Dow Chemical’s Knowledge Factories:
Action Anthropology against Michigan’s Company Town Culture

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ABSTRACT: The article describes my efforts as a public anthropologist/journalist in addressing the official culture of silence in Michigan’s colleges, universities and towns regarding Dow Chemical’s extensive environmental health pollution and corruption. These sites include Midland, Michigan, home of Dow’s international headquarters, and my own residence of East Lansing, site of Michigan State University, the state’s largest higher education institution. Both are beneficiaries of Dow largess or philanthropy. This relative silence – which extends to nearly all state media and universities – is remarkable considering the fact that, unlike turn of the century company towns, Dow Chemical operates in a civic culture where thousands of highly educated professionals work in education, government and communications. Democracy is degraded by processes of accumulation, ideology, fear, suppression, conformity, specialization and, importantly, the self-censorship of professionals and academics. With Eriksen (2006) and Hale (2008) I argue for an engaged anthropology where anthropologists step out of their academic cocoons to embrace the local public. This is ‘not just a matter of … reaching broader publics with a message from social science … it is a way of doing social science’ (Hale 2008: xvii). This case study illustrates how an anthropologist engaged contradictions in order to show how Michigan universities are becoming veritable knowledge factories in service to Eisenhower’s feared military–industrial–academic complex.

KEYWORDS: civic engagement, company towns, environmental justice, higher education, journalism, public anthropology

‘Growth [is] the opiate we’re all hooked on …’
(Frank Popoff, former CEO of DOW Chemical; in Brandt 1997: 575)

‘Growth for whom?’
(in Dying for Growth, Global Inequality and the Health of the Poor, Kim 2000)

When the enterprising Herbert Dow was rummaging in his Midland Michigan shed in the 1890s, few locals knew what the Ohio man was up to. Dow was in fact digging a deep water well to mine the salty brine – from an ancient underwater sea beneath the city – to make bromine. He was applying the knowledge he had mastered at Ohio’s Case School of Applied Science to make a chemical – potassium bromide – that he would market to pharmaceutical companies for use as a sedative and stomach soother. The ‘chemical genius’ Herbert Dow had partnered with the ‘money men’ from...
Ohio to finance their obsessive quest to make cash from chemicals (Whitehead 1968: 1–2).

Midland locals were not impressed. As reported in Don Whitehead’s, *The Dow Story* (1968), ‘In 1903 Midland residents threatened to sue Dow Chemical because of smelly gases’, which they claimed induced vomiting (Whitehead 1968: 57). Herbert Dow ‘hooted down’ the protests as he would time and again after explosions, chemicals and pollution seeped from his plants, disturbing civic life (ibid.). But hooting down the locals over environmental contamination could not work forever. And, in fact, Dow’s family and his executive staff lived in Midland too and sought its pleasures, what few there were in a moonscaped place made barren after the nineteenth-century logging craze. Dow money flowed into the village and soon it seemed like every civic and cultural arena had the Dow name attached to it, from the library and gardens to the Museum of Science and Art and historical museum (Whitehead 1968: 277). Midland became a company town and the locals, dependent on the money and grateful for Dow’s largess, were quieted.

A century later Dow’s reach as a creator of pollution extends around the globe. On 3 December 1984, just after midnight, 40 tons of poisonous substances leaked from Union Carbide’s pesticide plant in Bhopal, central India. A huge yellow cloud exposed half a million people to the gases, which hung over the city for hours. It remains the worst industrial accident of all time. Although the numbers are still in dispute there were over 3,000 deaths and 100,000 injuries in the first few days and several thousand additional claims of injuries or deaths to date (Doyle 2004: 420). In 2001 Michigan’s Dow Chemical purchased Union Carbide, assuming the historic weight of its outstanding liabilities to the people of Bhopal. The international community shifted its attention to Dow Chemical for social justice. But in Michigan itself, few citizens are aware of any relationship between Dow and Bhopal. How does this happen, especially in a culture that prides itself on freedom of speech and academic freedom?

