue entitled 'Corporate involvement in Geography'. Much continues to happen. The Geography boycott against Shell largely receded over the ten years following Saro Wiwa's murder as there was a withering of awareness of the connections between Shell and the RGS<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, whilst many have maintained the boycott as a personal action, other Geographers actually think that the issue was positively resolved. This mirrors the pattern within civil society with a general drop in awareness and activity on Shell-Nigeria, demonstrating the power of corporations such as Shell to shape public opinion. Shell spent £20 million on PR to rebuild its reputation following its 1995 'annus horribilis', contracting PR company Fishburn Hedges to co-ordinate its strategy and sparking a turning point in the use of CSR to manage corporate image (Corporate Watch, 2006). The recent shift in consciousness around climate change and social justice, however, means that things are moving again. The spotlight is increasingly coming onto companies such as Shell with their soaring profits and atrocious records on climate change and socio-environmental justice. Geographers have important opportunities to contribute to this growing awareness and engagement with these and other issues.

The initial response of the RGS when we submitted the session proposal was that they did not want Shell to be the sole focus of the panel debate and they requested that reference to Shell was taken out of the title. We complied, happy to

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<sup>3</sup> In the interests of brevity we refer to the RGS-IBG as RGS.

broaden the focus in the knowledge that Shell would be discussed at the panel anyway. Shell continues to sponsor the RGS, with an annual £50,000 contribution to their 'International Leadership and Capacity Building' programme<sup>4</sup>. This tiny amount is easy greenwash money for Shell with \$70m daily profits and given the ethical dilemmas at stake, it is an amount that the RGS could certainly source elsewhere. Shell has been consistently criticised for 'Greenwash', seeking cheap kudos without genuine commitment (Briggs, 2008; FoE, 2008; Corporate Watch, 2006). Shell's 'shock' withdrawal from the London Array threatened to undermine the world's largest wind power scheme in May 2008 (Macalister, 2008), whilst just 1% of its investment goes towards renewable energy schemes. Meanwhile, Shell is steaming ahead with plans to exploit fossil fuels in the world's most fragile areas including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Sakhalin Island. A recent report suggests Shell has breached OECD Guidelines not only in Nigeria, but also in Louisiana, USA; Durban, South Africa; Sakhalin, Russia; Saõ Paulo, Brazil and Manila, Philippines (FoE, 2006). Shell continues to build the on-shore gas pipeline in Rosspport, County Mayo, in the face of intense local opposition. Local people undertaking non violent protests against the construction of a gas refinery have been exposed to sustained repression from the Irish Garda. Questions as to Shell's continuing activities around the world and its role within a progressive Geography discipline are at the forefront of this special issue. However, these questions can also be placed alongside others as we look more widely at the role of corporatisation in academia.

The Elsevier issue, for example, has also caused much controversy (Chatterton and Featherstone, 2006). Contributors to the prestigious International Encyclopedia of Human Geography began to withdraw their entries in 2006 and 2007 due to their concerns about Elsevier's involvement in the arms trade. However, in June 2007 Elsevier made the surprise announcement that they were to pull out of organizing weapons fairs as they 'are no longer compatible with Reed

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<sup>4</sup> In many ways this Shell sponsorship illustrates the challenges the neo-liberal agenda presents to activists within academia. During the course of our engagement with the RGS, Shell reduced its sponsorship commitment from that of a core, corporate partner to sponsoring on a much less secure project by project basis. Over time Shell may well reduce/pull its sponsorship whether the RGS likes it or not. This offers clear opportunities. With a less secure funding arrangement it becomes far easier for the RGS to switch sponsorship to a more ethical alternative. However, this new project funded by Shell is itself a potentially radical, liberatory initiative! Reversing the neo-colonial 'expedition' legacy whereby western 'experts' 'discover' or 'explore' 'foreign lands' it 'seeks to encourage more young people from poorer countries to develop their own field research projects in partnership with UK students.' (RGS-IBG 2008). In calling for an end to Shell's sponsorship of the RGS we recognise the value of this project and the need to secure replacement ethical funding.

Elsevier's position as a leading publisher of scientific, medical, legal and business content.' This victory, largely due to the much more vocal and powerful medical and law lobbies within academia, gave hope to many academics that their efforts through boycotts and public exposure can get companies to divest from certain activities (see Stafford, this issue). The key question is how to build upon victories such as Elsevier - there are a thousand similar issues out there.

