



Jessica M. Smith. *Extracting Accountability: Engineers and Corporate Social Responsibility.* Engineering Studies Series. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021. Illustrations. 328 pp. free, open access, ISBN 978-0-262-36615-1.

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Extracting Accountability is an account of how engineers in the mining and oil and gas industries understood the ethical implications of their jobs. Jessica M. Smith seeks to understand how accountability worked within “loose technoscientific organizations in the era of corporate social responsibility” (p. 3). In short, Smith seeks to explain how it is possible to believe you are doing the right thing but actually be unethical. An anthropologist by training and director of the Humanitarian Engineering Graduate Program at the Colorado School of Mines, Smith answers this question using participant observation and extensive interviews with oil and gas engineers.

In her introduction, Smith effectively positions herself as both a researcher who studies engineers and a professor on a college engineering campus. She cautions against “a militant anthropology of elites predicted on morally insulting those who work in the industries we criticize” (p. 213). This mixed insider-outsider perspective runs through the book and provides both nuance and urgency to her argument. Over seven chapters, Smith explains that an American engineering culture developed in the second half of the twentieth century providing individual engineers with professional legitimacy. This same culture produced a sense of “distributed agency” in which engineers

did not feel individually responsible for their workplace decisions. Engineers were accountable to many different entities simultaneously and encouraged to privilege corporate profits over other concerns. Crucially, according to Smith, these engineers were given no formal training or institutional guidance on how to reconcile these at-times directly competing accountabilities.

Smith argues that many engineers developed a two-faceted ethical framework in response to a lack of institutional guidance and that these “interrelated moral architectures” influenced individual action in diverse ways (p. 205). First, the “ethic of material provisioning” allowed engineers to feel proud of their work as providers of needed resources. Extractive industry produced the materials that made global capitalism—and individual affluence—possible. Second, she identifies some engineers as interpreting the general public’s reliance on the materials produced by extractive industry as a “social license to operate.” Lack of protest could be construed as tacit agreement—or at least acceptance—of the need for those industries to continue.

The majority of the book recounts interviews with engineers working mostly in Colorado, but examples range from Texas, to South America, to the Caribbean. Chapters are divided into thematic

sections. In chapter 1, Smith gives a brief overview of the history of corporate social responsibility efforts and positions industry community outreach programs as a response to public outcry against corporate environmental degradation. Over the next six chapters, respondents present a range of reactions to these programs and to the limitations to individual agency. Battles are waged between engineers as stand-ins for corporate interests and local communities reluctant to allow environmental damage. Engineers respond in different ways. Some are apathetic, some worked on community engagement within existing structures, others became independent consultants, and yet others left the industry altogether. Smith's focus is on individual accounts and perspectives. She argues that rather than emphasizing the cultural sway of any one corporation—and seeking to avoid an assumption that corporations are monolithic—she foregrounds the individual agency of team leadership and administrative decision-making.

In her conclusion, Smith calls on engineering educators and professional management to move beyond the ethic of material provisioning and social license to operate to form a “new ethics of relation,” which will allow engineers to be “accountable not to an impossibly nebulous notion of the public good but to particular publics” (p. 211). For this reason, the book will be of particular interest to those in the growing fields of engineering ethics and engineering philosophy. Humanists and social scientists in engineering and STEM-focused colleges will enjoy her epilogue, which provides an account of her work building social responsibility into the engineering college curriculum. While the book will also be of interest to environmental historians and to historians of science and technology, both groups will probably want more context for her case studies. Mining historians will look for a discussion of interactions between rank-and-file miners and debates over health and safety. Environmental historians will want more discussion of specific landscapes and geologies. This said, the

history of the engineering profession deserves further attention, and this book provides a compelling, and needed, contribution to the literature.

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