



Time to Shell Out? Reflections on the RGS and Corporate Sponsorship

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Abstract

This paper reflects on lessons from the campaign against Shell's sponsorship of the Royal Geographical Society in the mid-1990s, that took place in the aftermath of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists from the Ogoni region of the Niger delta. It argues that the continuing relationship between a fossil fuel multinational company and the professional body representing British Geographers remains deeply problematic, and that there should be a renewed and concerted effort to end that relationship. It reflects on the lessons for an effective campaign of both the events of the 1990s, and the recent successful protest against Reed Elsevier's involvement in the promotion of the arms trade.

The mood of optimism that followed the success of the Elsevier campaign has refocused attention on long-running concerns about the corporate sponsorship arrangements of the 'learned and professional society' that represents British Geography, the Royal Geographical Society (RGS). The RGS currently has five 'Corporate Benefactors', the Ordnance Survey, Land Rover, Rolex, Trailfinders and Shell international. There is what might be described charitably as a variability

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of fit between these benefactors and the discipline. The Ordinance Survey has obvious synergies with a significant part of the geographical community (not withstanding long-running debates about the commercialization of spatial data), and you'd need a pretty strong commitment to post-Bergsonian philosophy to get too upset by a purveyor of over-priced time-pieces sponsoring the spatial discipline. The other three benefactors are all more troubling, not least for a discipline and an institution that have made great efforts to position themselves as central in debates about climate change and global citizenship. (This is unambiguous in documents like the RGS Annual Report for 2006, that features full page glossy illustrations using the standard iconography of climate change, down to the stock picture of worried polar bears on a shrinking chunk of ice on the back cover.) Land Rover is described as providing the RGS with 'four-wheel drive leadership' whatever that might be, although it can certainly teach the Society a thing or two about irony. Land Rover calls its environmental policy 'fragile earth'; anyone who has witnessed one of its large SUVs churning up an ancient green road, or taking no prisoners on the West London school run, will doubtless better appreciate just how fragile the world can be. A top-spec Range Rover manages to emit 376 grams of CO₂ per km, which even allowing for the above-average bulk of their owners, means that most will get through their body weight of climate changing gas emissions on a round trip from, say, Kensington to Gloucestershire. (Manufacturer's figures for CO₂ emissions, fuel economy 16L/100km or 17.7 mpg. All figures refer to the non-amoured models.)

However, most concern has been voiced about the RGS's relationship with Shell, the fossil-fuel multinational currently ranked by Fortune 500 as the world's third largest corporation, and one of its most profitable. Its annual operating revenue for 2007 (likely to increase significantly in 2008 on soaring oil prices) was around \$355 billion, with gross profit in excess of \$70 billion. From this Shell has annually donated around £50000 (or about 8 seconds worth of revenue) to the RGS each year, mainly to fund an expedition advice centre for young people. In 1994, at the time of the merger of the RGS with the Institute of British Geographers (IBG, the professional organization for academic Geographers since 1933), concerns had been raised over the sponsorship arrangements. There had already been some uneasiness from a few individuals within the Society about corporate involvement, focused particularly on the environmental and human rights record of Rio Tinto Zinc, at the time another sponsor of the RGS. Matters, however, came to a head in late 1995, with the execution by the then Nigerian military regime of the writer and political activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists from the Ogoni region of the Niger Delta. Saro-Wiwa had been a fierce critic both of the Nigerian junta and of Shell, the dominant multinational company in Nigeria (see discussion of Shell's role in Ogoniland in Watts, 2001). He argued that the company's operations had devastated the environment of the Niger Delta, and that the Ogoni people had received little or no economic benefit from oil extraction. Overnight, the Ogoni dispute was transformed from a minor item of African news to the headline story

covered by the international press and broadcasting organisations. Shell came under intense pressure from environmental organisations, facing consumer boycotts and protests at shareholders meetings. The situation in the RGS was also transformed. It was not so much that the Nigerian situation provided the opportunity for a concerted campaign on the sponsorship issue, that many geographers reacted with simple disgust at the continuing public relationship with Shell.

