

Enforcing Hopelessness: Complicity, Dependence, and Organizing in Frontline Oil and Gas Communities

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ABSTRACT

Fossil fuel companies hold enormous political, economic, and knowledge production power. Recently, industry operators have pivoted from pushing climate denialism to campaigns aimed at individualizing responsibility for climate crisis. In this paper, we focus on one related outcome of such efforts – people’s experiences of *complicity* – here in the context of unconventional oil and gas (UOG) production. We ask: How do mobilized activists experience fossil fuel scapegoating, and what does it mean for their goals as they organize against UOG production? We show that even activists fighting UOG production feel complicit in fossil fuel production, and these feelings of complicity diminish their demands for UOG accountability. We argue that these outcomes have been especially pernicious in cultural contexts like that of the United States, where neoliberal ideologies are normalized, centering personal responsibility, individualization, and identification as consumers rather than citizens. We marshal an extensive qualitative dataset and advance a theory of *complicity* as a way to understand: a) how social movements intersect with neoliberalized patterns of life; b) how experiences of complicity affect activism; and c) how this may contribute to fossil fuel firms’ goals of undercutting organizing. We end by examining how a sub-set of activists works to dismantle this complicity narrative.

KEYWORDS: environmental activism; complicity; hydraulic fracturing; oil and gas production; social movement organizing.

Fossil fuel companies, especially oil and gas companies, hold enormous political and economic power, as well as the power to shape knowledge production and the discourse on the climate crisis (Malin et al. 2019; Mann 2021; Wylie 2018). Until recently, the industry consistently fueled climate denialism; industry foundations and operators funneled money into spreading narratives that sowed doubt about climate change’s existence and causes (Brulle 2014; Farrell 2016; Oreskes and Conway 2011). Now, however, the fossil industry has shifted tactics, pivoting to similarly complex campaigns aimed at individualizing responsibility for climate crisis. These new campaigns are designed in part to make individual people feel as though the crisis is their own fault, thus minimizing political mobilization (Mann 2021; Supran and Oreskes 2021). As Mann has observed, this is “an effort to deflect attention

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away from systemic solutions. [Industry is] trying to convince people that climate change is not the result of their corporate policies but of our own individual actions” (Schiffman 2021). Other work has found that Exxon-Mobil “worked to shift responsibility for global warming away from the fossil fuel industry and onto consumers” (Supran and Oreskes 2021:696). The goal is to prevent meaningful movement towards decarbonization in order to protect industry profits.

In this paper, we focus on one related outcome of such efforts – people’s experiences of *complicity* – here in the context of unconventional oil and gas (UOG) production in Colorado. Broadly, we are interested in how industry efforts benefit from the hegemonic influence of neoliberalism in the United States; we are especially interested in how neoliberalism’s powerful individualizing influence manifests in social movements. Specifically, we ask how mobilized activists experience fossil fuel scapegoating and what it means for their goals as they organize against UOG production. We show that even activists fighting UOG production in their communities feel complicit, and these feelings of complicity often diminish their demands for UOG accountability. We argue that these outcomes have been especially effective in cultural contexts such as the United States, where neoliberal ideologies are normalized.

As such, this paper explores the consequences of intersections between one of neoliberalism’s most intractable principles and one of fossil fuels firms’ most powerful tactics: a committed focus on individuals and individualism. We advance a theory of *complicity* as a way to understand: a) how social movements intersect with neoliberalized patterns of life; b) how experiences of complicity affect activism; and c) how this may contribute to fossil fuel firms’ goals of undercutting organizing.

Our research suggests that understanding people’s experiences and characterizations of their own participation in the face of daunting crises provides one fruitful avenue for starting to deconstruct neoliberalism’s influences – and the powerful ways they can combine with efforts of fossil fuel companies. We show how feelings of complicity, or *participation in a wrongful act*, emerge as a persistent companion to the “vote with your dollar” rhetoric of individual change-making, and meaningfully shape people’s engagement with political action. Though complicity has been analyzed in the context of corporate behavior and the role of NGOs (Choudry and Kapoor 2013) and even oil and gas (Hughes 2017), it has not, to our knowledge, been explored in the context of neoliberalism’s influence on environmental or climate activism, nor in regard to industry tactics to slow climate response. We explore how narratives of individual complicity can limit people’s aspirations to demand systems-level changes in the context of UOG production. We marshal an extensive qualitative dataset to show how activists’ experiences of complicity can reshape and limit activism related to UOG production – but also how some begin to see through industry tactics.

NEOLIBERALISM, ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS, AND COMPLICITY

Social movements, or sustained efforts among people to change the institutions that govern their lives, are shaped by the broader social and political contexts in which they operate (McAfee and Shapiro 2010; Della Porta et al. 2016). The era of neoliberalism—in the United States particularly—has changed how people view themselves, how communities organize, and the form and substance of social movements. By “neoliberalism,” we refer to the set of economic and social ideologies and policies that privilege a combination of the following: free markets and trade; private property rights; de- and re-regulation; shrinking of the state’s capacity to provide social safety nets; financialization; commodification, and hyper-individualization (Fuentes-George 2013; Harvey 2007, 2016). Our focus here – the practice of individualizing action and responsibility – is central to neoliberal ideologies, governance regimes, and political action (Bourdieu 1998a, 1998b). The term *individualization* describes processes by which structural and collective drivers of socio-environmental problems are de-emphasized, while people’s personal consumption habits and individual behaviors are over-emphasized and framed as causing systems-level ills. As a broad trend, activism has changed: neoliberalism has created new patterns, assumptions, and goals and habits (cf. MacNeil and Paterson 2012),

which have frequently taken the form of market-based approaches to political change (Almeida 2008).¹

For environmental and ecological concerns, the shift towards neoliberalism manifests in part through activism that focuses on individual behavior rather than collective action (Bennett 2012; Harrison 2008; Maniates 2001; Seyfang 2006), and in part through “conscious consumerism” (Nelson and King 2020; Roff 2007; Slocum 2004; Willis and Schor 2012). “Voting with your dollar” has become a catchphrase of sorts, gesturing at perceived links between consumption and citizenship (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Heath and Potter 2004; Johnston 2008; Szasz 2007; Willis and Schor 2012). The intersection of individualism and commodification has been wildly successful—only more so through the onslaught of social media and its influencers (Gustafsson and Weinryb 2020).