So to the ideas behind this debate. Many geographers are increasingly concerned not just about the intrusion of neoliberal policies into our workplaces through the marketisation of higher education, but also about how we are increasingly directly involved with, and guided by, large multinational corporations (see Chatterton and Featherstone, 2006; Blomley, 2006; Castree, 2000; Hughes and Reimer, 2004). There is growing awareness of our role, not as handmaidens to capitalism, but as critical public scholars. As a result of these concerns, 'public' variants of sociologies, geographies and anthropologies have emerged to elucidate what exactly our public role is or should be (see for example, Burawoy, 2006; Castree, 2006; Kathrynne Mitchell's forthcoming special issue in *Antipode* 'Becoming a public scholar', the session at the 2006 at Royal Geographical Society conference 'Public Sociologies, Public Geographies?' the People's Geographies project led by Don Mitchell at Syracuse University ([www.peoplesgeographies.org](http://www.peoplesgeographies.org)) and the Participatory Geographies Research Group (PyGyRG) of the Royal Geographical Society ([www.pygywg.org](http://www.pygywg.org)).

The contributors in this issue collectively address a coherent and crucial set of questions. What does it mean to build an ethical workplace and what would one look like? Do we actually know what the levels of corporate involvement are? What forms do they take? What are their effects? How can we legitimately challenge and question these connections? How do we hold them to account? To whom do we have responsibility as Geographers? To our principals, vice-chancellors, students, research funders or publishers? To those struggling for change? To oppressed and marginal groups? What tactics and strategies can we use to make our discipline and our workplaces more ethically sound and socially responsible? How can we develop Geography as a discipline which is both professional and ethical? There are no easy answers to these questions. It is vital, however, that we both asks these questions and seek answers, or at least greater awareness and tangible responses, especially in the light of the unprecedented restructuring within universities right now. Once we scratch the surface we become aware of a whole world of complicity. Let us take a brief look at some other issues emerging in this respect.

USS is the main pension provider for the HE sector in the UK, with over £30 Billion in assets. Almost every academic has a pension with them. USS has a strong Environmental Policy and has been at the forefront of the UK ethical pension fund movement following extensive campaigning by students and academics from the group People and Planet under the banner of 'Ethics for USS'

from its formation in 1997 onwards. This lobbying and the subsequent embrace of Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) by USS is often presented as a best practice example of how we can all help to reform the behaviour of corporations (see, for example, McCallin, 2003). However, a quick look at USS's website reveals that the fund's top 15 equity investments are in some of the world's largest and most troublesome multinationals (see Figure 1). Only a basic understanding of social struggles around the world reveals to us some of the issues at stake here. Shell's environmental and social abuses outlined above, BP's poor record on human and environmental rights in the building of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, RBOS's role as the main funder of the expansion of the aviation sector - the fastest growing source of carbon emissions in the UK, allegations against Rio Tinto concerning human rights abuses in its mining operations in Papua New Guinea, Tesco's monopolistic position in the UK grocery market which has undermined local businesses, and Total's complicity with the Burmese military junta to only mention a few.

**Figure 1** USS top 15 Equity Investments, as of 30 July 2007. (Source: [www.uss.co.uk](http://www.uss.co.uk))

<b>Company</b>	<b>Market Value</b>
Royal Dutch Shell	788.9
BP	655.8
HSBC Holdings	631.1
Vodafone Group	598.8
Glaxosmithkline	428.6
RBOS	383.4
BHP Billiton	354.0
Rio Tinto	336.3
Astrazeneca	306.2
Barclays	296.5
Anglo American	260.5
HBOS	224.4
TESCO	220.3
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>201.6</i>
Lloyds TSB Group	192.2

The original aims of the Ethics for USS were twofold: to 'avoid investment in unacceptable ways of making money (like the arms trade and tobacco companies)' and 'to bring pressure to bear on those companies in which it did invest' (Gilson, 2002). In practice USS has focused solely on a policy of 'engagement' with companies, refusing to disinvest in any company. Whilst some argue that this has brought about positive outcomes, such as Balfour Beatty's withdrawal from the controversial Turkish Ilisu Dam (Gilson, 2002), it means that

