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# BPerkeley Inc.?

By Iain A. Boal

As a lead in to Mute's climate change special issue, Iain Boal reports on BP's recent biofuel deal with University of California, Berkeley. In the name of a planetary emergency, the oil behemoth has both managed to greenwash biotech research and further entrench campus capitalism

In June 2006 British Petroleum announced a plan to spend half a billion dollars to fund research into genetically modified elephant grass and other transgenic plants now being considered as candidates for rotting and fermenting into alcohol for non-fossil car fuel. Like the other oil majors, BP is outsourcing its R&D to universities who are lining up for Big Energy contract work.

## Berkeley Students

Three months later BP formally invited Cambridge, Imperial College London, MIT, Stanford, and UC Berkeley to bid competitively for a ten-year contract to host an Energy Biosciences Institute, where biofuels and enhanced oil extraction techniques are to be developed, patented and made market ready.

This February the UC Chancellor, the Director of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (where the US nuclear arsenal is designed), and the Governor of California stood on a stage emblazoned with BP's new sun/flower logo to announce Berkeley's successful bid to host fifty company scientists and engineers who will be 'embedded within the campus research environment'. The Energy Biosciences Institute, according to the terms of the provisional deal, is slated to straddle the fence-line between the military (Lawrence Berkeley National Lab) and civilian campus, looking out over the Golden Gate. Up to 30 percent of BP's \$500-million grant may be spent inside BP's proprietary labs. Any faculty member or student who wishes to enter BP's labs would have to obtain 'controlled card-key access.'

Jennifer Washburn, author of *University Inc.*, accurately notes that the deal :

would...allow BP to operate its own private, commercial labs on the campuses, where research would be confidential and proprietary. The plan also dispenses with numerous traditional safeguards designed to protect the university's independence. It grants BP unusual control over the institute's research agenda, makes no mention of peer review, downplays commercial conflicts of interest and contains provisions on publication that would violate UC's written policies...[T]he plan gives BP exceptionally broad commercial rights to co-own and license the institute's academic inventions. In short, for \$500 million, the plan would allow BP, a company valued at \$250 billion, to turn an academic research institute into its own profit-making subsidiary.

One of the first casualties of the deal is already clear – the English language. The authors of this proposal have already begun a laundering operation, even before the deal is signed. Genetically modified organisms and biotechnology are nowhere to be seen. The brief era of 'biotech' is over, it seems; a new age of 'synthetic biology' is dawning. Oddly, we find ourselves back in a world of electricians, chemists and masons. Instead of living GMOs we are dealing with 'DNA circuits'; instead of genes we find 'biobricks'. Plants no longer decompose; in this brave new science they undergo 'depolymerization'. These linguistic constructs are an attempt to obscure the fact that the core of the BP project for growing fuel instead of food remains the global proliferation of new, reproducing, lifeforms that contain genes transfected from distant species, with very poorly understood results.

It is not by accident that the parties to the BP-Berkeley deal borrow their rhetorical strategies from their counterparts in the military and nuclear fields. The UC scientists and administrators begin the proposal by invoking, in the most effusive terms, the Manhattan Project. In fact, the whole initiative is to be modeled on the Manhattan Project's 'team science' model. But that project is properly remembered for its secret, reckless decision-making. With its very first experiment, Arthur Compton, the head of the Chicago scientists involved, risked building a secret reactor in the middle of the city. Compton explained: "We did not see how a true nuclear explosion, such as that of an atomic bomb, could possibly occur"; still, as Richard Rhodes the historian of the Manhattan Project put it, he was risking 'a small Chernobyl in the midst of a crowded city.'

Here, then, are some questions: What is modern science that its shining hour was the Manhattan Project, a secret project to build a weapon of mass murder? What is modern science that it flourishes in secrecy? What is it that the biofuel boosters at UC Berkeley like so much about Lawrence and the atomic bomb project?

#### Trinity Test

Image: The first-ever nuclear detonation, at the Trinity test of July 16, 1945 under the auspices of The Manhattan Project

Well, here's one possible explanation: science – that is to say, 'actually existing' science – is capital's way of knowing the world. It's no accident that ballistics and the development of weapons of mass murder are at the heart of modern physics. Now the cult of the atom is mirrored and even matched by the cult of the gene. The stakes are high, they tell us – global warming and oil depletion loom. And certainly this is all rather plausible, even if promoted by known market manipulators such as BP. But it is worth asking: what does it mean, when the language of crisis is on so many lips? Suddenly, everyone is on board with biofuels as the answer to global warming – scientists, environmentalists, pundits, celebrities, politicians of all stripes – the Gores and Bransons and Blairs, and now the Bushes, with their ethanol deal with Brazil.