These shifts have affected both the goals and targets of social movements; many new social movements primarily target non-state actors, including corporations. As the targets of social movements shift, the perception of state authority also weakens (Bartley et al. 2015; Dauvergne 2017; Dixon, Martin, and Nau 2016; Gamson 1996; Jasper 2004; Van Dyke, Soule, and Taylor 2004), and organizations turn away from the state as a source of social protections and look to corporations instead. As social movement organizations (SMOs) shift their targets from state to non-state institutions, corporations gain power over movement logics and tactics (McMichael 2016), which may weaken SMOs’ potential to demand systems-level change (Bartley et al. 2015; Jaffee 2012, 2014); that is, results become narrower when individual corporations become the targets, *even when movements meet their goals*.

As part of this transformation, activists also frequently deploy a new “repertoire of tactics” that are considered appropriate to industry structures (Schurman 2004:245) – often using the internal logic of neoliberalism. For instance, Collins (2003) and Seidman (2008) showed how social movements targeted sweatshop-dependent apparel firms by orchestrating international campaigns aimed at companies’ reputations among consumers. Using fair trade coffee and third-party certification as examples, Jaffee (2012, 2014) shows that markets increasingly dictate the terms and goals of SMOs. Jaffee’s findings parallel Bartley’s observations about forestry certification where “firms typically prefer weaker commitments with minimal enforcement, while social movements prefer stronger, binding standards” (2007: 311). In other words, and despite the immediate efficacy of some of these campaigns, when laws do not transform entire systems and codify requirements – whether related to labor standards, environmental protections, or anti-discrimination policies – firms push for self-regulation and weaker, non-binding commitments. Moreover, recent evidence suggests that action directly targeting corporations is becoming routinized – and that if this can “de-fang social movements, then it stands to reason that the prospect for movement actors to effect meaningful change in a society dominated by business is severely limited” (Martin and Dixon 2020:288). Therefore, while some research suggests that targeting non-state actors can result in more significant outcomes when using direct forms of protest, such as sit-ins or strikes versus marches (Walker, Martin, and McCarthy 2008), most evidence contradicts this finding.

Specifically, neoliberalized approaches to activism have contributed very little to meaningful action on climate change (Aiken et al. 2017; Connolly 2013; Hampton 2018), racial or environmental justice (Giroux 2003; Rhodes, Wright, and Pullen 2018; Sbicca and Myers 2017), or democratic penetration (Hickel 2016; Kashwan, MacLean, and García-López 2019). Such movements often spark social, cultural, and economic change, but not necessarily *political* change (Caniglia and Carmin 2005); that is, while public opinion about issues may change, large-scale legislative changes or formal protections often remain elusive. Consider the animal rights movement: consumer culture has certainly shifted, and vegetarianism and veganism are more common. Vegan food options have become a strong market niche in many grocery outlets, and organizations such as the People for the Ethical

1 There are, of course, exceptions: some earlier political movements used market-based strategies to generate change (Tilly and Wood 2015), and some organizations do not engage with market-based organizing (cf. Whyte 2016).

Treatment of Animals (PETA) lead campaigns boycotting companies or products. But increased political protections for animal welfare across economic sectors or enforced by the state have been almost non-existent, due largely to corporate consolidation and lobbying power (Howard 2016; Lyson and Raymer 2000; Sheingate et al 2017; Vogeler 2021).

Our focus thus becomes how activists within SMOs *normalize and reinforce the neoliberal paradigm rather than challenging it*. They do this by prioritizing individualized, consumer-based, and market-centric modes of activism – which may not be “more radical and disruptive” than movements targeting the state (Jaffee 2012:44). Instead, in this new “social movement ecology” (Jaffee 2012:112), organizations are vulnerable to cooptation as neoliberalized goals facilitate “the ability of the corporate target to bring the interests of a challenging group into alignment with its own goals” (Trumpy 2008:480).

Indeed, the scale of these shifts are significant. Embedded in neoliberal regimes—which are both ideological and structural—people see their identities as consumers as central to their political selves, as synonymous with patriotism and even the American Dream (Cohen 2003). These multi-scalar impacts, then, create multiple intersections between one of neoliberalism’s most intractable principles and one of fossil fuels firms’ most powerful tactics: a committed focus on individuals and individualism. These manifest clearly in the concept and experiences of complicity, to which we now turn.

Diffusing Collective Action through Consumerism and Complicity

The trends described above laid ideological groundwork for the effects of complicity we discuss below – and created important points of intervention for corporations to induce feelings of individual responsibility and blame.

Within a regime of conscious consumerism, every purchase becomes a moral act. This tactical shift has been broadly consequential, producing ‘political anesthesia’ and attempts to buy goods that reduce risk. Yet, consumeristic responses to environmental risk (such as buying bottled water because it is seen as safer than tap water) are not “the modality of a citizen in a democratic society . . . [but] instead . . . the modality of a consumer” (Szasz 2007:4). Szasz (2007) explains the stakes when consuming goods like bottled water become perceived as a proxy for collective action to improve water quality; for example:

[This] changes people’s *experience*. . . . Their sense of being at risk diminishes. The feeling . . . that they have done something to protect themselves reduces the urgency to do something more about what, until then, felt threatening to them. If many people experience such a reduction in urgency, that will have consequences in a democracy, in a society where mass sentiment affects what a government does. (2007:195)

What’s more, these approaches are anti-democratic. Guthman (2007), for instance, found that conscious consumerism does little to engage people in collective democratic action, but instead creates notions of citizenship that rely on individual consumption. While conscious consumption can be part of political engagement, shopping alone cannot save the world (Bartley et al. 2015:210; Martin and Dixon 2020).

The narrative of individualized responsibility has immense staying power, though, even when evidence indicates that it does little to drive systems-level change. This holds in the context of UOG production – where the industry has meta-power, or the ability to shape the rules of the game (Malin et al. 2019), and benefits from multiple forms of procedural privilege (Malin 2020). And with the industry’s enormous wealth and its efforts to manipulate action and policy around climate change (Brulle 2014; Farrell 2016; Mann 2021; Oreskes and Conway 2011), this narrative of individualized responsibility for climate change can be—and is—used to dilute and dampen activists’ goals.

Complicity, as commonly defined, refers to participation in a wrongful act or the perception thereof. Because it calls individuals' moral selves into question, it can be paralyzing. Indeed, this paralysis is the goal of fossil fuel companies (Supran and Oreskes 2021). The thinking goes like this: "if I participate in fossil fuel consumption by driving a car, then any action I pursue to address fossil fuel consumption, fight hydraulic fracturing, or seek solutions to climate change is hypocritical. Therefore, I have no real right to demand change." That is, political anesthesia can work both ways: if once you've purchased the "right" green goods, you then feel protected from environmental risk and absolved from participation in collective action, then feelings of complicity in purchasing fossil fuel-based goods (such as cars or plastics) could be interpreted to mean that *you have chosen that risk*. You deserve the risks, and you have no right to demand that the risk—or, indeed, the *sources* of risk, such as oil and gas corporations—face accountability or regulation.

