

CONSILIENCE

THE JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Toxic Legacy of Industry in Nova Scotia: The Environmental Violence of Sydney Steel

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Abstract

The steel mill in Sydney Nova Scotia and the associated tar ponds were a site of extreme environmental violence against the indigenous Mi'kmaq peoples who hunted and fished on the land before the mill was constructed and against the working-class people of Sydney who lived and worked in the pollution the mill produced. Using an environmental violence framework this paper analyzes scientific and historical data to make the case that the extremely slow reaction to the harm being done to these communities by the pollution produced by the mill was due to a disregard for their lives and their devaluation as people. The land and people were viewed as simple resources to be exploited, they were 'resourcified,' much to their detriment and thus they suffered as they were heavily contaminated with the byproducts of steelmaking. This pollution led to contamination throughout the food chain and water supply, leading to high rates of birth defects and cancer, an act of violence of a slower variety than we are used to. This disregard for human life is sorely underrepresented in scientific literature, and as such this paper aims to bridge the gap in the communication of what has happened in Sydney and raise awareness for the deeper reasons behind this and other similar environmental tragedies.

Author's Note

I wrote this paper because as a Nova Scotian, this issue is close to home for me. I care about the environment, and I care about people, and I want to advocate for both to be treated well and respectfully. When I see injustice being inflicted on people, I want to bring attention to it, and when we see the system failing, I do not think we should be quiet about it. If we remain silent, nothing will ever get fixed, so we must be loud. I think this paper is relevant to the field of sustainable development because we cannot just focus on fixing the physical problems in the pursuit of sustainability, we must fix the systemic ones too. We must ensure that the sustainable system we are building is fair and beneficial for everyone and not just those in the majority or who have money.

Keywords: Violence, Indigenous, Pollution, Politics

Introduction

Nova Scotia has a long history of environmental violence motivated by both race and class, and the Sydney Steel Mill is a prominent example in that history. Beginning operation in 1901 the Sydney Steel Mill and the associated Sydney Tar Ponds left an enduring mark on the local Mi'kmaq community through the destruction of one of their traditional hunting and fishing grounds, as well as leaving a destructive and enduring mark on the health of the people of the nearby city of Sydney (Waldron, 2021). This represents a devaluation of the environment, the Mi'kmaq peoples who called this place home before the colonists arrived, and who still do today, and the working-class community of Sydney. The following will be an analysis of the race- and class-based violence committed by the operators of the steel mill against the aforementioned people who relied on both the mill and the environment that it was polluting for their livelihoods. This treatment demonstrates a level of dehumanization and resourcification of these communities precisely of the form described by Cohen and Biro in their recent analysis of Canada's natural resource political economy, *Organizing Nature: Turning Canada's Ecosystems Into Resources* (Cohen & Biro, 2023). Environmental violence is an important issue in the history of not just Nova Scotia but industrialized society generally, and it does not receive enough attention in the mainstream discussions of the climate crisis. The practice followed by developed countries of offshoring their polluting heavy industry repeats the environmental injustice already inflicted on their own prior generations, only internationally on the future generations of other peoples. Developed countries offshoring pollution heavy industrial activity is a form of environmental violence against the host country just as much as doing it to a vulnerable domestic population is. This represents a system that is thoroughly, and repeatedly, destructive in its pursuit of profit, laying waste to both communities and environmental integrity on scales ranging from the most local to the global. The following analysis of one of Nova Scotia's most well-known cases of environmental injustice is an effort to illuminate the callous and destructive nature of the actions of government at local, provincial, and federal levels towards the vulnerable people it should have been doing the most to protect.

An analysis of the political motivations and implications of phenomena like Sydney Steel is important because it offers sociological, political, and cultural contexts for the data generated by the scientific investigations which often uncover the magnitude of environmental or human damage inflicted by environmental injustice. The data, though, is often lacking the "why" of the event, the political motivations behind it, and the broader social and cultural implications, encompassing everything from property values to cultural dislocation and health care costs. Many of the scientific sources I have cited in this paper are 'purely scientific' with very little analysis of why the event happened. Works such as Dodds and Seviour (2001), a purely scientific piece of work, and Haalboom et al. (2023) are superb factual discussions, but they offer little explanation of larger trends which influenced the situation. The same thing is true of Campbell (2002), as the work provides a sociological perspective on the course of events, discussing systemic failures and providing some analysis of why those failures occurred, concluding that financial considerations and systemic failures were primarily responsible for the severity of the situation at and around Sydney Steel. However, a discussion of the *origins* of those actions, and the thinking that drove them,