Global emergency, like communism and terrorism, is a very useful bogeyman that brooks no dissent. It facilitates backroom deals, and in the BP case (an agreement put together, in the revealing phrase of the UC vice chancellor for research, 'at warp speed'), it obscures the risks that university administrators and scientists are prepared to take not only with the local environment of Strawberry Canyon in Berkeley, but with the ecosystems of the planet and the lives of small farmers everywhere who face further dispossession for the purpose of developing a biofuel monoculture.

#### Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

Image: Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

Not that you would suspect any of this by listening to the President of the University of California when the deal was announced. 'A great day for Mother Earth', intoned Robert Dynes. Certainly it was music to the ears of BP executives (working for one of the world's brownest firms) for whom a deal with Berkeley represents good greenwashing value. As it does for the nuclear weaponeers from the Lawrence Berkeley National Lab, who will be partners in the project. The cost of this exercise for BP is actually rather modest. BP's net profit last year, in 2006, was \$22 billion - roughly \$600 per second. So the annual commitment to the program represents 0.0005% of annual profits – which can be measured in a few hours. However, BP's biofuel interests are part of a picture of very large investment by oil companies in other fuels and the energy field overall (e.g. Shell investing in solar in China); this is why all the oil majors have these sorts of university relations around the globe (Stanford with Exxon etc); this is part of a much larger wave of such 'partnerships', mostly with private, that is publicly unaccountable, institutions.

BP's track record does not augur well for this partnership or for free and open inquiry. Here are the words of Greg Palast of *BBC Newsnight*:

BP, which owns 46% of the Alaska pipeline and is supposed to manage the system, had a habit of hunting down and destroying the careers of those who warn of pipeline problems. In one case, BP's CEO of Alaskan operations hired a former CIA expert to break into the home of a whistleblower, Chuck Hamel, who had complained of conditions at the pipe's tanker facility. BP tapped his phone calls with a US congressman and ran a surveillance and smear campaign against him. When caught, a US federal judge said BP's acts were 'reminiscent of Nazi Germany'.

Indeed, on what grounds could one expect anything else from a marriage between self-described legatees of the Manhattan Project and a global oil corporation? In other words, it's business as usual. On a straightforward institutional analysis, how could a major oil company behave very differently than the way it currently is doing? For starters, it would be a dereliction of their sworn obligation to stockholders. By the same token, should we be surprised that a governor with 8 Hummers is committing 40 million dollars of public funds to keep his vehicles running... on alcohol?

### Khalifornia

The 'governator' is riding a wave of public anxiety, as the residents of California contemplate the drying up of the Columbia river and coastal inundation scenarios. They listened to a news item last week suggesting that Perth in Western Australia may be the first major modern city to be simply abandoned for lack of water. There are dangers, however, in the discourse of global warming and the widespread predictions of imminent global catastrophe, which issue not just from religious salesmen of apocalypse, but from pundits and scientists and environmentalists everywhere – the Gores and Bransons and Blairs, and now the Bushes. Thus Al Gore: 'What we are facing is a planetary emergency. So some things you would never consider otherwise, it makes sense to consider.' He is far from alone. In Britain and Germany nuclear electricity is on the agenda again. Horst Teltschik, former security adviser to Chancellor Kohl recently said: 'It is a tragedy of every democracy that everyone can publicly represent their opinion ... In a dictatorship, this type of thing wouldn't happen.'

### Governator Money

The matter is complicated. On the one hand, 'peak oil' has a plausible ring to it, but it is a mystification. We are not going to be out of oil in our lifetimes. (Sheikh Yamani, when he was head of OPEC, liked to say, 'The stone age did not end for lack of stone'.) The history of oil has never been one of scarcity, except locally or through the monopolistic actions of cartels. Rather it is a story of glut; the problem for the oil executives has always been how to create scarcity – Enron learned much from BP about gaming the market. The timing of last summer's sudden inspection and fix of a decade-long problem has a suspicious smell. A precipitous shutdown in mid-summer, in the middle of Middle East war(s), is guaranteed to raise prices and reap large profits for BP. The price of crude jumped \$2.22 a barrel on the shutdown news to over \$76. How lucky for BP, which sells four million barrels of oil a day. Had BP completed its inspection and repairs a couple years back – say, after a tenth warning – the oil market would have hardly noticed.