Although a collective phenomenon, this logic is experienced at the individual level, is highly personalized, and can dampen political action, its goals, and people's ability to see structure. It is insensitive to systemic perspectives generally (in our hypothetical, to the need for collective environmental goods such as access to public transportation or alternative fuels). And we must point out that complicity is also economic, a part of the material consequences of neoliberal regimes. For instance, the lack of public social safety nets in the United States means that people may be complicit in private or profit-based systems they dislike or disagree with—for instance, keeping a job because of its health-care package, even if they disagree with the company's behavior.

Complicity can thus be—and is—regularly manipulated to serve corporate (or indeed, state) interests. Powerful companies such as BP have used complicity as an intentional tool to paralyze, disengage, and "de-fang" their opposition. For instance, although ecologist William Rees created the "ecological footprint," BP popularized it, creating the first calculator through which individuals could quantify their "carbon footprint" in 2004 (Yoder 2020), in an effort to direct political attention at people's own consumption patterns rather than industry accountability. These campaigns helped popularize the idea that individual responsibility could "save the planet" while individual failings could also ruin it – even if only 100 corporations were actually responsible for over 70 percent of global emissions in the last 40 years (Griffin 2017).

We theorize, then, that even mobilized activists feel complicit in larger-scale social problems due to their consumption – even when that consumption is a function of systems in which they are embedded. This is true even (or perhaps especially) when their experiences of complicity are partly shaped by bad-faith corporate misinformation campaigns. Complicity plays a role in shaping social movement action across scales, from individual experiences and decision-making to collective action. To summarize, our framework of complicity has four components:

- Complicity emerges when people see their political identities as consumers, rather than as citizens. This orientation shapes the kind of action that is perceived as effective and/or possible.
- Complicity is also shaped by economic dependence. Some interviewees are materially dependent on UOG production, which deeply discourages criticism of the industry.
- Complicity turns on guilt (an individual-level experience), as well as experiences of moral conflict.
- And, although complicity is experienced individually, it has structural and social drivers and consequences.

Despite the importance of complicity, few scholars have explored its role in social movements, particularly around oil and gas. D. M. Hughes has examined complicity as an enabler of oil production on Trinidad and Tobago, despite the island's vulnerability to climate change (2017). His work explores people directly linked to the industry via corporate positions or those who exercise a "choice not to protest the oil and gas industry" and who remain "silent about its costs" (2017:14). These

insights are valuable to understanding extractivism, but Hughes' work is an historical analysis of a single, small country, and much work remains to develop these concepts, especially as it relates to social movements.

We believe that analyzing the role of individualized experiences of complicity can help social scientists understand more precisely how guilt is constructed and produced, how it shapes experiences of action, and how it re-shapes and perhaps limits movements broadly. In our data, not only do people feel complicit in oil and gas production through their consumption, but they also experience complicity through their employment or financial connections to the industry – a double bind of a different sort. Ultimately, industry firms can use this to their advantage.

BACKGROUND: UNCONVENTIONAL OIL AND GAS PRODUCTION

We explore complicity in a particular energy context in the U.S. West. Unconventional oil and gas (UOG) production refers to the combination of vertical and horizontal drilling for oil and gas deposits trapped in shale rock layers. Once the vertical well is drilled and encased in cement, directional drills are sent out in multiple directions through the shale layer. The horizontal wellbores stretch for miles underground, and when they are completed, explosions are let off around the horizontal pipes to open up the shale layer. Next, a combination of (potable) water, sand, and about 500 chemicals is pushed down the well at enormous velocity, opening those cracks. Typically, 2–5 million gallons of water are used each time a well is 'fracked'. Water returns to the surface briny and radioactive, fit for little else than reinjection underground or storage in surface ponds. The oil or natural gas quickly follows.

UOG production has made the United States the number one producer of hydrocarbons globally (EIA 2018). Despite economic booms associated with this industry, significant busts have also occurred and social tensions have emerged, largely due to industry deregulation (Davis 2012; Ladd 2018; Malin 2021; Malin et al. 2019). The 2005 Energy Policy Act exempted UOG production from significant federal environmental regulations, including the Safe Drinking Water Act; this meant that each state could regulate many aspects of UOG production according to its own rules – frequently resulting in self-regulation (Wylie 2018). *Forced pooling* also occurs when community members are forced to let operators access minerals below their homes even when people oppose drilling (Ryder and Hall 2017). Forced pooling allows industry operators to extract people's minerals without permission, as long as about 65 percent of the other minerals around them have been leased. Forced pooling is an important mechanism whereby industry can develop wherever it wants – and where the state and courts have often supported those efforts by ruling against local control or zoning (Malin et al. 2019).

Production speeds ahead, then, and environmental and public health protections lag behind (Malin 2020). Health and environmental concerns, concerns over wellpads' and pipelines' close proximity to homes and schools, climate concerns, and economic instability (McLean 2018) all helped generate mobilized opposition to the industry. Communities have fought particularly hard to *attain local control over where production takes place*, and not, interestingly, for improved federal regulations (Mayer and Malin 2018). A minority of activists have tried to ban UOG production outright—but more often they fight for incremental improvements (Opsal and O'Connor Shelley 2014). Economic vulnerability and individualized rationales also factor in here; research has shown that in states such as Colorado, support for outright bans decline when personal economic costs are associated with that ban (Mayer 2018)—which has perhaps limited activism for ballot initiatives that ban UOG production.

Industry operators possess significant political and economic power across levels of government, cultural power (Vasi et al. 2015), and meta-power (or the ability to set the rules of the UOG production game) (Malin 2020; Malin et al. 2019; Ryder and Hall 2017). Operators' structural power has been examined extensively, and it can often induce inaction or quiescence among people living near

extraction (Dokshin 2016; Eaton and Kinchy 2016; Jerolmack 2021; Malin and Kallman 2022; Malin, Mayer, and Roeser 2022; Wylie 2018). But here we examine something different: *even when people have mobilized and are empowered to that extent, they dilute the goals of their activism because of their feelings of complicity.* The industry’s power is further amplified in neoliberal contexts where individualized actions and “conscious consumerism” dominate—discouraging activists from asking for “too much.” Interestingly, this may display an outcome of Foucault’s biopower, where individuals monitor their own behavior and, here, keep themselves from asking for “too much,” even when mobilized, because they purchase petroleum-based goods.