I discovered the Bhopal connection in 2002 while updating my knowledge on the tragedy for a course I was teaching at Michigan State University as an adjunct professor. The class was called ‘Global Diversity and Interdependence’. I was surprised at the news because Dow’s International headquarters in Midland is just 60 miles from MSU. After discussing the Dow–Bhopal connection with my class of 250 students, I was approached, after class, by an irate student who expressed anger at my mentioning the issue. A very close relative of hers, she told me, was the CEO of Dow Chemical. At the time MSU’s president was Peter McPherson, a close friend of Vice President Dick Cheney. The former head of the U.S. Agency for International Development, McPherson later took a leave of absence from MSU, in 2003, to serve in Iraq for President Bush. After my conversation with the student, I consulted with my friend Dave Dempsey, the Policy Director of the Michigan Environmental Council, for advice. He suggested that I stage a debate. The subsequent debate, ‘Is Dow Chemical a Good Corporate Citizen?’ was well received and turned a potential problem into a good pedagogical moment.

**Public Anthropology, Civic Engagement and Activism: The Local as Exotic**

In fact, the question of Dow’s so called ‘corporate citizen’ status is an oxymoron. Dow’s primary interest is capital accumulation. Democracy and citizenship education are threats to its enterprise, as we shall see. Subsequent to the 2002 classroom debate, I published nearly all of what follows as a Michigan journalist. This included the Ann Arbor Ecology Center’s *From the Ground Up* (2004a) and Michigan’s *Lansing City Pulse* newspaper (2002, 2004b), where I was a weekly columnist. This work
was reproduced or updated in several outlets including *CounterPunch* (2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) a daily Internet newsletter which receives over half a million views per month, as well as *Corporate Watch, Bhopal.Net, and CommonDreams*. It was also featured in the American Anthropology Association’s series *Pulse of the Planet* in November 2008. This work is part of a larger project in which I seek to diagnose a new company town culture, including the growing corporatization of the university and media, in neoliberal America. It is also part of another project to improve the theory and practice of public pedagogy in anthropology (McKenna 2009).

My Dow–MSU work is a form of what anthropologist Charles Hale calls *Engaging Contradictions* (Hale 2008) as his new book is titled. A few months after learning about the Dow–Bhopal connection, for example, I found another significant contradiction. In the Spring of 2002, Dow co-sponsored a seminar series at MSU’s Detroit College of Law called ‘Creating Sustainable Cities in the 21st Century’. On 19 March the talk was titled ‘Abandonment of the Cities’. I noted to myself that there was no mention that day of the irony that Dow Chemical had abandoned the city of Bhopal. Moreover, there were no protests even though MSU had a nationally renowned campus sustainability programme. So, a few days later I wrote about it in my weekly environmental column as a local journalist (McKenna 2002). This was one of 33 weekly columns I wrote during that period. Soon I was asked by an MSU social scientist, who had influence over my adjunct employment, to stop writing about MSU after s/he received a phone call from MSU administration. I chose to continue writing since I considered it important social science.

Jennifer Washburn describes the stakes tellingly in her important work, *University, Inc., The Corporate Corruption of American Higher Education* (2005), ‘As universities have become commercial entities, the space to perform research that is critical of industry or that challenges conventional market ideology – research on environmental pollution, poverty alleviation, occupational health hazards – has gradually diminished, as has the willingness of universities to defend professions whose findings conflict with the interests of their corporate sponsors’ (Washburn 2005: 227). She asks, ‘Will universities stand up for academic freedom in these situations, or will they bow to commercial pressure out of fear of alienating donors?’ and concludes ‘Too often of late, it has been the latter.’ (ibid.). And yet, without publicly engaged activist anthropology I would never have written this very article before you. As Hale correctly notes, ‘Activism is not just a matter of publicity or reaching broader publics with a message from social science. It is a way of doing social science [emphasis mine], often in collaboration with non-social scientists. … [it] is part of the process of forming, testing, and improving knowledge’ (Hale 2008: xvii).