in practice USS can continue to invest in companies responsible for some of the most unethical projects and policies in the world. So the question of what price our profitable pension fund remains, alongside the question of what we, individually and collectively can do about it! The USS refuses to disinvest on practical and legal grounds. Practically, it claims that it is not big enough to really make a company such as Shell change its policies and legally it claims that it is duty bound to serve the interests of those who place their savings in the scheme. Neither point is convincing. As one of the biggest investors in the world, USS has huge power, that is the very argument behind its 'engagement' approach. Furthermore, if it *worked with* fund holders, campaign organisations and other pension funds it could certainly help to bring about radical and positive change! Legally, the advice on which disinvestment is shunned includes an acknowledgement that, 'if the likely impact as assessed by the Trustee Company (or its investment managers) is sufficiently serious, this may mean a decision by the Trustee Company (a) not to invest in that particular investment or (b) to divest (Fenton, 2006, para 3.2, p.4). Ethics for USS was set up and run so successfully *precisely because* its members feel the issues of social and environmental justice at stake are 'sufficiently serious'! Furthermore, the legal precedent upon which 'ethical' pension funds have relied to avoid divesting has been critiqued by a subsequent report (Wheelan, 2008b) and is currently being challenged by the TUC and Merseyside Council (Wheelan, 2008a). As one of the UK's leading ethical pension funds the USS could be at the forefront of such initiatives and if enough of its members lobby it we can still make this happen!.

Scratch again and we see a process of privatization occurring across the UK HE sector reflecting familiar trends to those in the USA over the last decade. In particular, companies such as INTO have been bidding to run Language Centres and companies such as Study Group International (part of the Daily Mail Group) have bid to run International Centres. The research group Platform (Muttitt, 2003) has also produced revealing research in its report 'Degrees of Capture' outlining the extent of connections between universities, the oil industry and climate change while a report by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (Study War no More, 2007) showed the close links between academia and military/war research (see Stavrianakis this special issue). One final area of concern is the evolving system of metrics based assessment and ranking of academics which is becoming prevalent. Academic citation indexing and ranking was originally undertaken by the company ISI, the brainchild of Eugene Garfield back in the 1950s. ISI was acquired by Thomson Group in the 1990s and is now Thomson Scientific, part of the huge Thomson-Reuters Corporation which reported annual profits of \$6.6B. Moreover, the big three publishing houses (Wiley-Blackwell, Informa, formerly Taylor and Francis, and Elsevier) now dominate academic publishing of journals and books and extract a huge amount of surplus value from academic labour (see for example Blomley, 2006). What we see is an evolving enclosure of knowledge production and circulation within the boundaries of the corporate world. One of the

key battlegrounds for critical academics to protect the ‘knowledge commons’ – the free spaces for the production and circulation of knowledge which are not directed by the likes of the World Bank, the oil industry or the large publishing houses. The journal *Acme* plays a key role in this respect, as do each of us in the choices we make regarding which publishers we read, reference and publish through.

ACME, then, is the perfect place this special issue, which forms a critical intervention into debates and practice around the corporatisation of academia generally and the specific issues it raises. When compiling this special issue our emphasis has been getting these ideas out to a wider audience in a timely, uncompromising manner so the energy and passion of the panel discussion and action planning meetings surrounding it can spill out and prompt further interventions. Whilst none of the papers presented here is the final word on any of the topics covered, they can help each of us to engage more critically and actively with the corporatisation of academia in its various guises. The diversity and fluidity of academic corporatization means that a range of approaches are required to help understand and respond to it and this diversity, flexibility and willingness to experiment is reflected in the form, content and style of papers that follow. The papers move from those dealing with broader issues of academic corporatisation to those addressing specific issues within this area. Whilst each piece stands alone as a valuable contribution in its own right, collectively this series provides a powerful and wide ranging analysis-cum-call-to-action and we encourage readers to engage with it as such.

Larch Maxey opens by looking at the ‘double edged sword’ of sustainability within the corporatising, neoliberal academy. His analysis shows a complex relationship, or ‘dance’ between sustainability and neoliberalism in which each have the potential to resist, recuperate and radically reform the other. In common with so much of this special issue, the paper demonstrates that nothing is yet fixed, much dancing is still to be done and we are all invited to join in. Silvia Federici looks in detail at one of the areas covered by Larch Maxey’s broader sweep of academic corporatisation: education and the enclosure of knowledge. Silvia Federici’s paper highlights the ruthlessness of the corporate logic which is obliged to privilege profit. Thus, the paper shows how students become markets to be exploited and knowledge/education a commodity which corporate universities seek to control and sell in a globalising world. Stuart Hodgkinson stresses the importance of embedding alternative and radical educational practices inside the university, and explains how this is being undertaken in practice through his involvement (along with Paul Chatterton) in the Masters in Activism and social change at Leeds University (see [www.activismsocialchange.org.uk](http://www.activismsocialchange.org.uk)). Ed Brown helps us look in more detail at the corporation behind corporatisation by offering a critical analysis of corporate social responsibility and the implications this has for academic corporatisation and critical responses to it. David Murakami Wood deepens our understanding academic corporatisation further as he demonstrates the links

