

A Celebration of NIMBY

“Not in my backyard... not in ANY backyard!”

The house was surrounded. The FBI was on the phone. And the White House was negotiating for hostages.

Sound like a pitch for the latest Hollywood blockbuster? Not quite. For U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) official Frank Napal, it was real life.

As Napal, the Director of Public Affairs for the EPA's New York City office, surveyed the scene outside, he saw an endless sea of protestors, signs, and news cameras. Hundreds of people stood outside the house where he was being held, blocking the Niagara Falls police from entering.

The date was May 19, 1980. The place was Love Canal.

“Nothing wrong” in Love Canal

For over two years, almost every governmental agency – including the community's own school board – had denied that there were problems in Love Canal.

Even when over half of the children born in the area suffered from birth defects, the New York State Department of Health continued to declare that such evidence was “useless housewife data.”

Niagara Falls Mayor Michael O’Laughlin infamously proclaimed that there was “nothing wrong” in Love Canal. Hooker Chemical and the U.S. Army (which had dumped waste from the Manhattan Project in Love Canal) continued to deny that the 200 pesticides, solvents, and chemical warfare byproducts dumped there could have made anyone sick.

After two long years of meetings, protests, and marches, and the kidnapping of Napal and another EPA official, Lois Gibbs and the Love Canal Homeowners Association would eventually force the Carter Administration to evacuate Love Canal.

While that community remains one of the highest profile cases of chemical contamination, community uprisings at hundreds of other chemical dump sites

across the country combined to drive the Superfund law, which sought to hold corporations liable for cleanup costs at hazardous sites. Predictably, chemical corporations tried to stop the law.

NIMBYism – a corporate creation

Several months after the evacuation of Love Canal, corporate flacks created a new phrase – NIMBY – an acronym for “Not In My Backyard.” First appearing in the *Christian Science Monitor* in November 1980, it was identified as a phrase “used in the trade” of chemical companies.

The NIMBY acronym, designed to demean community cries for help, has successfully cast a long shadow over community organizing in the United States. The phrase encourages

us to dismiss a community's concerns even if the concerns are real, because they are automatically outweighed by the benefits that we all enjoy by being part of an industrial economy. In short, the phrase castigates those communities as unappreciative beneficiaries.

The acronym has become so powerful that the first thing that many people who dare raise their voice in protest proclaim is, “We’re not NIMBYs!” – even before they tell us what they’re protesting about. In other words, they’ve been made to feel the need to express their appreciation for a system that caused their problem, while being squeezed into asserting that their community is “unduly” burdened by that system's operation. In essence, to be taken seriously, they are forced to validate the goodness of the very system that is causing them harm.

Turning our communities into sacrifice zones

The intent of the careful design and use of the NIMBY phrase, and others like it, is to distract us from clearly seeing our existing industrial system for what it actually is – a system which requires endless expansion. And endless expansion, we

learn, requires certain sacrifices – forcing places like Love Canal and thousands of other communities across the U.S. and the world to become *sacrifice zones*.

This system, as we are endlessly instructed, is indispensable to progress and prosperity. It is vital to our liberty and freedom.

“Manipulation . . . an important element in democratic society”

Using language to manufacture our consent to this system, of course, is nothing new to cultures in which major economic and political decisions are made by a relatively small handful of people. It is only when these sacrifice zones begin to swallow broader and broader swaths do we begin to awaken to how completely we’ve been manipulated.

But we shouldn't feel too bad. After all, those in charge have had a lot of practice.

In the early 1900s, Edward Bernays (a nephew of Sigmund Freud), began his storied career for which he would later be called “the father of public relations.” **Bernays worked with some of the largest companies of his day to change the way we think.**

He was hired by the American Tobacco Company to sell more cigarettes by promoting smoking among women. He worked with Alcoa to legalize the dumping of fluoride – a waste product of aluminum production – into drinking water. For Dixie Cup, he convinced consumers that only disposable cups were sanitary.

Bernays's popularity with corporations was derived from being a pioneer – the first to apply Freud's analysis to how our subconscious affects our buying decisions. His methods ranged from using paid doctors as “experts” on fluoridation and hygiene, to portraying women with cigarettes as symbols of equality.

In his book, *Propaganda*, Bernays famously wrote that the “manipulation

of the opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society.

Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.”

