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Book Review: Fractivism: Corporate Bodies and Chemical Bonds

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BOOK REVIEW

Fractivism: Corporate Bodies and Chemical Bonds by Sara Ann Wylie (Duke University Press, 424 Pages; 2018)

Sara Ann Wylie's 2018 book, *Fractivism: Corporate Bodies and Chemical Bonds*, is a text that examines the fracking industry's organization and its interaction with human bodies under the lens of endocrinology, all with the goal of designing new ways of tracking the impact of unregulated fracking. Suffice it to say, *Fractivism* is no primer on fracking but is instead a work that attempts to design a new form of activism through academic research, database compilation, and human-interest tales of medical malady.

However, the first third of *Fractivism* draws away from the focus on fracking. To lay the foundation of *Fractivism*, Wylie explains, at length, the process for building science-based methodology to pierce the "regimes of imperceptibility," specifically, the systems petrochemical industries use to retard developing a link between illness and fracking. Discussion of the steps taken by experts on environmental health, like TEDX founder Theo Colburn, to create environmental monitoring and data collection tools (such as TEDX and HIERship) takes up a significant portion of this book. The text's first half stalls the reader's momentum to learn why fracking is so dangerous to human health. While this structure is necessary and, to some degree, medicated by a gripping introduction and chapters that begin and end by guiding the reader back toward fracking, the initial half of the book lacks in focus and drags the pace of the text to a crawl.

The initial framework hiccup is a stark contrast to the remainder of *Fractivism*, which is a strong display of how such tools and technologies are being used against industry interests. Tools like the Landman Report Card (LRC) and its later incarnation, WellWatch, were effective resources for landowners in restricting use of their land by oil and natural gas interests. Wylie argues, persuasively, that such industries are connected to human health, from fetal development to global warming, and the technological tools like the LRC and WellWatch show this connection. Thus, her argument truly takes form as the book comes to an end: environmental activism must find a new foundation within irrefutable, overwhelming documentation and scientific data or risk being subject to the "regimes of imperceptibility" that have stalled environmental efforts before.

Yet, herein lies the dilemma. *Fractivism* is an almost overwhelming scientific and academic text, but the most persuasive portions are those of the people living next to unregulated fracking sites, exploited for their mineral rights, and whose health has been compromised. From the introduction, the reader is given a snapshot of Rick Roles, who has experienced hardship and suffering after facing poisoning from fracking chemical contamination. This story grabs the reader, only to shift uncomfortably into the depth of technical scientific and academic jargon. A shift between pathos to logos is disconcerting and sterile. This pattern is shown again and again, creating dissonance between *Fractivism*'s tone and stalling the reader. While this pattern may be appropriate in other environmental texts (toeing the line between the detailed effects of environmental mismanagement and the

stories of surrounding degradation), one would think that there would be a middle ground to tread, leaving the reader to appreciate scholarly facts, scientific evidence, and human interest stories in equal measure. However, perhaps this approach is the point of *Fracktivism*. The realm of environmental activism has not been created to fully synthesize the scientific and the social. If *Fracktivism* is the first step toward a meeting between these approaches, then this is a welcome attempt. As wide in scope as *Fracktivism* is, perhaps the message to take away in this seemingly irreconcilable structure is that the future of environmental activism must be multidisciplinary, broad, and community-based to pierce the “regime.”

Aside from structure, *Fracktivism* is a meticulously researched and supported text through the oft-cited efforts of, predominantly, Theo Colborn. Through her time at MIT and in the field, Wylie champions the efforts of her then-mentor, and rightly so. Colborn’s efforts in creating the field of endocrine disruption applied to environmentalism is central to Wylie’s underlying premise in *Fracktivism*. Wylie need not hang her hat on only Colborn’s efforts, as her scientific expertise can be drawn from her own experience and a litany of other scientific expert’s sources. If that were not enough, Wylie transcends the typical bounds of environmental readings and scientific sources to draw upon every available source of scholarly writing to broaden her credibility with the reader. Reaching deep into a vast source of anthropological reading, Wylie cites a veritable encyclopedia of philosophical constructs to justify the social forces at play in this struggle between industry and environment. These philosophical constructs will appeal to the academic reader who may have knowledge of these concepts and can realize the importance of the references. To any other reader, however, this is a barrier to comprehension and applicability of these theoretical frameworks to the physical world.

Oddly enough, for a text on environmental activism, *Fractivism* only briefly mentions the use of the law as a barrier against the harms suffered by the denizens of oil and gas extraction sites. Perhaps Wylie would believe this would be attributed to the “regimes of imperceptibility” that would bar a causal connection between the maladies suffered by these residents and redress under the law. In fact, the judicial system, for the most part, only really serves as a bar for Wylie’s monitoring sites to flourish. Mainly, Wylie cites the evolving form of slander and libel law applied to the internet as the prime reason for the loss of LRC and WellWatch platforms. While the law may not have been developed enough for the time that these injustices occurred, one could hope that redresses may be possible thanks in part to legislative action spurred from data collected (such as what Wylie had attempted with Colborn) linking the health risks and fracking practices.

In sum, *Fracktivism* is not a casual read, but a highly academic text that serves as a call for activism akin to the system Wylie has devised: a marriage between corroborated human experiences with the fracking industry and hard science of endocrine disruption. For academics, lawmakers, and activists, *Fracktivism* may give either the insight, data, or motivation for a new platform in piercing the “regimes of imperceptibility.”

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