

**Andrew Barry: Material Politics: Disputes along the Pipeline.
Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford. 2013. xiv + 244 pages.**

Andrew Barry's genius as a writer is that he teaches you something new about something that you thought you already knew. If you are a member of the small world of science and technology studies (STS) and you did not read Plato's *Republic* firsthand while at university, then you were probably introduced to Plato's analogy of the large sailing vessel in Langdon Winner's famous essay "Do artifacts have politics?" First published in *Daedalus* (Vol. 109, No. 1, Winter 1980), reprinted in *The Social Shaping of Technology* (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999), and then adapted for his masterpiece *The Whale and the Reactor*, Winner (1986: 31) shows readers that "[a]ttempts to justify strong authority on the basis of supposedly necessary conditions of technical practice have an ancient history." Ocean-going vessels, the story goes, "by their very nature need to be steered with a firm hand, ... [for] no reasonable person believes that a ship can be run democratically." For Winner, the physical make-up of the ship and the realities of voyage on the high seas create circumstances that, in effect, require that the artifact have certain politics – in this case, centralized control. However, after reading Barry's *Material Politics*, it appears that artifacts may no longer have politics, at least, not the way we thought we knew they did.¹

Let us anticipate a fair criticism of our set-up thus far: is it not the case that substituting Winner's "artifact politics" with Barry's "material politics" is just clever, post-modern word-play? If that were the case, then Barry's book would deserve an outward

expression of disapproval on account of this sloppy and ultimately unforgiveable fault. However, that is not the case. Despite the perceived similarities, Barry's title is not a play on Winner's old idea, furthermore, Barry does not cite a single work of Winner's nor does he utter that tiresome old phrase "technology is politics by other means". After showing readers that materials are not the stable fodder for building infrastructures, Barry convinces us that materials play an always lively and often unpredictable role in political disputes. However, Barry's guidance does not stop there; he takes us one step further. We also learn that when companies preemptively employ policies to enhance the outward appearance of transparency – and, if they are lucky, rationalize the pipe-laying process while limiting downstream complaints from locals – they do not, upon reflection, obviate what they think they will. Barry (p.182) enlightens us:

... while limiting the scope and intensity of controversy [is anticipated and is also the explicit purpose of transparency], this does not occur as anticipated. For as the case of [Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC)] demonstrates, the production of information – in the form of the evolving archive [i.e., the host and home for all matters transparent at British Petroleum regarding the BTC pipeline] – had the effect of multiplying the surfaces on which disagreements can incubate and flourish.

Where better than to stake his (academic) claim than on an oil pipeline? Barry capitalizes on the massive amount of public information, evidence which became available and simply bled from the full-on collapse of the Soviet Union, about the 1760km BTC pipeline connecting the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean. According to the acknowledgements, the book was born from Barry's (p.x) selective reading of these materials as well as some "modest" "fieldwork along the route of the pipeline."

Returning to the main thrust of our review: if your main source of knowledge about the BTC is based on aperçus, asides, and casual readings of the global media, then you would likely agree that most seemingly political debates surrounding the pipeline tends to invoke either economic prosperity or energy production. Gaging the effectiveness of the pipeline is a straightforward matter of "how much profit can be earned?" and/or "for how many years can the fuel supplied by the pipeline sustain our energy needs, given current consumption patterns?" Beyond those two obvious questions, relatively little is said about the BTC.² In essence, public discussion of pipelines tends toward a kind of semi-ethico-utilitarianism.

In *Material Politics*, however, Andrew Barry, armed with a particular definition of politics, tackles a much broader and far more interesting set of disputes and controversies associated with oil pipelines. Before we go further, we would like to position this book on the bookshelf. To readers who are looking for historical portrayals of the noble race to secure oil futures, for example, like Alastair Sweeney's (2010) *Black Bonanza: Canada's Oil Sands and the Race to Secure North America's Energy Future* or Andrew Nikiforuk's (2010) *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, you will be disappointed by this book because Barry's ultimate goal is academic; his comments,

related to the role of material as well as the realities of transparency, are made for the disciplinary homes of human geography and social theory. Also, this book is not a book about the rise of "New Russia," which you might enjoy reading about in Marshal I. Goldman's (2008) *Petrostate: Putin, Power, and the New Russia* or David E. Hoffman's (2011) *The Oligarchs: Wealth And Power In The New Russia*. Barry's book was published by Wiley-Blackwell as part of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) Book Series, and academic books in that collection are of the "highest international standing" with the overt aim to "promote scholarly publications that ... change the way readers think about particular issues, methods, or theories."³ Thus, while most undergraduates will be able to read and absorb the book, we agreed that readers should arrive with an earnest interest in pipelines and/or a learned background in environmental studies, (human) geography, or STS. Still, the book is far from pedantic. In the introduction, for example, Barry (p.4) kindly notes for movie buffs: "[p]rior to its construction, the BTC pipeline had figured in the plot of the [19th] James Bond film, *The World is Not Enough*."⁴