It is not just corporate donors and disciplinary norms that can constrain free inquiry, but for some universities, it is foreign governments. This is of increasing importance in Great Britain. In March 2009 Great Britain’s Centre for Social Coherence released a groundbreaking report *A Degree of Influence: The funding of strategically important subjects in UK universities* (Simcox 2009) that detailed how Arabic and Islamic countries are contributing large sums – often anonymously – in strategic curricular areas. It shows how universities are being used as diplomatic arms of those countries. With entire departments dependent on foreign contributions, a climate of censorship and self-censorship is fostered: ‘universities have insufficient safeguards in place to prevent donations affecting the way universities are run. There is clear evidence that, at some universities, the choice of teaching materials, the subject areas, the degrees offered, the recruitment of staff, the composition of advisory boards and even the selection of students are now subject to influence from donors’ (Simcox 2009: 12–13).
PhDs and the Magical Circle of Knowledge

One might think that a large group of highly educated PhDs is sufficient to protect critical inquiry. Midland, Michigan ‘has more PhDs per square acre than you’ll find most anywhere else’, Don Whitehead reported in The Dow Story 40 years ago (1968: 276). That is just as true today. But all that brainpower has not translated into much critical intervention against Dow’s practices and policies in Midland, where citizens live under the conditions of a company town. Many are beholden to Dow for their livelihoods, and everyone’s property values are held hostage to the idea that dioxin – one of the most dangerous substances known to man – is not really harmful and the contamination of their yards, parks, playgrounds and water is really not that significant. Whitehead provides insight into this mindset: ‘Those who seek anonymity after working hours and who wish to build a wall between their business lives and their private lives find the small town a very difficult place. Such walls are not easy to build in a small town. The town’s life is not different from the life of the company. One impinges on the other in many ways’ (Whitehead 1968: 10).

One might expect Michigan’s universities – located safely outside Midland’s geographical sphere of influence – to be more independent and critical of Dow Chemical. But as Stanley Aronowitz makes clear in The Knowledge Factory, Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning (2000), the current business craze in academia has blurred the distinctions between training, education and learning. As educational theorist Henry Giroux pointed out in an interview, ‘educators need to take seriously the importance of defending higher education as an institution of civic culture whose purpose is to educate students for active and critical citizenship … markets don’t reward moral behaviour’ (Giroux, personal communication) And markets are what Dow is all about.

There is a growing scholarship on this crisis. In the book Campus, Inc. (White 2000), for example, 39 contributors explored topics including the myth of the liberal campus, organizing advice for campus combatants, and rethinking academic culture. One necessary form of academic rethinking concerns the very content and structure of disciplinary knowledge itself: specialization. Academics need to understand better the forms of social control that have transformed them into specialists writing for a small, narrow audience (Jacoby 1987). Bledstein’s formulation of the ‘magical circle of scientific knowledge’ (1976: 90), has characterized academics as self-conscious members of an exclusive club in which members believe that only the few specialized by training and indoctrination are privileged to enter. Academics configure social problems in accordance with the specialized rituals of their specific disciplines, he said. For Bledstein (1976), these magical circles of specialized expertise are the basis for both the professions’ contribution to society and for the avoidance of society’s problems. The result was a fragmentary effort whereby any holistic notion does not work very well. It is ironic that anthropology, the alleged science of holism, too often tends to fall under this academic hegemony.

A holistic engagement is a civic engagement. It is by its nature critical. Therefore it comes with risks. And yet, this holistic, interdisciplinary engagement – as journalists or public writers – is all the more important at a time when the journalistic profession has significantly been scaled back and chilled under severe corporate pressure, undermining critical public culture (Giroux 2007). Anthropologist Thomas Eriksen (2006) agrees. He argues for an ‘engaged anthropology’ where anthropologists step out of their academic cocoon to embrace the wider public. ‘[Anthropology’s] lack of visibility is an embarrassment and a challenge’ (Eriksen 2006: ix). Eriksen argued that anthropology must write in a popular vein to make sense of peoples’ lives to the people in their
own communities. Anthropologists can alternately use their intellectual resources to make the familiar exotic or the exotic familiar in their own communities. The corporation as a cultural form is tailor-made for this treatment. It is perhaps the most animistic entity known to man. It is treated constitutionally as a living breathing human being. Anthropologists need not travel to all four corners of the globe in search of the exotic: it is right before their eyes ‘at home’.