I became involved in the campaign against Shell in the RGS after the Ogoni executions. The precise chronology of the campaign was quite complicated, reflecting in part the complexities of the RGS and its constitution; there is a detailed account that sets the campaign in the broader context of issues surrounding sponsorship, academic independence and critical engagement in the journal *Ethics, Place and Environment* (Gilbert, 1999). However, in outline what happened was as follows. In the days after the executions the nascent email discussion group, the Critical Geography Forum (CGF), became the central hub of opposition to Shell's sponsorship, something that seems unremarkable now, but for many of us was our first experience of the power and particularly the speed of electronic organisation. At the time the academic conference of the RGS included an annual general meeting, a legacy of the previous structure of the IBG. A motion was proposed calling upon the Society to 'end the Shell Oil Company's position as corporate patron immediately.' At the conference at Strathclyde University, held in the first few days of January 2006, this motion was passed by 157 to 10 votes.

The first few days of January are often a quiet time for news, and the international press honed in on the dispute at the RGS. The result received extensive coverage in the British media, with many national newspapers and the main BBC news simplifying the story to the straightforward (if technically erroneous) headline that the Royal Geographical Society had, in the words of *The Independent*, 'dumped Shell.' The story was also covered in papers in the USA, Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, on the BBC World Service, and in the academic press, including *Nature* and *The Times Higher*. My own memories of Strathclyde are decidedly mixed. There was a real feeling of common cause among many academics at the conference, a putting to one side of regular antagonisms of political and intellectual position (albeit that there were different reasons and rationales for supporting the motion.) As proposer of the motion, there was real satisfaction not just in the 'victory', but also in the way that the widespread coverage had sustained the pressure on Shell, and pushed the Ogoni dispute back into the media at a time when it was already becoming old news. The downside, for me at least, was a crash course in the dark arts of public relations, and what I found to be the intensely stressful experience of a near constant round of interviews.

The RGS back in London was clearly embarrassed by the events in Strathclyde. There was a strong personal relationship between some Shell directors and the upper echelons of the Society, and for some RGS traditionalists, Strathclyde seemed to confirm their worst fears about the intrusion of 'political' academics into the organization. Nonetheless, the RGS, even prior to the merger with the IBG, had been attempting to increase its credibility and visibility by promoting itself as a significant player in debates about environmental responsibility and sustainability. There were concerns that, at the very least, the Society had to be seen to be taking the issue of its relationship with its troubled sponsor seriously. It undertook a number of actions in the spring of 1996: firstly, it emphasised that the vote had no constitutional status, and that the matter should be decided by its Council, after a proper 'fact-finding process' (Lowman and Gardner, 1996, 358); secondly, the well-known environmentalist and ex-President Crispin Tickell was asked to convene a working party on the ethics of corporate sponsorship; finally, it held a special conference on 'Petroleum and Nigeria's environment'. In June 1996 the Council of the RGS voted by a substantial majority to retain Shell as a sponsor. A supporting statement echoed many of the points made by Brian Anderson, then Chairman of Shell Nigeria, at the special conference, indicating that Shell was acting to remedy the past 'difficulties' in Nigeria and to improve its environmental standards.

After the Council decision the RGS constitution left one final step open to opponents of the Shell sponsorship. This was to call for a Special General Meeting (SGM) and postal ballot of the whole Society. This was an almost unprecedented event in the history of the Society, with most recent previous example taking place in 1913 to reverse an earlier decision that had excluded women from fellowship (Bell and McEwan, 1996). The 1996 vote saw a 72% majority in favour of the Council's advice to retain links with Shell. After the result around 100 academics either resigned or publicly pledged not to join the Society as long as Shell remained as sponsor.

And there things seemed to rest. Over ten years on, Shell is still a major fossil-fuel company that also continues to provoke international and local protests over its activities, Shell is still a sponsor of the RGS, and the RGS is now firmly established the only representative body for academic Geographers in Britain. The RGS ethical review of sponsorship didn't amount to much, perhaps because some of those who could have done most to give any policy real teeth had left the Society, or perhaps because the Council decision and membership vote had shown the limits of the possible. The boycott by some academics continues (including me), though it is now, I think, primarily now about personal conscience rather than concerted action. Others have drifted back, while the quasi-autonomous status of the RGS Research Groups means that it is perfectly possible to play a very active role in the collective activities of British Geography, including the annual RGS conference, without actually being a member. In the past decade the RGS has had

a couple attempts to address this anomaly, but has rather wisely decided not to push things, in the face of what has become a less than threatening stand-off.