But \$2 a barrel is just the beginning of BP's shut-down bonus. The Alaskan oil was destined for the California market which now faces a supply crisis at the very height of the summer travel season. The big winner is ARCO petroleum, the largest retailer in the Golden State. ARCO is a 100%-owned subsidiary of... British Petroleum.

Enron Corporation was infamous for deliberately timing repairs to maximize profit. Would BP also manipulate the market in such a crude manner? Some US prosecutors think they did so in the US propane market. The Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) charged the company with approving an Enron-style scheme to crank up the price of propane sold in poor rural communities in the US. Lord Browne, the CEO of BP who was recently forced to resign, apologized for that scam, for the Alaska spill, for the summer shutdown, and for the deaths in 2005 of 15 workers at the company's refinery operation at Texas City, Texas.

### Alaska Oil Spill

Image: Site of the BP Alaska oil spill

A second note of caution, which also has to do with the politics of emergency. We live in a system that positively produces crisis and emergency and disaster. It is a system that even thrives on disaster. Naomi Klein calls it 'disaster capitalism'; she notes it was very visible in New Orleans and now again in Iraq. Companies like Halliburton are the beneficiaries of the chaos. A profoundly undemocratic politics of emergency flows rather plausibly from the current climate of fear; it is on view every week in the US on Fox TV's 24. As the result of a kind of 'Jack Bauer effect' we are invited to believe that there is no time for deliberation, only for extreme measures... now.

We are further asked to believe that the same people who brought you the problem will bring you the solution. Just as the industries that bring you a breast cancer epidemic are claiming to deliver the cure. What they won't bring you, we may be sure, is prevention. There's no profit in it. Just as obviously, British Petroleum will not be financing a critique of automobilism, nor will it foster a new critical urbanism, that links mobility, livelihood, habitation and space. The proposal that UC was 'honored to submit' – and which it has delivered to BP cap in hand – is deeply complicit with the status quo, namely the neoliberal policies that now, through the WTO and IMF and US Treasury, dominate the global system and were hatched in the 70s thinktanks funded by big oil and big armaments. We can directly connect the world they have ushered in to the unfolding disasters in New Orleans and Mesopotamia – the gimcrack levees, the destruction by the oil companies of the buttressing wetlands, the intensity of hurricanes, the gutting of public health infrastructure, the privatization of war and emergency relief. And leading us again to the politics of emergency, even though the crises have been long in the making.

For example, the choking of funds to public education and research has a lot to do with this deal. And we can trace it directly to Proposition 13 in 1978 and the policies of Ronald Reagan starving the University of California. The current proposal will do nothing to strike at the roots. Biomass-derived alcohol may fuel a few more hummers and 'Ford Tough' trucks. Mostly it will fuel a lot more despair and insecurity, more degradation of communal lands; for sure it means a race to the bottom for the world's farmers who are heading in staggering numbers to the cities, where there is no work waiting for them. The two faces of global neoliberalism, fully supported, funded, endorsed by big oil and soon by UC Berkeley, are the obscene sumptuary playgrounds of Dubai and the complementary slumworld of Cairo and Delhi.

We have already noted how the very language in which to discuss our plight has been hijacked. What economists and in particular the drafters of this UC-BP proposal call the 'market' is really the 'anti-market'. The capitalist 'market' is about monopoly and crushing competition, and it always has been. Knowledge-making, however, which is the business of the university, depends on an economy of the gift, of collegiality and cooperation. This necessary sociality BP is going to exploit and to profit from. It will of course be massively compromised by the paraphernalia of security, passwords, 'need to know' and secrecy. In the proposal there is talk about 'flow' between 'open' and 'proprietary' areas of the Biofuels Institute, but it's basically a lie. We know the direction of flow they really care about –

from open to proprietary; coming in your direction expect a niagara of green hype from the BP marketers.

Their 'market' bears the same relationship to the glory of a local brocante, agora, or *mercado* as Velveeta cheese does to Jose Bove's Roquefort. And the same goes for the bioscientific 'disruptive technologies' (the term used by the drafters of the UC-BP proposal) in relation to a biology adequate to the times. I am speaking of a critical, liberatory science rooted in an ethic of care and equity, in restorative justice and rightful reparation to the communities and natural systems worldwide which have been devastated in the deadly pursuit of private enrichment. A science, finally, that will be at home in a world no longer dominated by private tyrannies, one that partakes of an open, ample life in common.

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