METHODS

The data we present here are part of a larger, mixed-method study funded by the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences. Data collection was longitudinal; it began in 2014 as part of a three-year study through the NIEHS R-21 grant program. Interviewing continues at the time of this publication, due to widespread interest in participating. The mixed methods we used were multi-sited, community-based, and coordinated by a team of social scientists (led by the first author), epidemiologists, and exposure scientists.

Our study is centered in three communities – Greeley, Windsor, and Fort Collins, Colorado—and extended to other locations in the northern part of the state. (We had included Fort Collins as our quasi-control community because they had passed a drilling moratorium, but the moratorium was subsequently overturned. Thus, we do not include that data here.) We distributed survey instruments to randomly sampled households across the three communities, and then we conducted in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork at affected people’s homes, production sites, host communities, and public meetings. Data from participant observation in public meetings and ethnographic techniques such as Photovoice (Wang and Burris 1997; Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001) inform a broader set of publications and helped provide points of comparison and triangulation for the interview data, which is our main focus here. Our research team collaborated with several community organizations, who became our official partners for the study.

Greeley, Colorado, is a community of about 99,000 residents, with a long history of oil and gas production (Malin 2020). It is situated in Weld County, Colorado, which has one of the largest numbers of wellpads in the nation, and some of the highest well-to-people density ratios. Weld County is one of the largest producers of both hydrocarbons and industrial agricultural goods in the United States. Windsor, Colorado, is smaller, with a population of just under 22,000. It straddles Larimer and Weld counties, has a shorter history with oil and gas development, and less agricultural production.

For this analysis, we focus on data from 66 interviews conducted in Greeley and Windsor. The interviews allowed us to discuss multi-faceted implications of living amid UOG production (Berg and

Table 1. Interview Demographics

<i>Interview Participant Demographics or Traits</i>	<i>Percentages of Interview Sample</i>
Weld County (Greeley or Windsor) Residents	88%
Fort Collins Residents	12%
Women	65%
Men	35%
White	80%
Latinx	20%
Black	N/A
Randomly Selected from Survey sample	30%
Network Sampled	70%

Lune 2011), while facilitating careful observation about topics related to the energy policy context and related activism (Marshall and Rossman 2014).

The interview data included in this study were a subset of 45 interviews drawn from the larger dataset. This paper draws on data from interviews with several local political leaders but primarily with activists, most of whom mobilized for more local control and better *local* regulation over UOG production. We focus here on interviews with activists from Greeley, Windsor, or other spots in Weld County, since they all lived near UOG production activities (within about a half mile). Typically, activists lived close to *multiple* wellpads, due to the density of production in Weld County. Our sampling frame used this proximity for the initial recruitment, and around 30 percent of interview participants were chosen using random selection from sampled households that completed surveys. The lead author selected other participants (roughly 70 percent) using network and purposive sampling, drawing from networks working with community organizations, political leaders, or early interviewees.

In addition to interviews, we conducted two focus groups (due to activists' significant time constraints). Our first focus group (with five individuals) represented a larger group fighting wellpads slated for operation in open space behind their homes. The second focus group (three activists) worked with another community organization with similar goals. Around 65 percent of study participants were women, and about 80 percent of interviewees were white, working- or middle- to upper-middle-class, and ranged from college-aged to retired—matching general Front Range demographics. About 20 percent of interviews were conducted with Latinx populations.

We asked interview and focus group participants questions about the ways UOG production affected their lives, the various risks they perceived (or not), and the ways they characterized their activism (with a few probes related to complicity due to people's frequent mention of it). Interviews took between one and three hours and occurred in interviewees' homes or public locations. Recordings were transcribed verbatim. Fieldnotes were recorded after each interview. Transcripts were then divided among a three-person research team, led by the first author, which started with a list of likely codes from the literature and fieldnotes (Drisko 2013). Our initial list included themes related to complicity because people had mentioned it so frequently during interviews that it emerged as significant during interviews and as we reviewed fieldnotes. Each person used this initial codebook to assign primary codes, while also generating and noting additional codes. Team members discussed new codes at meetings as the team refined the codebook (Rubin and Rubin 2011). Each member focused on five interviews before initial group meetings and then results were shared – so the team collectively analyzed and coded 15 interviews to create the master codebook. The team met continually and exchanged interviews in the interim while iteratively revisiting codes, assuring inter-rater reliability across all interviews (Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

Overall, our data demonstrate that activists often think of themselves as complicit consumers—a self-image that stands in tension with alternative self-images, as citizens deserving of protection or activists fighting UOG production. In this hyper-individualized and market-based context, people experience complicity because they participate in fossil fuel economies and see themselves as somehow failing as “conscious consumers.” Their experiences of complicity reshape their activism. As such, the industry's power is amplified in neoliberal contexts and can help induce feelings of complicity *even among mobilized activists fighting development*.

We find that experiences of complicity, and concomitant guilt, lead people to dilute or dampen their demands regarding the protections they deserve from environmental and public health risks. Complicity keeps them from working toward codified federal (and often state) regulations on UOG production, system-wide changes (such as bans on or reductions) in oil and gas extraction, or large-scale public transit systems. Instead, complicity persuades activists to focus on hyper-localized projects and the actions of specific oil and gas operators.

Specifically, interview data show how people use a “consumer-being-complicit” argument, *even as they discuss their concerns about UOG production’s public health and environmental impacts*. As the lead author observed through ethnographic fieldwork, activists often minimize their criticisms of oil and gas when questioned by industry representatives or others about whether they drive, use plastic, or otherwise consume petroleum-based products. This becomes a mechanism of complicity that effectively halts efforts in their tracks (including, as we will describe below, a NIABY (Not in Anyone’s Backyards) view that argues for a complete moratorium on oil and gas production). Many interviewees felt their individual actions could not be reconciled with also working for systemic change, although some, as we explore, begin to embrace more systemic critiques.

Feeling Complicit as Consumers of Fossil Fuels

Study data show that individualized experiences of complicity can neutralize activists’ goals and limit their willingness to resist development more fully. For instance, a retired man we interviewed – who had worked for years to limit hydraulic fracturing within neighborhoods – still felt as if activists needed to work with, or collaborate with, industry operators. When he mentioned feeling complicit during the interview, we followed up by asking how such feelings affected the goals of his activism. As he explained, companies’ private property rights and people’s use of related products *meant that cooperation with the industry was vital*. His feelings of complicity, per his consumption of fossil fuel-based products, persuaded him to reject the idea that UOG production could be banned or that economies could move away from it:

I understand that they [oil and gas companies] have a job to do, and they’re hired to do it. And, you know, they’re going after their property [minerals the companies own]. And everybody uses their product. So we all have to work together. . . . Whether we use it in our car, we use it to heat our house, our business that we make our living in. . . . I mean, everything revolves around it [oil and gas]. Everybody uses it one way or another. Whether it’s plastic products or gas in your car or to heat your home.