While a joy to read from cover-to-cover, we agreed that once readers happen upon "Transparency's Witness," they should be pretty-well sold on the book. In chapter 3, Barry introduces a key component of his argument: transparency. "The implementation of transparency," he writes, "is said to provide the basis on which the information necessary for the proper function of free markets would become readily available" (p.58). In this respect, transparency has three functions. First, transparency allows investors to make rational choices about the strength of commercial and public organizations. Second, transparency serves as a boundary

between the legitimate and illegitimate market. Third, transparency fosters public accountability by requiring reliable information and communication between decision-makers and stakeholders. In short, transparency is a “technique of governmentality[;] a device intended to articulate actions” (p.59).⁵ According to Barry, transparency leads to disputes:

about the process by which public information is generated.... [and] transparency points inevitably to the existence of a domain of activity about which it is thought that information has not yet been or might never be made public, whether intentionally or not (p.60).

To illustrate, before constructing the pipeline, the BTC company wanted to appear “open” and ethical to gain public support. In fact, in order to receive funding from the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the BTC Company was expected to comply with the IFC’s information disclosure and consultation policies (p.100). Part of this agreement was to make information about the pipeline available to “affected communities” (i.e., a term used to describe communities directly “affected” by pipeline construction based on proximity to construction sites, and subsequently entitled to compensation) as well as members of the “concerned public” (i.e., anyone wishing to inquire about the pipeline). The company claimed to accomplish precisely this by having accessible computers with data projectors and free copies of information available to anyone who went to the Baku Enterprise Center and other European Bank for Reconstruction and Development offices. However, visitors claimed that “they were watched by BTC security” and that police guarded entrances to various offices requiring every visitor to register (p.101). Moreover, disputes about the

pipeline erupted over the way in which consultation with “affected communities” had occurred. In the town of Haçibayram, Turkey, company representatives claimed to have consulted the village prior to construction. However, the village (whose inhabitants are nomadic) was actually deserted at the time of the supposed NGO Fact Finding Mission. Further, according to the Muhtar (elected head of Haçibayram), he had only once met with representatives from the pipeline and no one in the community had ever been contacted by telephone (p.108).

In the end, while Barry spends a good portion of the book criticizing the BTC company’s development of the pipeline, he also does a good job of remaining relatively unbiased and showing that questionable activity (i.e., micro-corruption) was no less common among members of affected communities. For example, and the book is chocked full of these beautiful little insights, Barry writes, “in some locations, trees or flowers were planted near to the pipeline route in anticipation of compensation to come” (p.168). Barry tells of walnut trees being planted along the pipeline or beehives being moved closer to pipeline construction pathways and every time this seems to have been in anticipation of higher compensation packages for affected communities. We agreed, Barry did a good job of showing that when financial incentives were present, no one affected by the construction of the pipeline – corporation or individual – was immune to material politics.

Our only concern, which sits uncomfortably in the mouth like a dirty penny, is that Barry’s excellent use of cases to illustrate material politics may have been too carefully selected. You see, the BTC pipeline is so long and constructed over so many years, it seems possible that Barry carefully selected specific cases that may or may not have been representative of material

politics on the whole. After all, out of 1,000 complaints, what percentage were walnut-related or, for that matter, beehive-related? We cannot determine the representativeness of his examples because he does not report on their empirical prevalence. We cannot determine if his vibrant illustrations are also valid explanations.

References

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Notes

- 1 On balance, however, it might be argued that the death knell of this phrase was published in 1999 by Steve Woolgar and Geoff Cooper or, in the same year, in the opposite direction but with the same effect, Bernward Joerges's final attempt at defending "do artifacts have politics?" (Joerges, 1999) and wrestling some residual use from it.
- 2 Of course, exceptions exist, especially in the public realm; for example, Svetlana Tsalik's *Caspian Oil Windfalls: Who Will Benefit?* (Tsalik, 2003).
- 3 Quotations are from series editor's preface.
- 4 As an odd coincidence, Goldman (2008) mentions Bond in his opening lines too.
- 5 Long-time readers of Barry's work no doubt see this as an extension of his 2001 book *Political Machines*.

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