But perhaps things don't *quite* rest there. My sense is that the success of the Elsevier campaign has fostered a mood of possibility that wasn't there a few years ago. The Elsevier campaign had the effect of reinvigorating debate about the relationship between the discipline, academic ethics and the activities of major corporations (see for example the debates in *Political Geography* and the editorial in *Journal of Historical Geography*: Chatterton and Featherstone, 2007; Hammett and Newsham 2007; Kitchen 2007; Driver and Wynn 2007). Quite rightly, these debates have pointed towards the complexity of that relationship. The focused and seemingly delimited campaign against Reed Elsevier's involvement in the arms trade raised issues about the tangled webs of investment and interest that included, notably, many of the universities employing British Geographers and the universities' pension scheme. Nevertheless, the wider campaign succeeded in part because it took the step of cutting the Elsevier issue out from just such complexities, and highlighting a central ethical issue, not so much over the issues of academic independence in general as the fundamental incongruity of world-leading medical journals being owned by an arms fair organiser.

The current RGS sponsorship arrangement with Shell strikes me as an equally striking incongruity. The central contradiction of a global-warming company with a troubled history of more local environmental, employment and human rights disputes sponsoring the professional body for Geography remains as strong as it was in the mid-1990s. Despite Shell's so-called 'ethical epiphany' and its embrace of 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) and 'stakeholder' strategies over the past decade (see Crane and Matten 2007, 209-13; Wheeler, Fabig and Boele 2002), the company is both still mired in long term disputes with local groups in many parts of the world, and remains fundamentally a giant machine for turning oil into energy, profit and carbon dioxide. Although it claims to be an energy not an oil company, Shell spends less than 0.1% of revenue on renewable projects, has recently sold off most of its solar business as insufficiently profitable, and is using the opportunity presented by the unprecedented melting of the Arctic Ice to massively increase its prospecting and drilling activities (Hari 2006; Macalister 2007).

My sense that the time is right for a renewal of the campaign against Shell's sponsorship is also based on a judgment that the RGS itself has also changed over the past ten years. In the mid-1990s the non-academic membership was pretty conservative in its views, and suspicious about the motives of upstart interloping academics wrecking 'their' Society. For me one of the real shocks of the dispute was to hear the authentic voice of an old imperialism in the debates at the RGS. We were told several times that we didn't know the real Africa, and that Shell couldn't be expected to operate to the same environmental, human rights or anti-

corruption standards there as they did in Europe or North America. I'm not suggesting that a majority of non-academic members thought this way, but there was a distinctively old colonial (as opposed to post-colonial) element to part of the RGS's culture. More generally most members were prepared to trust the then leadership, and were sceptical about some of the claims being made by opponents of Shell – it's worth remembering that this was a time when big oil was running a very well-funded and effective public relations campaign of denial about *any* evidence for human-induced climate change. I'm not suggesting that there has been a radical switch in the ordinary membership of the RGS, but I do feel that a combination of generational turnover, the development of a new wider public consensus about the environmental impact of a fossil-fuel driven economy, and a changing sense of the role and nature of the discipline has created a rather different context for any campaign. The academic section of the RGS is now much more firmly embedded in its structures and culture, and I think there are now many more within the Society who find the relationship with Shell distinctly problematic. Since the session on corporate involvement in Geography at the 2007 RGS conference in London, there has been renewed dialogue between opponents of Shell and officers of the Society that indicate both the possibility of change, and the importance of concerted pressure.

In a renewed campaign about the RGS's relationship with Shell, I think there are a number of lessons that can be drawn from the experiences of 1996 and the Elsevier campaign. Firstly, I think that we should recognize the double-sided character of any campaign of this nature. At one level the goal is very clear – to end the relationship with Shell. But at another level, the goal must be to place more pressure on Shell, and to give a potential platform for its critics. If the removal of Shell is only about salving our consciences then I think it is in every sense an academic exercise. It's worth remembering in the euphoria of the Elsevier 'victory' that it has not stopped a single arms fair from happening at the ExCel centre, nor will it make a dent in international weapons sales (and indeed it took a significant amount of time and further pressure for Reed Elsevier to finally sell off its arms fair division to Clarion Events at the end of May 2008). What it did do, apart from free academic journals from direct association with the arms trade, was to place that trade under increased public scrutiny and to show that civil society action could sometimes challenge large corporations on issues of ethics and morality. In this respect, the profile, reputation and visibility of the RGS are important, and there is something to be said for a longer and carefully staged campaign.