The sense that he was a participant in the “system” made him feel obligated to work within it rather than demanding, for instance, the cessation of UOG production.

Another activist, a middle-aged woman fighting drilling’s close proximity to homes, schools, and workplaces felt similarly implicated, even sheepish for being part of the “system.” She described how industry supporters in her neighborhood and at public meetings had responded to her complaints about UOG production, targeting her own consumption patterns and intimidating her about demanding substantial changes related to production. Her personal consumption of fossil fuel-generated electricity meant that while she was a mobilized activist, she felt too ashamed to take a public stand for systemic changes, due to her feelings of complicity. She explained:

We can still work to change it [UOG production]. We can also conserve where we can, and I like to think I do. I’m sure I could do even more than what I do. I recycle, big deal. I drive a Prius, big deal. But I mean there’re other things that I think I tried to do and we all do them, but it is it’s really hard when people just say “Well, you like to flip that switch and get your light, don’t you? So shut up.” I don’t write letters to the editor because I’m afraid to.

In both cases, being complicit in UOG production by consuming products from oil and gas extraction makes these respondents feel abashed and ashamed, as though they do not have a “right” to work for systemic changes—or even to publicly express opposition to production. Industry operators rely on this narrative and particularly on individual-level thinking—both powerfully disempowering when people remain, to a large extent, obligated to participate in the existing system.

Though activists we interviewed saw problems with the austerity of market-centered ideologies like neoliberal capitalism, many believed that because nearly every American relies on fossil fuel production to an extent and uses petroleum-based consumer goods, nobody had a right to demand system-wide shifts away from fossil fuels. Market-based thinking and a general faith in capitalism, even with its problems, amplified these convictions. This quotation from a mid-thirties male activist, fighting for more local control of UOG production near his home, illustrates this pattern:

I mean, we still rely on fossil fuels. . . . We have a vested interest in what's in the ground, and if we don't get them out, somebody loses. . . . We're in this mode, where if we don't get those reserves out of the ground, then it's a failure for the property rights holder and the mineral rights holder. That's viewed as a failure by the city and by that town . . . it's like "You missed out, you missed out on it." I think capitalism has wonderful outputs for our civilization and society, but I think when it's unbridled, we're just [pauses] going crazy.

Other excerpts illustrate how feelings of complicity can lead activists to dampen the goals of their activism—often from the start—and persuade them to focus on small-scale or limited goals, rather than on transformations away from fossil fuels and towards renewables or other systemic changes. Another interviewee, a middle-aged woman who lived next to a wellpad and was actively fighting UOG production near homes, admitted she felt complicit in using petroleum products, and therefore believed that she could not completely reject oil and gas. She said:

I know we need it. I mean I use my fuel, I wear makeup. I understand what it provides. What I don't get is how they [companies] cannot be better neighbors. . . . They could have moved the site further back. . . . So I understand we do need it [oil and gas]. And I'm not another one [looking for] another way of fuels. It's kind of like, I know we need it, but I didn't realize that it meant 20 tanks up there [near her home]."

This woman cites her own dependence on fossil fuels as a reason to not seek out alternatives. An activist couple living amid several wellpads and other infrastructure—and who mobilized to gain more power for communities in determining production activity—still blame themselves and other "consumers" who buy petroleum and natural gas. In a focus group, they compared the current situation to an *individual* addiction to oil that each person causes through their consumption, rather than the systems in which people are embedded inducing those behaviors:

*Tom*²: So as consumers . . . it's kind of like the drug problem. We wouldn't have a drug problem if we didn't have consumers. And so we try to regulate the drug thing—production and transportation, but it's the users that are really in control. And as long as there's demand, there's a way to do it.

Joanne: But there's a demand for oil and gas.

Tom: There's a demand for oil and gas.

Joanne: As long as we strive to have low-cost fuel and we're not willing to pay more for the fuel, then these low-cost solutions . . . is what's gonna happen.

Tom: Then that whole consumer perception can get so skewed by the amount of subsidies that are in some industries and not in others. And this is a heavily subsidized industry, so that makes it even harder to send exact price signals about what the market would be like.

Not only do these interviewees use individualized thinking in their addiction metaphors, they also use neoliberalized criteria to assess the UOG production context. We see this especially in Tom's

2 All names are pseudonyms.

lamenting of the lack of accurate price signals by which to make decisions within energy markets, using logic that some would call market fundamentalism (Block and Somers 2017).

In all cases, activists limit themselves from the beginning. They do not start with big demands and then scale them back when they feel complicit. Instead, they feel complicit and do not let themselves imagine bigger changes; the sense of complicity forces them to accept a broken system, *even as they recognize it as broken*.

Economic Dependence and Induced Complicity

In our framework, complicity is partly constructed on economic vulnerability, which the data bear out: people's economic vulnerabilities and their dependence on the industry induced feelings of complicity and curtailed critique, even among activists we interviewed.

This aspect of the experience is structural. The United States has a profound lack of collective, state-provided social safety nets compared to peer countries – ranging from health insurance to child-care. Because of this, corporations are significant providers of limited safety nets, via employment benefits. This is particularly true in places where economies depend on extractive industries (such as uranium development) (Malin 2015). Operators' roles as local employers compelled activists we interviewed to limit goals. Interviewees refused to consider bans on UOG development, fearing such actions could threaten the few social safety nets they or their neighbors had. The industry's economic might here is volatile at best and illusory at worst; oil and gas operators have experienced two significant bust periods since 2008, where significant portions of their workers were shed. More broadly, operators' financial bases are frequently unstable and have been shown to resemble a Ponzi scheme (McLean 2018).

Still, the economic dependence that communities experience is real in its consequences and induces complicity, and concomitant experiences of guilt, that limit activists' goals. For instance, a retired woman living in a heavily drilled community in northern Colorado had become an activist to limit the development of UOG activities in her neighborhood. But paradoxically, the threat to her family's economic well-being induced complicity and limited her goals and willingness to agitate. As she explained:

My grandson worked for oil and gas for a while and I don't like that, but I understand people have to feed their families. . . . I didn't say anything, people have got to eat. My grandson, he married a lady with two little kids, and they have another one, and they have to eat . . . that's what's so, so aggravating about the situation. . . . You get a whole army of supporters because they are economically dependent upon what you [the industry] offer, right? And that's what has driven so many of these conflicts. Jobs versus environment and . . . they [workers] have this immediate need. . . . They need money.