could have been developed further by Campbell. The motivations which led to the steel mill and its associated infrastructure being sited where it was, at a location of tremendous importance to the Mi'kmaq people, are little discussed beyond brief mention in works such the book *There's Something in the Water* by Ingrid Waldron (2018b) and a pair of shorter pieces also by Waldron (2018a; 2021) which discuss Sydney Steel as part of a broader and clearly-visible historical trend of racial bias in Nova Scotia's provincial environmental policy across many governments and multiple levels of administration. By the same token, the role of class is also little mentioned relative to environmental harms in works I have encountered beyond a mention by Campbell (2002) of the history of neglect facing traditionally working-class Cape Bretoners, but even that does little to tie in class issues as the drivers, partial or total, of the neglect in the first place. *Closing Sysco* by Mackinnon (2020a) provides the only significant work I came across tying class into this story, indeed the only significant work on Sydney steel at all. It focused in part on the working-class environmentalism of the mill's employees in later years as the harms became more publicly known, and more broadly on the rise and decline of industry in Cape Breton through the story of Sydney Steel and its workers. Though a good study of the systemic oppression of the working-class at Sydney Steel as well as their concerns over hazardous working conditions and industrial pollution, this work only lightly touches on issues of race and does so mainly in relation to discriminatory and exclusionary hiring practices and the theft of land and resources from the Mi'kmaq, passing them over after brief mentions. This present analysis is my attempt to bridge that gap, to offer an answer to that question of "why" – what are the origins of the thinking that produced the decisions that were instrumental throughout the Sydney Steel story, from its inception in 1901 all the way to the present. It is just as important for us to discuss why decisions are made as it is to discuss their effects, and it is important that we communicate our findings broadly. Such knowledge is necessary for us to recognize, challenge, and ultimately dismantle the deeply unjust thinking which has informed and regrettably continues to inform the environmental policies of governments like that of Nova Scotia.

Theoretical Framework

Environmental violence as this paper approaches it is a form of slow violence, where the damage done to the environment then harms the people relying upon it (Marcantonio & Fuentes, 2023). The "slow" part of the violence is found in the slow but inexorable manifestation of the harms themselves, everything from incidence of cancer—particularly lung cancer, birth defects, and other health issues in humans, and the steady loss of biodiversity and pollution or destruction of ecological integrity (Campbell, 2002; Dodds & Seviour, 2001; Mackinnon, 2020a; Marcantonio & Fuentes, 2023; Waldron, 2018a). This violence is conceptualized using the framework developed by Marcantonio and Fuentes (2023) where "environmental violence [is] defined as direct and indirect harm experienced by humans due to toxic and non-toxic pollutants put into a local—and concurrently the global—ecosystem through human activities and processes" (Marcantonio & Fuentes, 2023, p. e861). This definition of environmental violence also makes room for and acknowledges the role of structural and cultural violence, comprising the power differentials and vulnerability that often

prevent the party being harmed from obtaining the justice they deserve. This framework also acknowledges the importance of a material vector of violence; something must be causing the harm. With this understanding of environmental violence, we can see room for both a racial and class-based forms of discrimination and their capacity, indeed their likelihood, to intertwine as represented by both structural and cultural violence, both of which will be explored in this paper through their impacts on the Mi'kmaq and the working-class people of Sydney. This paper also explores the idea of resourcification as discussed by Cohen and Biro (2023). Their argument is that when something, or someone, is viewed simply as a tool to be employed, an object to be exploited, or simply as a vector to add value, that person or thing has become resourcified. No longer seen for what they are but for what they can be used to produce or to provide, people, ecosystems, practices, or beliefs only hold the value – the utility – that the system attaches to them. In the case of the Sydney steel mill, we see this play out twice, as the environment is seen only as a resource base at the beginning of an industrial process, and as a dumping ground for the waste at its end. Mirroring this, the people of Sydney are only seen as producers of labor value and no longer as people whose lives were threatened by the pollution of their environment. When people, ecosystems, and the environment become resources, they become expendable, consumables reduced to statistics for the systems that encompass them: they become means to an end for others instead of an end in and of themselves. In short, the very systemic institutions and regulations which are stated to protect them and support them, instead exploit them and subsequently block their path to restitution and restorative justice.