**On the Dow Dole**

Dow has invested millions into Michigan State University. For example, it gave US$5 million to build the Dow Institute for Materials Research, a 46,000-square-foot addition to the east wing of MSU’s Engineering Building, in 1996. In March 2000, Dow Chemical made a biotech deal with Michigan State University in which it would pay MSU about US$4 million over several years. The project focuses on plant oils that might be used in areas like low-cholesterol cooking oil and plastics (McKenna 2004a). Dow hopes new patents will arise to improve its bottom line. Tim Martin, a journalist with the *Lansing State Journal*, spoke with Bob Huggett, MSU’s vice president of research and graduate studies, in his 17 April 2000 article, *MSU Weighs Rewards, Risks of Research* (Martin 2000). Martin pointed out that ‘critics worry that universities can get too cozy with corporations that sponsor their research, fearing that competition for money could lead schools like MSU to do research that does not help the public, or worse, skew research test results in favor of those paying the bills’ (Martin 2000: B1). Martin reported that MSU officials said the source of money does not influence their quest for truth. ‘Are we selling our soul to the devil by taking industrial money? I don’t think so’, [Huggett told Martin] ... Corporations have relied more on universities to help their research efforts in the past decade … I don’t think that’s a problem, as long as we protect what the university stands for – the free and open dissemination of data’ (Martin 2000: B4).

But the free and open dissemination of data (which is not always so easily accessible), while very important, is not the same as a rigorous search for the truth, or the free and open dissemination of ideas, a supposed hallmark of universities. Does education produced for the market undermine education produced for a critical citizenry? Befitting its interdisciplinary goals, does the university present a complete portrait of Dow to all its students? Is Dow a good corporate ‘citizen’ deserving of an association with a university?

**The Long Shadow of Dow**

In November 2003, Steve Meador completed a 90-minute documentary titled, ‘The Long Shadow’ – a critical investigation of Dow’s dioxin dealings with Michigan’s state government – alone and on a shoestring budget, as a master’s project for his environmental journalism degree. Meanwhile, just down the hall from the environmental journalism offices at MSU’s Communication Arts Building, a fledgling undergraduate Public Relations specialization is just getting off the ground. It is in honour of E. N. Brandt, whose 1997 book, *Growth Company, Dow Chemical’s First Century*, largely sang the praises of ‘one of the wonders of the modern business world’ (Brandt: 2000: xii). The endowed E. N. Brandt chair was the result of a US$1.3 million gift to MSU from the Carl Gerstacker Foundation in 2000. And who is Carl Gerstacker? Most MSU faculty do not know. He is the former CEO of Dow Chemical. I will address Meador’s film first and later return to Brandt.

Meador’s film documented what happened after Michigan Governor Engler learned, in 2001, that dioxin levels in the Tittabwassee River floodplain, downstream from Midland’s
Dow Chemical were found at over 7,000 parts per trillion (80 times Michigan’s cleanup standards) near parks and residential areas. They did not bother to tell anyone. Finally, two citizen groups, the Lone Tree Council and the Michigan Environmental Council filed a Freedom of Information Act request to get the data, alerted by conscientious Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) insiders. In January 2002 the FOIA revealed that MDEQ Director Russ Harding had blocked further soil testing and was suppressing a state health assessment that called for aggressive state action. Later the Engler administration secretly tried to work out a ‘sweetheart deal’ with Dow to raise the clean-up level of dioxin to 831 parts per trillion, thus circumventing clean-up of the dioxin in most areas. A judge later threw this out.

In an effort to appeal to the widest audience, the documentary carefully explained all sides of the controversy. It is neutral in tone, unsensational and almost legalistic in its style. For example, Meador politely interviewed Harding in the film. The film also interviewed Kathy Henry, one of the floodplain residents who lives downstream from Dow’s Midland factories. She was advised by the MDEQ to remove her clothing the moment she enters her house after mowing her lawn. Henry looks out at her property as a wasteland. Verifying this, in November 2004, the state of Michigan issued a game consumption advisory for the Tittabawassee river floodplain because of Dow’s dioxin. Turkeys and deer are now considered potentially toxic. This was only the second time in Michigan history that such a warning was made (McKenna 2004a).