Many interviewees noted that the industry uses its (perceived) economic power, alongside strategies such as forced pooling, to induce complicity in workers and community members. Interviewees expressed this consistently, and while they clearly identified the industry's manipulation, activists we interviewed tempered their demands and often took this power differential as a given cost of employment. For instance, a man in his mid-fifties observed that regional histories of oil and gas production created family histories of economic dependence amid environmental vulnerability, saying: "My father worked for Halliburton all his life, so they put bread on the table. But while they were doing it, they were polluting, polluting, polluting." Another interviewee, a woman in her forties who mobilized to limit production around neighborhoods, articulated this, too—representing a consistent theme across our interviews:

The oil companies run the show. They bring in the high-paid lawyers. They can put how many thousands of dollars into campaigns to push against certain initiatives or for certain initiatives, and it's so discouraging. I mean . . . even when Weld Air and Water [a community group aiming to limit production near residential areas] started out, people said, "I'm afraid for my job. I don't think this [drilling] is right, but I can't say that because my job depends on it." It shouldn't be like that.

Activists we interviewed expressed significant hesitation to push back on the industry, even regarding safety concerns, displaying an induced complicity based on economic dependence. An activist we interviewed, a woman in her thirties fighting UOG production's proximity to homes, was married to an industry employee. She described the tensions this created and their impacts on her induced complicity and willingness (even her perceived ability) to hold industry operators accountable:

My husband actually used to work with the oil and gas industry. He was what they would call a swamper – he'd go out and clean frack tanks. . . . He only did it for a few months. The hours were really awful and dangerous. . . . There would be days where they'd have him out there for like two or three days in a row cleaning stuff. . . . He told me that they would take like little naps in the truck. Or, you know, he'd come home, and he'd just be dead tired. . . . *More studies were starting to come out, and I was like, "I don't know about this." But we needed the money. We were going to lose our apartment, so he took it.*

This family's economic dependence forced this activist's spouse to take a job that was "awful and dangerous", even as our interviewee felt that her economic dependence meant she could not demand much, despite her accumulated knowledge of UOG production's multiple risks. In this case, employment induces complicity that also, it seems, created a sense of shame for her at not being able to "make it" in a skewed economic system. Here, complicity feeds off shame and indicates the sort of "remoralization of the poor" that scholars have noted in various neoliberalized settings (Castree 2010:12).

Some political leaders we interviewed in heavily drilled places discursively normalized dependence on the industry – and amplified it, even as they recognized structural problems. These leaders often acted as gatekeepers for industry; cultural liaisons who normalized pro-industry sentiments and who made local-level decisions that facilitated UOG production near people's homes and schools. They were key promulgators of complicity, given these gatekeeping roles. In our interviews, these leaders downplayed the boom-bust nature of oil and gas operations, while (over)emphasizing industry jobs. The following quotation from a mid-forties county official represents these patterns:

I believe we had over 200 wells within our municipal boundaries. . . . My neighbor around the corner from me has a very young family, probably early 30s. The husband works in the industry. The wife is a stay-at-home mom. She got diagnosed with cancer about two years ago, and as far as quality of life, they have great insurance, which is provided by the company he works for. He has a good job, so she can be at home with her kids as a mom. . . . She chooses not [have] to work. She could work, but she chooses not to. Their quality of life is very good, and I think that they felt a lot of security because of the pay that he gets and the benefits that he gets. . . . And they live in a nice home, and they live in a nice neighborhood, and they're able to take care of their family themselves . . . I hear a lot from a lot of people that work in the industry that are grateful and thankful and love their jobs.

Here, the ability to provide for one's family (or indeed, survive as a family on a single income) is marshalled as sufficient reason to avoid criticizing an industry for risks or contamination or cancer diagnoses—even for an elected official. Notably, too, this person chose to use *other people's experiences* to

make his point, rather than talking about his own experiences—putting still more distance between himself and criticism of the industry.

In all these excerpts, we see the power of induced complicity—where people’s economic dependence on the industry is so pronounced that demanding systemic shifts away from UOG production feels untenable. The effects of “remoralization of the poor” (which has increasingly become “remoralization of most working people in the United States”), encourages people to see economic vulnerabilities and dependencies as personal troubles or deficiencies, rather than as the result of structural economic inequalities and public policies filled with austerities.

Structural Constraints: Leases, Forced Pooling, and Small Acts of Resistance

Industry operators depend on leases to access land and minerals. They, therefore, used several clever approaches to get community members to lease their land and/or minerals—and this is where some of the industry’s most direct attempts to induce complicity become visible. Operators tried to get leases signed through individualized strategies, which often involved preying on people’s economic vulnerabilities. Industry operators aimed to get people sign leases at their most fragile times (for instance, around Christmastime) and benefitted from the induced complicity that such strategies created—even in households with mobilized activists. Firms also use their structural advantages (such as the ability to force pool) to induce complicity. Many activists we interviewed had leases, but they described how the industry had used the threat of forced pooling to get them to sign away their mineral rights, thereby inducing their complicity.

For instance, an interviewee—a teacher in her late forties who co-founded a community organization fighting to move drilling away from homes—observed that people felt pressured by the industry due to forced pooling, a powerful way for industry to obtain mineral access and induce complicity through involuntary participation. Our interviewee described how forced pooling, combined with economic vulnerability, induced complicity for members of her organization and her community:

It’s after Christmas, you got your Visa bills, you get this thing in the mail saying “Sign it, and we’ll give you 300 bucks.” And I remember thinking, “Oh, my God!” And then friends of mine are on Facebook like, “Hey who knows a notary?” because they’re going to go sign it! And I said, “You’re gonna sign that lease aren’t you?! Stop! Don’t sign it!” You also don’t know who’s been force pooled. You would have to go down to the county courthouse and look up every address. . . . And we’re all working right? They’re counting on the fact that you’re too busy, and you need the money, and it’s right after Christmas, and you’ve got some bills. . . . They also were fracking out on C Street, they go to Habitat Lane [a low-income Latinx neighborhood]. They offered them less royalty, and a lower signing bonus. *And* they did it in such a way, that it’s on a check. So if you endorse the check, you’ve signed the contract. . . . This is predatory, it’s unbelievably unethical.

Once the check has been signed, induced complicity becomes twofold: general economic dependence on the industry (for which people blame themselves) and complicity in signing a check they may not be able to refuse (if they were force pooled).