The Damage Caused by the Mill

The environmental damage done to the area centers mainly on the creation of the Sydney Tar Ponds, an area of roughly 33 hectares contaminated with approximately 700,000 tons of pollutants including very high levels of arsenic, antimony, benzene, and xylene (Campbell, 2002). This massive contamination load has led to elevated cancer rates in the communities of Sydney and Whitney Pier, which encircle the Tar Ponds sites. In addition to these epidemiological effects, the aforementioned contaminants as well as many others leached into the surrounding environment, contaminating ground water sources and the vegetable gardens that working-class inhabitants relied upon for sustenance and income from sales (Waldron, 2021). This contamination of the environment and food sources has contributed to the unusual rates of cancer in Sydney, which are among the highest in Canada (Haalboom et al., 2023; Mackinnon, 2020; Waldron, 2021). Additionally, there is some evidence that the chemicals polluting local ecosystems have produced harmful effects on mothers giving birth in Sydney and Whitney Pier (Dodds & Seviour, 2001). The main and most significant effect found was an increase in congenital birth defects in Sydney of 25% compared to the rest of Nova Scotia, a rate of 2.8% compared with 2.3% across the rest of the province, a statistically significant increase not present in neighboring communities within the county (Dodds & Seviour, 2001). These are clear examples of slow environmental violence in action, generating impacts that develop over years or decades, and which persist for at least as long. Because of its slow pace, this phenomenon is rarely seen as a form of violence: actual harms may not be

immediately apparent, or those harms' pathways into peoples' lives – via the vegetables grown in their family gardens, for example – may be difficult to track. We therefore struggle to conceptualize the processes themselves as violence, associating it as we do with immediate pain and harm, not something long and drawn out. This violence is rendered even more significant when we consider that the provincial government knew at least as early as 1974 that the levels of polluting chemicals which had been intentionally dumped in the Tar Ponds were indisputably and significantly above their own safety requirements (Campbell, 2002). This represents not just a systemic failure to address an issue, but in failing to act upon this knowledge the government clearly committed an act of violence not only against the people who were already suffering the effects of these chemicals, but also against those who had yet to fall victim to their impacts. We cannot escape the conclusion that the government's failure to act was based, at least in part, on an assessment that the lives of the people – citizens of Nova Scotia – were less important, less valuable, than the steel produced by the mill. There is in recent history, a measure of positivity to be seen in the trajectory of this situation at least, as the Tar Ponds have finally been cleaned up and remediated as of 2014 however only time will tell how much that has done for what pollution has already seeped out into the surrounding environment and into local food resources (Waldron, 2021).

An Attack on the Mi'kmaq

There is an inherent degree of racism in the choice of location of the steel mill. Placing such a dangerous and destructive industry in the traditional and unceded hunting grounds of the local Mi'kmaq is hard to discount as being purely happenstance, especially since at the time the explicit policy of the Canadian state was the elimination of Indigenous cultures and their assimilation into European Canadian society (Government of Canada, 2010; 2017; 2023; Matheson et al., 2022; Taylor, 2020; Waldron, 2021). To that end, the destruction of the very landscapes they rely upon to maintain their way of life makes a lot of sense. If they have nowhere to hunt and fish and live as they wish according to their traditions, logic would dictate to Canada at the time at least, that they must see the Canadian way as better, and if not better, then as the only alternative. This is all rooted in the assumption of colonial culture that they hold a position of cultural superiority and that as such they have more right to do as they wish with the land than the native peoples. These native peoples were often regarded as not even being people as exemplified by ideas like the doctrine of *terra nullius*, which described the “New World” as open and uninhabited, ripe for settlement by European colonists (Cohen & Biro, 2023). Indeed, the Mi'kmaq faced discriminatory hiring practices, rarely finding work at the mill, alongside their exclusion from partaking in the wealth generated from the natural resources being harvested from their own land (Makinnon, 2020a). All of this comes from a devaluation of the Mi'kmaq and other Indigenous peoples who were seen as something to be remedied by the Canadian state and society, something we are still struggling to overcome even today (Taylor, 2020).