**Two Films and Two Terrorisms:**
**Public or Private TV?**

‘Unfortunately, The Long Shadow was never shown on Michigan PBS’, said Meador in an interview (McKenna 2005: 1). Meador sent a rough cut to four stations – WCMU (Mt Pleasant), WFUM at the University of Michigan (Flint), WTVS (Detroit), and WKAR at Michigan State University (East Lansing) in December 2003. ‘All of these stations had broadcast a previous documentary of mine entitled “A May to Remember” about the Bath School bombing of 1927. Strangely, all of the stations were completely unresponsive to “The Long Shadow” (i.e., phone calls and e-mails not returned)’ (McKenna 2005: 2). Meador said the film’s merits have been recognized by environmental reporters from the Bay City Times (Jeff Kart) and Detroit Free Press (Hugh McDiarmid). ‘The affected residents in the floodplain also had very nice things to say about it,” he added. “I’m not sure why the PBS stations didn’t bite. A number of people have suggested that the stations shied away because they are underwritten by Dow, and I think that is a possibility”’ (McKenna 2005: 2).

When the focus is on a single demented terrorist the public airwaves are available, but when the gaze turns to a transnational guilty of poisoning vast swaths of mid-Michigan with dioxin – which the Environmental Protection Agency classifies as a highly toxic persistent organochlorine that causes cancer – that’s a different story, especially when the public airwaves are partly underwritten by the trans-national corporation. In fact, Dow Chemical is associated with a world historic form of industrial terrorism. Given the death counts, the prolonged agony and the persistent callous treatment of its victims, the Union Carbide/Dow Chemical disaster is far worse than the September 11th tragedy. Yet it is invisible in Michigan.

**Dow’s Version of History**

Dow is a big funder to universities that house three of these public television stations. For example, WCMU is at Central Michigan University, 30 miles from Midland. In 1978 Dow’s President withdrew money from CMU after Jane Fonda spoke there on economic democ-
racy. ‘[It] will not be resumed until we are convinced our dollars are not expended in supporting those who would destroy us’ (Brandt 1997: 527). CMU got the message. It’s new ‘Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow College of Health Professions’ touts Dow even though DOW only gave US$5 million, while MI taxpayers gave US$37.5 million. Brandt approvingly quoted columnist George Will on Dow Chemical’s decision at the time: “Capitalism inevitably nourishes a hostile class,” said Will. “American business has been generous with gifts to universities … but too indiscriminate. Dow has given the business community a timely sample of appropriate discrimination” (Brandt 1997: 527).

Brandt’s thick volume represented Dow’s view of the world. Predictably, it dismissed dioxin’s real-life dangers, citing study after study apparently disproving a health problem. Brandt tells the story of a ‘60 Minutes’ crew who arrived in Midland, soon after Times Beach, Missouri was evacuated for dioxin pollution in 1982, expecting Midland to be the next town evacuated because of dioxin contamination (Brandt 1997).

‘They came at the busiest weekend of the year,’ Brandt quotes a Dow official as saying, ‘everybody’s laughing and having a big time at the art fair, and the antique show you have to see to believe … They’re having trouble finding beleaguered folks. To make a long story short, with the exception of a few environmentalists from a local organization, they gave up. That story just went away because they could not find any substance for their story line’ (Brandt 1997: 365–366). This 649-page treatise spent a great deal of time defending Dow against various interlocutors. In a chapter called ‘Flower Children’ Brandt dismissed all the ‘napalm hubbub’ (Brandt 1997: 362) created by Vietnam War activists, claiming that napalm was, according to secretary of defense McNamara, of little consequence to civilians and was ‘a great service for the armed forces’ (Brandt 1997: 357).