Older activists we interviewed, especially those on a fixed income, had often been unable to refuse financial incentives from leasing, or they knew people in that bind. Here, we see how economic vulnerability induced participation and feelings of complicity. An activist we interviewed, a woman in her fifties fighting for local control, illustrated the influence of economic vulnerability and acknowledged structural barriers:

I have a friend who hardly has any money at all. She’s a little older than me, and she can hardly go out for coffee. She just barely lives. And she came for coffee one day, and she had checks

from oil. She said “What does this mean? What am I supposed to do with this?” And I briefly told her this is what it means, and she says “I don’t want them to drill for oil . . . [but] what do I do with this check?” And I said, “Well, if you need the money, cash it because they are going to do it anyway.” She says “Okay, I will,” and I said “Don’t feel bad.” She needed it!

Despite their structural disadvantages relative to industry and despite seeing the intensely uneven power dynamics at play when an industry can force pool leases, many interviewees held onto a narrative of individualized control—perhaps to retain some sense of agency when industry literally shapes the rules of the game. Complicity was key to these narratives, and people discussed the concomitant guilt often, as with the passage above, especially if they had not been force pooled but were forced due to economic vulnerability.

Importantly, the dynamics of forced pooling *did* encourage some activists we interviewed—especially landowners opposed to drilling—to acknowledge structural constraints. While this did not necessarily persuade most activists in our dataset to demand *substantive* changes, it countered the hyper-individualism encouraged by neoliberal ideologies and created spaces for smaller acts of resistance to UOG production. Their recognition mattered: *even when activists identified themselves as complicit consumers, some also made observations about “feeling forced” to cooperate with the industry and lease away their minerals.* For this sub-set of activists, then, focusing on their perceived complicity in consuming petroleum products became a way of dealing with their ultimate lack of power relative to the industry; although they felt disempowered, they also “chose” to participate in leasing and to buy petroleum products. For instance, a retired man we interviewed who mobilized against wellpad construction near his neighborhood had been force pooled, but he also described feeling pressured to lease access to minerals, in part because of his household’s consumption of petroleum products. While he ultimately ties complicity to larger structural considerations, he still uses individualized, market-based logic:

We can’t be hypocritical because we use it [oil and gas]. It’s in our life and we depend on it an awful lot. It just seems like . . . I felt like we were being railroaded. We were being run over because it was their [the operator’s] right. Well, what about *our* rights? As long as we strive to have low-cost fuel and we’re not willing to pay more for the fuel, these low-cost solutions and trying to do it in the cheapest manner possible is what’s gonna happen.”

Small acts of resistance also cropped up in our data in response to these tensions. Another interviewee, a retired woman working with a community organization to limit development, cashed checks from an industry operator after months of refusing to agree to a lease. She knew the company was going to access her minerals either way due to forced pooling, but she wanted to take responsibility for her induced complicity and use the money it generated to counter production: “They sent the paperwork . . . regarding the forced pooling . . . although we ended up signing eventually because it [the drilling] was going to happen anyway. So I wanted to get the money and donate it to a good cause.” Another retiree we interviewed, working with the same community organization, also felt forced to lease access to her minerals but quietly rebelled:

I’ve gotten checks. And I just take that money. I decided after letting those checks pile up in the drawer to cash them . . . [my land is] pooled. So it doesn’t matter whether you take the check or not, they’re going to do it anyway. . . . These checks kept piling up, and I thought “They’re doing it anyway, whether I take the checks or not.” So I cash them and wrote a check to Weld Air & Water instead.

Though these interviewees did not necessarily express broader goals for their activism, they *did* see the importance of structural constraints and the paradoxes such constraints could generate. Some

committed small acts of resistance in response. A still smaller sub-set of our activist interviewees, though, had moved beyond the guilt of induced complicity and started demanding more meaningful and systemic changes. Below, we turn to this data.

Moving Beyond Complicity

A minority of activists in our sample had begun to identify problems with the complicity narrative, and to resist it. We draw out this pattern for its comparative value. For instance, one interviewee – a grandmother who moved to the area to care for her grandchildren and became an activist fighting for more community control over drilling – noted the irony in asking individuals to exercise responsible water use while allowing the industry to freely use scarce water resources: “I started attending the classes where they promote xeriscape, and they check your irrigation system. It’s to conserve water. So the irony is you’re telling the citizens of this city to conserve water, but on the other hand, you’re allowing this industry to use millions of gallons of water - gallons of water that are being wasted, of course, at the end of it.” This is a staggering example of individualizing responsibility – demanding xeriscaping from individuals while letting industry use unchecked amounts of potable water. This woman recognized the inconsistency – and named it outright.

What’s more, she saw the years of obfuscation of climate change science by industry operators such as Exxon as generating complicity and creating direct barriers to renewable energy sources, for example. She saw the industry as much more responsible for climate crisis than individual people purchasing oil and gas products; the degree of complicity was staggeringly different. She observed: “I found out that the oil and gas industry has manipulated the information for years, to block any kind of alternative energy. So we could have been so much more ahead in terms of electric cars or solar panels. If they [companies] hadn’t paid off or blocked off and paid scientists to . . . give false information.” She continued: “Some of the people that are for oil and gas say, ‘Well you drive a car and you use oil in your daily life.’ And so I was thinking, ‘Yes, but we have other alternatives. And it is the oil and gas companies that have blocked being able to move to that.’” Importantly, then, she sees that corporate behavior encourages and induces experiences of complicity, while simultaneously receiving enormous subsidies at the expense of renewables in the United States (Nuccitelli 2018; Redman 2017).

Another poignant observation emerged during an interview with an activist, a woman in her mid-forties, whose small farming operation had become surrounded by wellpads, pipelines, and other UOG infrastructure:

I understand we want gas to fill our car, but still. . . . That’s giving you an excuse not to work on changing society back to something that’s better. . . . I mean, granted we’re all kettle black, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t, you know, scrub a little bit. . . . I don’t necessarily have all the right light bulbs. But there’s a reason for that. . . . If society would make it easier for everybody to do it, if they would stop giving subsidies to the fossil fuel companies and help out the renewables that seem like they are practical, then everybody would be better off. And having gas for our cars doesn’t mean that we have to put oil wells right next to everybody’s house! I mean there’s a degree. . . . You should be able to vote for what you believe in, and you should be able to have an opinion on something. Even – you can say, “I want my job to still be here, but I don’t think we should put this well in this particular position.” You should be able to say that, and I don’t think people feel like they can.