between academic publishers and the trade in personal information. ‘Dataveillance’ and data ‘mining’, David Murakami Wood shows, have significant implications for human rights and social justice as well as offering huge opportunities for corporatisations to increase their power and maximise profits. With Reed Elsevier at the forefront of data mining globally, this piece is a timely call for us all to consider the how we respond to this emerging challenge. Tom Stafford’s piece looks in detail at the recent campaign opposing Reed Elsevier’s involvement in running arms fairs. Having been centrally involved in the campaign the piece presents a candid view of the reasons for its success and future directions it may take. The Reed Elsevier campaign has strong parallels with those surrounding Ethics for USS and the Shell RGS-IBG boycott.

Despite the tremendous success of all three campaigns, each remains vulnerable to the relentless logic of corporations pursuing profit regardless of ethics. Several months on from its promise to divest its arms fairs there are signs of back tracking, or at least foot dragging from Reed Elsevier now that the momentum of campaign pressure has dwindled (see, for example Allen, 2008). Anna Stavrianakis allows us to place the role of Reed Elsevier in a wider context by exploring the many ways in which arms producing companies are involved in education at school and university levels. Focusing on the UK as a case study, the paper illustrates how this corporate agenda instrumentalises and commercialises education and seeks to normalise militarisation within society more generally.

Focusing on the issue of Shell and the RGS, David Gilbert provides an insightful history of the 1996 academic boycott, which draws on his personal involvement at the heart of the campaign. With this history and the benefit of over ten years reflection David Gilbert is able to take a step back and look more broadly at what can be learnt and, crucially, what we can achieve now. Taking us to Nigeria, the heartland of the Shell/RGS controversy Felix Tuodolo draws on his unique position as a Nigerian activist and scholar. His doctoral work with the Nembe tribe in Nigeria allows Felix to powerfully outline how the social and environmental costs of Shell’s corporate social responsibility programmes have been experienced within Nigeria, suggesting little has actually changed over the last decade, despite the rhetoric. Emily Johns’ is a different intervention again in both form and content. Drawing on her role as artist-activist, Emily Johns graphically grapples with the conflicting messages and meanings Shell’s actions and advertising have created over the last century. Employing her own art Emily Johns shows that Shell has no monopoly on the use of art to shape public feelings about a company and a natural resource. As her own intervention evocatively demonstrates, art can be a powerful tool to create alternative narratives of corporatisation. The recent decision by London’s Natural History Museum to drop Shell’s sponsorship of its annual wildlife photographer of the year award is instructive here, and highlights both the need to be alert to large multinationals using art for greenwash and the power of direct action to affect change.

In keeping with the commitment to critical engagement driving this special edition, we have begun an on-going dialogue with Rita Gardner (Director) and others at the RGS to push for an ethical sponsorship policy to match their ethical investment policy and for the RGS to become a progressive force for social and environmental change in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We welcome anyone and everyone to join us in this task and urge geographers to contact the RGS directly on these issues whether as a concerned member or ethical boycotter. After dialogue with them, the RGS has agreed to place its existing ethical sponsorship policy available on its website and we urge you to scrutinise it and whether it is being employed (see [www.rgs.org/AboutUs/Governance/Governance.htm](http://www.rgs.org/AboutUs/Governance/Governance.htm)). Our hope is that this special issue will spark further debate about the exact contours and depths of corporate responsibility in our workplaces. The first task is a process of self understanding as to depths of our complicity. From this we can begin to respond and challenge the corporate mega machine and defend education, rightly, as the practice of freedom.

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## **Web Resources**

Campaign Against the Arms Trade: [www.caat.org.uk](http://www.caat.org.uk)

Disarm DSEI: [www.dsei.org](http://www.dsei.org)

The Campaign for Responsible Investment:  
[http://www.fairpensions.org.uk/act\\_now/](http://www.fairpensions.org.uk/act_now/)

Platform: [www.platformlondon.org](http://www.platformlondon.org)

Remember Saro Wiwa: [www.remembersarowiwa.com](http://www.remembersarowiwa.com)

Shell to Sea Campaign, Rosspport: [www.corribsos.com](http://www.corribsos.com)