Brandt defended Dow against the 1941 charge by the U.S. Justice Department that Dow conspired with the Nazi’s I.F. Farben to hold down magnesium production in the United States in the pre-war era (Dow later pleaded nolo contendere), but failed to mention Dow’s 1951 hiring of Otto Ambros, the Nazi war criminal convicted at Nuremberg for slavery and mass murder in the killing of thousands of Jews with poison gas (well detailed in the excellent 1991 book, ‘Secret Agenda’, by Linda Hunt). Brandt informed us that Dow was the first company to receive a phone call from Pinochet’s military in 1973 soon after his forces assassinated democratically elected Chilean President Salvador Allende, toppling his government, asking Dow to come back, which Dow ‘readily accepted’ (a Dow official saluting the economic ‘miracle’ of Pinochet) (Brandt 1997: 453). But Brandt’s book never mentions the thousands tortured and 3,000 killed during Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship.

Tapping the Brain Bank

Dow Chemical has established deep-seated connections to everything from biotechnology, engineering and military research, to public health, public relations and journalism. In so doing, Dow has constructed a benevolent corporate image while mining expertise and reaping patent rewards. In recent years Dow and its offshoots (like the Gerstacker Foundation) have contributed more than US$10 million in direct contributions to the University of Michigan, including US$5 million in 2000 to fund a new College of Engineering laboratory; US$2.5 million in 2000 for the Dow Chemical Company Professor of Sustainable Science, Technology, and Commerce; and US$1.2 million to the U-M School of Public Health in 1996 for a Dow professorship focusing on the health effects, risks and benefits of chemicals in the environment. The Dow Chair at Saginaw Valley State University is chemistry Professor...
David H. Swenson. In a 9 April 2002 article in the *Saginaw News* he said that when environmental groups clash with alleged polluters, the claims of both groups often are suspect. In a follow-up interview Swenson said that ‘the [dioxin] data is fuzzy and unclear … we know it’s [damaging] to mice [at given levels] but it’s hard to see if that translates directly into humans’. He said he knows people on both sides of the issue and that his position was ‘in the middle’ (McKenna 2004a: 11).

In May 1999, the British publication *Lancet* – perhaps the most prestigious medical journal in the world – ran a news story reporting the latest dioxin findings from the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. It reported on Dr Robert N. Hoover’s belief that ‘based on the current weight of the evidence … TCDD [the most potent dioxin] should be considered a human carcinogen’ (Larkin 1999: 1681). But they found a sceptic in Michigan. Dr Michael Kamrin, a toxicologist from Michigan State University, was quoted as saying that the dioxin data is ‘unconvincing and epidemiologically weak. These data don’t suggest to me that there’s any health risk from dioxin [TCDD]. I didn’t think so before, and I don’t think so now’ (Larkin 1999: 1681). Dr Kamrin later served on Governor Engler’s Michigan Environmental Science Board in 1999–2000 where he voted against raising Michigan’s standards for protecting children’s environmental health.

A Company State?

Does corporate money affect criticism of the benefactors? Michelle Hurd Riddick, with the Lone Tree Council, an environmental group contesting Dow, believes that ‘all that Dow money to universities reflects Dow’s ability to buy complacency’ (McKenna 2004a: 8). There is plenty of money being cast about.

Albion College has been a favourite Dow recipient, owing in part to the fact that Carl Gerstacker, a former CEO of Dow, served on Albion’s Board of Directors from 1960 to 1988. Albion received US$3 million in 1997 from the Dow Foundation to upgrade its science facilities. In 2001 the Gerstacker Foundation awarded it another US$2 million to build the Carl A. Gerstacker Liberal Arts Institute for Professional Management. Other small liberal arts colleges have also fared well. In 2002, Hope College received US$1 million to help construct a new science facility. Also in 2002, Alma received US$500,000 for a recreation centre. In 2003 Kalamazoo College received its final instalment of a US$3.2 million gift from the Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation for its Enlightened Leadership in the 21st Century Initiative. In 1999 Michigan’s Hillsdale College received US$500,000 for the Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism. It is ‘devoted to the restoration of ethical, high-minded journalism standards and to the reformation of our cultural, political, and social practices’ (McKenna 2004a: 11). That year the Dow Program sponsored Richard Lowry, Editor-in-Chief of the *National Review*, as a guest speaker. In his speech, titled ‘The High Priests of Journalism: Truth, Morality, and the Media’, Lowry criticized American journalism for ‘reinforcing] the radical side in America’s culture wars’ (Lowry 2000: 6). He continued:

What do I mean by the radical side? I am referring to those intellectuals on the Left who are attempting to remold American society and the way we view ourselves as human beings in keeping with an extreme feminist and multicultural world view … [we need to] get more conservatives in journalism, which means supporting projects such as Hillsdale College’s “Dow Program in American Journalism” … [and] strengthening institutions that work to change the prevailing culture, from the National Review Institute to conservative institutions in higher education’. (Lowrey 2000: 6)

A full accounting of Dow Chemical’s historic involvement in Michigan universities is yet to be written. Such a project would help make transparent a cultural politics that serves cor-
porate interests more than citizen interests. University scholars are well equipped to carry out this research. But will they?

Like Having a Foreign Country in Your Backyard

Dow Chemical is the richest chemical company in United States. With revenues of US$46.3 billion in 2006, Dow Chemical is worth more than 122 of the world’s countries according to World Bank statistics. It is like having a foreign country in your own backyard! Would that Dow could be studied like a foreign country, which is what it deserves. Many universities boast area studies programmes that critically investigate the political economy and culture of specific regions of the world, like Africa, Latin America or Asia. It is very common for these programmes to house perspectives that are very critical of capitalism. But, the only sector of the university that regularly studies corporations is business colleges or departments, though they rarely offer a critical perspective. Because Dow is such a big presence at most Michigan universities, its name plastered on buildings and on endowed chairs, it remains off-limits to critical enquiry.

The Importance of Critical Enquiry and Action: True Higher Learning (Is Holistic)

To understand Michigan’s dioxin crisis, you must dig into history, gain a fuller appreciation of the stakes involved, study the politics and follow the money. Universities have a name for this: interdisciplinary research. But many academic professionals are reluctant to venture publicly into this issue. When Ryan Bodanyi, Campus Organizer for the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, was collecting signatures at the University of Michigan for a ‘Resolution in Support of University Disassociation from the Dow Corporation’, he was surprised at how few of the faculty signed his petition: ‘We approached the Women’s Studies department and one person said, “my colleagues might say it’s outside our discipline”’ (McKenna 2004a: 8). In the public health and health professions fields, there seems to be little excuse not to study the links between the environment and human health. The Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow College of Health Professions at CMU is already committed to ‘fostering an understanding of health in its varied dimensions through relevant, community-based experiences’ (McKenna 2004a: 13). In the Midland dioxin case, community-based experiences could include rotations with environmentalists from Tittabawassee River Watch, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality fieldworkers, public health nurses, local journalists and citizens living in the polluted areas. Students could also be encouraged to pursue real research projects on Dow and dioxin.

Let us suppose academics from various disciplines got together to pursue research around Dow Chemical’s dioxin scandal, as the basis for a book. Communications professionals could diagnose Dow’s media manipulation techniques, studying its PR strategies, deceptions and omissions. Political Scientists could look at the ‘crisis of democracy’, exploring the politics surrounding Dow’s influence with governments. Philosophers and political economists might question former Dow CEO Frank Popoff’s assertion that ‘Growth [is] the opiate we’re all hooked on’ (Brandt 1997: 575). They could begin by asking simply, ‘What is growth?’ and unpack it. In fact the philosophers could point out that what Popoff and Brandt call economic ‘growth’ has a dark side of oppression, pollution and danger. Others might argue a more accurate description is ‘capital accumulation’ – the real opiate Dow is hooked on.

On the 30th anniversary of a Dow recruiting sit-in at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, two veterans reflected on the event in an
article published in Madison’s Capital Times. Recalling the 5,000 students who were gassed, and 63 who were taken to the hospital, they credited the civil disobedience with ‘pushing the anti-war movement beyond the campus and into the community’ (Bodden 2006). One of the writers, Paul Soglin, would six years later (1973) be elected mayor of Madison. He served six two-year terms, three in the 1970s and another three in the 1990s (Bodden 2006).