The re-branding of corporate harms by corporations and environmental groups

Those who control today’s corporations have had close to a hundred years to perfect Bernays’s ability to control the way we think. **They’ve been so successful that we think of their ideas as our own.** And when we do, we lose – bit by precious bit – the ability to think for ourselves. Consider the following examples:

▶ In the early 1990s, as some scientists and community leaders were becoming increasingly concerned about the contamination of water and soil from the **dumping of sewage sludge** (which may contain thousands of toxic contaminants), the sewage industry partnered with the EPA to create the “Name Change Task Force.” The result of the task force’s work is that we no longer hear about the dumping of sewage sludge on farmland (where at least half of sludge is dumped today), but instead we hear about the benefits of the “land recycling of biosolids.”

It’s one thing to be against sludge dumping; it’s much more difficult to be against “biosolids recycling.” Changing the language has been money well spent – protecting the industry by eliminating any opposition before it begins.

▶ Over thirty years ago, as a handful of agribusiness corporations began swallowing family farms to create massive, industrial style animal factories, the term **“factory farm”** was coined by communities and groups who were witnessing this dangerous trend. Concerned not just with air and water pollution, farmers watched as corporate agriculture wiped out hundreds of thousands of family farms, accelerating the growth of antibiotic-resistant disease and creating monopoly control over chicken, hog, and dairy production. That monopoly now controls agricultural policy almost everywhere, thus setting the fox firmly in control of the henhouse.

Knowing that the phrase “factory farm” wasn’t warm or fuzzy, the agribusiness corporations spent heaps of money to redefine themselves. Thus we no longer have factory farms, instead we now have “advanced farming” and “modern farming.” Being against “factory farms” is one thing; being against farmers receiving the “best and most advanced” technology to raise livestock is quite another.

Thanks to Bernays and others, **the re-branding of corporate harms – from a bad to a good – is standard practice today.**

Fracking for shale gas – involving underground explosions, earthquakes, and the contamination of billions of gallons of water – has become “unconventional extraction” coupled with “energy independence.” Industrial-scale wind farms – which are bulldozing ridge tops across New England and elsewhere – are now known as “green energy.” Blowing the tops off of mountains, an extraction method created by the mining industry to “harvest” coal, is now known as “mountaintop development.”

To make matters worse, it’s not just agribusiness and energy corporations doing the greenwashing. In many cases, they’ve had a lot of help from big environmental groups.

The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) played a major role in legalizing the dumping of sewage sludge on farmland. A slew of other environmental organizations have lobbied for the public funding of methane digesters (validating factory farms by reducing their odor and waste), and have supported fracking for shale gas as a “bridge” to renewable energy, when fracking and shale gas are major global warming polluters.

Building a new system based on sustainability, beginning in our communities

Building a new system, to end the sacrificing of our communities to endless expansion and production, will require changing our culture and language, as well as the law. Today, they are harnessed to an economic engine which refuses to recognize that the earth is finite.

Changing the culture means discovering a new language not employed in the service of the reckless, but one which reflects the realities of the need to transform today’s fundamentally unsustainable system to one that is both economically and environmentally sustainable. Changing the law can both create that shift and benefit from it.

Some communities across the U.S. are beginning to rise to that challenge.

This includes communities in rural New Hampshire that are beginning to establish their right to a sustainable energy future, by banning unsustainable energy development that violates community and nature’s rights. People in New Mexico are using the same principle to ban oil and gas extraction. Communities in Oregon are defining sustainable food systems by working to ban seed patenting and genetically modified seeds.

They are harnessing the power of their municipal governments by adopting local laws which protect those communities from exploitation. Through this process, they’re rejecting the corporate “framing” of energy, agriculture, and other issues, and instead defining what they want and need for their communities – rather than having that controlled by industry.

In the process, **they’re not saying “not in my backyard” – rather, they’re declaring “not in ANY backyard!”** For these communities have their sights set not just on changing their local laws, but on eventually harnessing the power of state governments, and eventually the federal government, to force that transition.

Along the way, close to 200 communities in eight states have rediscovered what it means to be American. In a country founded on the rejection of centralized governance and control, they’re finding historical parallels to what they’re doing today.

And in the scheme of things, what they’re doing may be as important as the work of their colonial forebears. In the 1770s, freedom and liberty were in the balance; today, our very survival hangs there as well.