Interview excerpts like this display multi-scalar and structural views that activists can take to avoid experiences of complicity that dilute or dampen their goals. She notes how individual thinking and feelings of complicity uselessly distract people and block efforts at improving larger systems. While observations like this were certainly rarer in our dataset, they displayed the ways that people

dismantle the complicity narrative by using structural perspectives to capture the comparative power and complicity of the oil and gas industry.

Although rarer, we can observe that the explicit structural critiques had patterns: they came from people who owned land, owned some minerals, had been force pooled, or had been mobilized activists for years. They typically possessed some power and class privilege, but they had been unable to exercise full control over the assets that lent this privilege; when their land or minerals were forcefully developed, they were positioned to observe the structural inequities – and empowered enough to speak out about it. Importantly, marginalized, minoritized, non-landowners (such as those living around environmental racism sites like Bella Romero) made similar structural observations during interviews, but they were typically made “off-the-record” due to fear of reprisal or, often, due to their undocumented citizenship status.

Complicity here matters both in terms of its impacts on the goals of people’s activism and the outcomes of organized resistance to UOG production. While opposition to localized UOG production has mobilized, that activism tends to focus locally (sometimes at the state level). This is due in significant ways to the 2005 Energy Policy Act and the devolution of most regulations governing UOG production to state (or even lower levels of) governance. But it is also important to note that very few of the people we interviewed mentioned working toward federal or industry-wide regulations. Instead, they focused on the wellpads or pipelines *in their neighborhoods, down the street, or in their towns*. These findings are not unusual in patterns of activism (Kallman 2018; Stasik 2018), but they are instructive. That is: people individualize the problem as a consequence of their feelings of complicity in consuming petroleum-based products, but they also aim lower regarding the results they want, even if they are mobilized. This localized approach makes sense and responds to regulatory devolution. But it does highlight the lack of systems-level aspirations in the goals of many activists. For systemic changes to occur, the structural critique we examine in this section must overcome complicity narratives. As climate scholar Supran noted “If you’re really focused on your own sense of guilt and responsibility, you become hamstrung from acting . . . to hold systemic failures to account that are locking us into this fossil fuel status quo society” (Westervelt 2021).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our data have shown that new tactics marshalled by the fossil fuel industry to induce hopelessness, despair, and powerlessness may hinge on complicity. Feelings of complicity can create significant barriers to demanding (much less accomplishing) change, even among mobilized activists, and stall efforts toward larger changes. Economic dependence on the industry and lack of safety nets in neoliberalized societies like the United States add extra layers to activists’ experiences of complicity, amplifying their guilt and diluting their goals.

These findings on complicity have vital implications for social movement activism, particularly in the realm of environmental and climate justice action. Our data have illuminated a few important patterns in how people experience complicity in fossil fuel consumption - and how the industry depends on individualized, consumer-centered guilt to continue operating, even amid climate crises. Our complicity framework helps illuminate these patterns. We have shown that: a) complicity emerged when activists centralized individualistic, consumer-based identities that limited their demands and solutions they sought; b) economic dependence shaped, sharpened, and induced feelings of complicity that persuaded activists to dilute their goals; and c) concomitant feelings of guilt paralyzed progress.

We must emphasize that although complicity is experienced and frequently analyzed as an individual (and individualizing) psychological phenomenon, it is in fact a structural force. Complicity is specifically and intentionally promulgated (by entities such as Exxon and BP) (Mann 2021) and combines with systems that keep people in poverty. Together, these dynamics create a social-structural force that uses the power of guilt to gag even mobilized dissidents. This is where economic vulnerability becomes such a powerful tool – inducing experiences of complicity to keep people from

aiming for larger-scale systemic changes. Among most activists we interviewed, experiences of complicity compelled them to dampen the goals of their activism, often from the beginning. Even activists who saw structural dynamics at play, as with forced pooling, focused on their complicity in consuming petroleum and natural gas products as a way to deal with their ultimate lack of power relative to the industry.

More to the point, it can work. These experiences of complicity and guilt stunt individual and collective imaginations; they encourage people to police their own visions for a better future and monitor their own behavior in a strong display of biopower in action. Ultimately, complicity encourages people to enforce their own hopelessness. These outcomes bear on multiple dimensions of neoliberalism: the ideology shapes imaginations and cultures of social movement organizations, while the governance regime shapes possibilities for political action. Neoliberalism's focus on market-based individualism is especially influential.

Moreover, the respondents in our study are engaged with one of the largest, best-funded, and best-integrated industries on the planet. While some of our findings on complicity may be generalizable – certainly industrial agriculture stands out as a potential parallel – the context of UOG production itself is specific and instructive. The industry is underwritten by federal subsidies to the tune of billions per year (again, conservative estimates put U.S. direct subsidies to the industry at roughly \$20 billion per year as of 2019 (EESI 2019; Redman 2017) and recent studies establish indirect subsidies in the hundreds of billions (McCulloch and Stefanski 2021). The industry has a pervasive influence on industrial policy as well as politics. All of these factors make it a unique case—and make fossil fuel corporations' influence uniquely difficult to dislodge. This is why experiences of complicity are so important to draw out in this context; they are inescapable without systemic change, but strongly impact communities' ability to engage that change.

Theoretically, our outcomes offer an important and under-studied flip side of Szasz's concept of political anesthesia. Instead of people using their conscious consumerism to make themselves feel protected from environmental risks, their experiences of complicity in fossil fuel consumption make them feel as if they, somehow, deserve the risks. The fact that it is all but impossible to opt out of this kind of consumption without systemic changes in the form of a wholesale shift to different energy and production models does little to assuage that guilt when experienced individually. In this way, then, individualized activism and conscious consumption may be even more limiting than the literature has shown thus far. Not only do they bespeak a hegemonic, internalized neoliberalism, but they truncate activist work, making people feel like undeserving hypocrites if they envision a fossil-free future.

But it is equally true that this complicity is not immutable—it can be countered. Our data included rarer but important moments where activists dismantle the complicity narrative and point at the fossil fuel industry's deep legitimization crisis (Habermas 1973). Typically, the people making these observations openly have some power and assets – such as owning affected land or minerals – but they have also been forced to comply with UOG production that they oppose. At the other end of the spectrum, the most disempowered (landless, undocumented people living in affected neighborhoods) also make structural critiques of the complicity narrative but usually off the record. They show how the industry's power and manipulation of complicity can be dismantled and disempowered. These small legitimization crises represent key points of intervention, then, and places where the industry's attempts to induce complicity fail. They can help social movement organizations envision more systemic, substantial goals and paths forward. And envisioning is the first step to acting. Structural changes that move societies rapidly away from fossil fuel consumption are precisely what we need to address and change drivers of climate change.

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