Whereas Brandt argued the Dow sit-ins of the 1960s were misdirected and a failure because corporate recruitment did not suffer, Soglin’s reflections were different. The sit-ins galvanized wider opposition to the war and helped to nourish future political leaders, like himself. Dissent is a fundamental part of the American project. Just as importantly, active dissent is a fundamental part of identity formation against the forces that would socialize citizens to conform and keep quiet. In a 1967 article about the Dow protests, historian Howard Zinn (2003) directed some criticism at the universities. ‘The University’s acceptance of Dow Chemical recruiting as just another business transaction is especially disheartening, because it is the University which tells students repeatedly on ceremonial occasions that it hopes students will be more than fact-absorbing automatons, that they will choose humane values, and stand up for them courageously’ (Zinn 2003: 307). A new generation has rediscovered this fundamental truth, and again a focus of dissent is Dow Chemical. On 3 December 2003 Dow faced its first nationwide student protests since the Vietnam War. Students from 25 colleges, universities and high schools organized protests around the country against Dow Chemical, as a part of the first-annual Global Day of Action against Corporate Crime. Organisers included Students for Bhopal, Association for India’s Development chapters, and the Environmental Justice Program of the Sierra Student Coalition (SSC) (McKenna 2004a: 16). Students delivered contaminated water samples from Bhopal to the homes of 11 of Dow’s 14 Board members, including the CEO, William Stavropoulos, and former U-M and Princeton President Harold Shapiro. They asked Dow to accept its moral and legal responsibility for the world’s worst industrial disaster. News of these protests was relatively invisible in Michigan media and on Michigan campuses (McKenna 2004a: 17).

**Summary: Take Back Higher Education**

Michigan’s Democratic Governor Granholm has never seriously challenged Dow Chemical, worried about jobs at a time when the Michigan economy ranks near the bottom of the nation. In fact, Dow’s power and influence even reaches deeply into the White House. When Mary Gade, a toxicologist and the EPA’s top Midwest official (of Region 5, located in Chicago) ordered Dow Chemical in 2008 to begin cleaning up dioxin pollution, the Bush appointee found herself ousted from her job. She was stripped of her powers and told to quit or be fired by 1 June 2008. She resigned. "There is no question that this is about Dow," Gade said, “I stand behind what I did and what my staff did. I’m proud of what we did” (Hawthorne 2008). Meanwhile Michigan universities remain relatively quiescent to this powerful leviathan in their backyard. As this article implies, Dow is only one representative of how universities operate as knowledge factories.

Writing is a form of action. As noted, nearly every sentence above was published, in journalistic form, in popular newspaper outlets in Michigan and elsewhere on the Internet. The stories generated much discussion and there were some tangible consequences. I was asked (and accepted) to be the keynote presenter for the three-day ‘Backyard ECO Conference 2005’ sponsored by Citizens for Alternatives to Corporate Contamination, a group of environmental activists who have been together since 1983. Later they asked me to join their Board
of Directors. Also Michelle Hurd-Riddick, a leader of the Lone Tree Council, the central group contesting Dow, informed me that several EPA officials had read my work and had been influenced by it, citing it in their efforts to hold Dow accountable. An April 2009 Google search with the referents ‘Dow Chemical’ and ‘Brian McKenna’ generated 609 websites, the great majority of which reproduce these writings. One cannot know what happens to one’s writing, but it is comforting to know that some activists in Bhopal were listening. ‘I’m really surprised that word about the Dow controversy hasn’t reached people in Lansing [until now]’, said Satinath Sarangi, with the Bhopal Group for Information and Action (McKenna 2002: 6). The stories are on the www.Bhopal.net webpage.

Social science praxis demands unrelenting public voice about injustice. Required is a radical rupture with a cocooning academic culture and its centripetal rituals. As Eriksen reminded us, anthropologists need to lose their fear of plunging into the controversial issues modern societies present (Eriksen 2006). As muckraking journalism erodes in the face of corporate power, social scientists are among those few professionals with the time, education and power to fill in the cultural gaps by reconstructing their public roles – as border crossers – in addressing the educated lay public. Anthropologists need to become keener participant observers, actors and public writers in their own locales. And they need to begin heuristically studying their own towns and universities as ‘company towns’. Our homes are as exotic as anything one might find in the ‘Orient’.

References


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