I think that both 1996 and the Elsevier campaign give clues about what works tactically, and what doesn't. In 1996, it was hard to use specific allegations about Shell to great effect in terms of changing wider opinion. Allegations about specific acts of local environmental despoliation, about its precise relationship with the Nigerian junta and particularly its security forces, and about the supply of arms

in the Delta were all met with strong rebuttals from the company. Such allegations tended to polarize opinion; for many opponents of the relationship with Shell this was compelling evidence of the company's behaviour in the Delta, often the direct testimony of those at the sharp end of the oil industry's activity. However these allegations were also hard to substantiate to those with doubts, placing opponents of Shell in the position of having to produce absolutely incontrovertible evidence about complex and contested events.

What seemed to have more force were general arguments about the overall contradictions of big oil sponsoring the learned society for Geography. With reference to Nigeria, arguments that dealt with the overall structure of the situation also seemed to have more effect (and got a more sympathetic press). Shell could not deny that it had a close working relationship with one of the world's nastier military regimes, that it operated a joint-venture company with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, that enormous volumes of gas were routinely 'flared-off' in the region, or that there was a vast disparity between the profits made by Shell's Nigerian operations and the pitiful returns to the Delta communities. I think there are parallels with the Elsevier campaign – what made most difference was not the gruesome details of particular cluster bombs or anti-personnel mines, but the wider incongruities of the publisher's position. What I'm emphatically not arguing here is that detailed debate about Shell's record should not take its place in a campaign – as I suggested above that must be a wider motivation. What I am arguing is that a clear, singular, core argument has most effect. This of course runs contrary to our usual academic emphases on the complex and multi-dimensional, but as the Elsevier campaign indicated, the focus on a single central issue actually gets more attention for those analyses that then open up wider issues. Some criticized the Elsevier campaign as 'narrowly conceived' and as largely ignoring 'the many complex and contradictory ways that academia (and indeed Geography) is enmeshed with military and defence industries'. (Kitchen, 2007: 500) Parallel arguments can be made about the penetration of the oil industry into all aspects of our lives (as tellingly revealed by the recent price surge). My fear is that we have too many debates about complexity that remain inward-looking and ineffectual – successful single issue campaigning potentially engages new audiences and participants for those discussions.

The third lesson of the two campaigns is, I think, that it pays to have powerful friends. Although we might like to think of *Political Geography* and the *Journal of Historical Geography* highly influential journals, it was the *Lancet* that made the real difference in the Elsevier campaign. While the British medical establishment is hardly likely to come charging over the hill in this dispute, it is vital to draw upon those with influence inside the discipline. Looking back at 1996, we got strong support from some senior figures, but there were also some surprising silences from those whose politics, at least in print, were well to the left of those at the front end of the campaign. I can understand an argument that sees

the sponsorship arrangements of one London-based private Society as pretty epiphenomenal in broader struggles with global capital. However it strikes me that this is one way that we can open up the significance of critical geographical perspectives to a wider audience than most of our publications or conference debates will ever achieve. I also feel that we did very little to pull key people into the 1996 campaign. Unlike the threatened boycott of certain journals and Elsevier's International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, this is a dispute that brings little danger of 'cutting off our noses to spite our face' and would not disproportionately affect the career chances of younger academics. (Kitchen 2007: 500) Nonetheless it is important that any action works across generations. One measure of change in the RGS can be gauged by the record of its honours over the past 30 years, and the presence of many Geographers who have been strongly critical of the actions of corporate capital. These indicators of esteem are also indicators of a changing Society and a changing public face for Geography. One would hope that such awards bring potential influence in the Society as well as esteem beyond.

So, in short, I think the time is right for a renewed and sustained tilt at Shell's relationship with the RGS. It would be good to see the Critical Geography Forum being used as more than just a message board again. And I believe that given the changing nature of both the RGS and the overall political context, that this is a campaign that could put the oil industry under the spotlight, that could invigorate debate in British Geography, that could strengthen the public profile of our discipline – and that, just perhaps, could be won.

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