An Attack on the Working-Class

The working-class people of Sydney also faced significant environmental violence and in this issue I see an intersection of race with class which may have played some role but it is hard to say how much. Through much of the mill's life Sydney was a working-class city with a largely European-descended population, however Whitney Pier, which provided significant unskilled labor to the mill was and remains incredibly diverse, pulling from all over the world, and including a significant population of African descent (Beaton, 1995; Collections Canada, n.d.; Muise, 2013; Parks Canada, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2021). Despite the fact that the Canadian state knew of the pollution the mill was putting out in 1974 nothing was done about it for decades until 2004 and the health considerations came second to the economic output provided by the mill (Campbell, 2002; Muise, 2013; Waldron, 2021). The contamination itself is most densely concentrated in Whitney Pier, however the harms are dispersed widely across the city and when situated in the context of a history of violent working-class suppression in Sydney, it seems unlikely that there is purely a racial motivation to the neglect. Instead, the impact seems to be driven by a broad disregard for all of the working-class people of the Sydney area who's labour supported the mill (Haalboom et al., 2023; Lambert & Lane, 2004; Mackinnon, 2020b). The steel was still getting made and the people were being treated as a resource to be expended in its production, much in the way resourcification was discussed by Cohen and Biro (2023), the people themselves became the resource and they were seen mainly for what they produced and less as people who were suffering from the pollution that was being put out (Cohen & Biro, 2023). They were simply workers, regardless of race, and it wasn't worth fixing the issue for any of them because they were expendable and replaceable.

The Resourcification of Land and People

Resourcification is at play in two major ways in this case. The land was resourcified for the productive capacity that could be built on it and extracted from it, as well as for its ability to receive the pollution generated by those productive processes which, in turn, of course, would reduce its long-term value as a resource. The people of Sydney, on the other hand, were resourcified for their ability to process those resources and to produce value from them. From the system's perspective, this was their only inherent value. Anything beyond the land's resource value and people's productive capacity fell away and was deemed less important at best, and utterly unimportant at worst, as a signifier of value. The land could be polluted and destroyed because there was no negative cost preventing or even discouraging the behaviour. Because there was no cost, there was (and often remains) no system-wide sense of responsibility towards the victims of the environmental injustice of Sydney Steel, and therefore no clear path for them to achieve recognition, let alone restitution for the harms endured. (Campbell, 2002). The poor quality of the local coal used in the coking process as well as that of the resulting steel was irrelevant in any decisions concerning the mill's safety or environmental impact. Only when the mill's profitability was in decline in the late 1950s were efforts made to replace the local coal with American coal of a higher quality, and also to process foreign ore, but while the quality of the steel produced with cleaner coal increased, the cocktail of pollutants produced by the coking

and smelting processes continued to be dumped into the Tar Ponds and elsewhere on the mill's site, from where they leached into surrounding areas. Throughout the life of the mill, human lives became expendable and the very environment that they relied upon for survival, the very employer that many of them relied upon for their livelihood, became a hazard to their health. When their predicament became clear, when the harms inflicted were increasingly apparent, at that point they were repeatedly informed by the provincial government that there was nothing wrong with what was coming out of the steel mill. The very agencies of government supposedly established to support people, instead abandoned their responsibility to do so.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Environmental violence, as well as the resourcification of land and people came together in Sydney to create a perfect storm which had detrimental effects on the communities which surrounded the Tar Ponds and the mill site. The Mi'kmaq lost more land and a traditional hunting and fishing ground, and the people of Sydney and likely other nearby communities were poisoned by dangerous chemicals. For a good portion of this period, the provincial government was well aware of the danger. The issue of slow, violent, environmental injustice explored in the example of Sydney Steel is by no means unique to Nova Scotia: it is endemic across the vast country of Canada and needs to be further studied, especially in light of the rapidly accelerating effects of climate change which open an entirely new dimension to the phenomenon of environmental injustice (Waldron, 2018b). We must examine the thinking which underpinned the situation of industrial projects in Canada, and the balance that was struck between productive processes and the environmental and human impacts of those processes. These cases and more could, and should, be examined through the lens of environmental injustice as a slow-violence phenomenon and if I must recommend any way to go forward, I think we need to take a much deeper look at where industrial projects are built in Canada and further explore how and why they end up where they do. It cannot be ignored that Sydney is not an isolated example, and it needs to be examined as simply one manifestation of a wider epidemic of systemic environmental violence against vulnerable communities in Canada. Greater study and communication are required not just on the physical harm caused by cases such as Sydney, but for the political implications of their very existence. The lack of care exhibited by the systemic forces – economic, political, racial – towards both the working-class people of Sydney and the Mi'kmaq who originally inhabited the land is a prime example of the destructive nature of the Canadian colonial project built overwhelmingly on the process of resourcification.

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