

SHALE GAS: A REVOLUTION THAT DID NOT HAPPEN

**ANNA SZOŁUCHA, *GAZ ŁUPKOWY W POLSCE.
HISTORIA, MAGIA, PROTEST***

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Anna Szolucha's book *Gaz łupkowy w Polsce. Historia, magia, protest* [Shale Gas in Poland: History, Magic, Protest] centres on shale gas fever – the public response to the potential presence of deposits of unconventional hydrocarbons, or so-called shale gas, in Poland in the period 2008–2018. Preliminary drilling did not confirm the presence of gas in the pores and fractures of rocks at a depth that would allow its (profitable) exploitation with the currently available technologies. However, the question of “What if it were there?” was answered. The scientific community, politicians, authorities at various levels of government, representatives of business, media, and industry, and residents of potential mining areas, all responded with an intensification of political activity, including the formation of coalitions, alliances, collaborations, and various forms of resistance. The book's narrative thus revolves around conferences, study visits, lawsuits, changes to the law, protests, administrative promotions, and diplomatic actions.

The book also contains a kind of “overture”: a history of the activities of individuals associated with the later exploration period, demonstrating how exposure to the ideas of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction occurs. The path leads through the United States: political, agricultural, and business contacts are formed that make it possible to imagine sources of revenue (buying or selling plots of land, concessions), new career paths (new

fuel, the reshuffling of current geopolitical alignments, the raised profile of geology as a science with the backing of the state), and political strategies (energy security, technological partnerships). Interestingly, this path has also proven useful for the resistance to the extraction trajectory – it provided important contacts and sources of eyewitness experience to farmers. Most attention and space in the book are devoted to the more-than-year-long blockade of Chevron’s exploration activities in Żurawłów, a small village in Zamość County, and the community that emerged around this protest.

The author of the book, Anna Szolucha, is an anthropologist who has devoted much of her attention within the field of energy studies to researching the impact of geological exploration, investment, and shale gas extraction itself on communities not only in Poland but also and especially in the United Kingdom. Her interdisciplinary background blends anthropology, political ecology, and critical social theory, allowing her to examine how extractive industries interact with local communities, grassroots activism, and broader socio-political structures. Her research is especially relevant in the context of Poland and the United Kingdom, where shale gas exploration has been promoted as a means of achieving energy security and economic growth, often in the face of strong public opposition. Szolucha’s work critically analyses how extractive industries and governments deploy narratives of development and technological progress while overlooking the social and environmental concerns of affected communities.

In studying shale gas extraction in the United Kingdom, Szolucha employed ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation to document the experiences, resistance strategies, and everyday lives of people impacted by fracking. By elaborating on the impact of extraction zones on local communities, her research fed into advocacy and policy work (Short & Szolucha 2019). In Poland, through interviews, site visits, and document analyses, she reconstructed how communities negotiated the uncertainty and risks associated with shale gas exploration. In both cases her ethnographic work shows that communities, through their activities in this regard, found creative ways of reinvigorating local democracy. Direct action, protests, and collaborative learning are responses – against all odds – to disillusionment with democratic procedures, which are easily breached on the central (governmental) and corporate level. *Shale Gas in Poland: History, Magic, Protest* focuses on storytelling and ethnography without engaging in theoretical academic debates. It is an example of engaged anthropology, which seeks to empower social movements, preserve their memory, and make science useful.

The book's narrative is built along the dramatic axis of the "enchantment" and "disenchantment" of shale gas, to which some actors were subject (e.g., politicians, research institutions, and to some extent, local governments), and which others resisted, as did the residents of Żurawłów. The author suggests that magic is not just a metaphor but an anthropological analytical figure, or – in her functional view – a social mechanism that by default serves to uphold political legitimacy in the face of uncertainty related to a new energy source. The mechanism allows the processes of concession and exploration to be orchestrated "as if" the idealised future associated with the energy source were a fact. Szolucha's analysis follows the chronology of events and leads her to the conclusion that "shale gas enchanted and disappointed in ways that, in retrospect, are difficult to explain with rational arguments" (Szolucha 2021: 11).¹

Szolucha describes "enchantment" in two ways: first, by pointing out the megalomaniac rhetoric in media, political, and scientific coverage; and second, by journalistically tracing the movements of the main actors in the field of politics, at the intersection of diplomacy and science. She concludes that the performative establishment of a vision of Poland's future in a new geostrategic position, in which it would be a technological partner of the United States, while at the same time being a country with energy sovereignty, consisted, first, in accepting the estimation of gas resources as a fact creating that future, and second, in adopting an attitude conducive to the realisation of the "*raison d'état*" thus understood. Actions that went beyond people's specialisations were thus legitimised: geologists made recommendations on how to deal with residents; politicians made promises using (estimated) data. They also went beyond the letter of the law.

Here are some examples of shale gas enchantment described in the book's first two chapters, which the author devotes to central institutions: the political community and the scientific community of geologists. In 2010, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote a report on a conference held by an organisation lobbying for the introduction of American technological and legislative endeavours for shale gas extraction, during which representatives of extraction companies spoke of the industry's lack of harm to the environment. They legitimised this opinion on the authority of the public administration, without citing their source – and thus created a document that served Polish diplomacy as a guideline in talks with investors (Szolucha 2021: 41), the media, and stakeholders. Geological services, in cooperation with businesses capable of financing

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

extremely expensive exploration wells, saw opportunities for scientific and technological development, while locating the actual possibilities of gas extraction in the future, where new technologies would supposedly overcome the existing limitations. This is why, for example, the geological services went beyond their competence in order to “soothe” public emotions, and adopted the interests of mining companies in regard to secrecy of information. Furthermore, as the author reveals, even though forecasts had not confirmed the presence of gigantic resources (already in 2012) and the drilling had so far not provided any tangible scientific benefit (there were problems with the samples, as revealed by the Supreme Audit Office) the state funded the Blue Gas programme at the National Centre for Research and Development, with the aim of developing and commercialising innovative technologies related to shale gas extraction.

The material contained in the second part of the book is different. First of all, it is extremely rich in quotations from interviews conducted after the events described above had already taken place, that is, after the formation of opposition to the gas extraction project and the subsequent 400-day protest by a group of farmers from Żurawłów who demanded a halt to prospecting in their fields (which ended in 2014). The author describes in detail the forums where – in addition to the direct blockade – a conflict played out between the state and local governments intent on securing cooperation with corporations, which were perceived as serious partners, and the community, which was learning to build connections and coalitions, and recognising that it had a right to say “no.” Szolucha writes that the residents of Żurawłów “did not agree that economics and geological considerations should determine whether a mining industry would develop in their area” (Szolucha 2021: 84). The activities of the residents, who were not even by law party to the proceedings, included questioning the ambiguities connected with granting a concession to Chevron, heightened vigilance over decisions of the local authorities, barging into meetings at various levels, proceedings before the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union challenging the direction of legal changes in the interests of the mining lobby, and finally, obtaining the support of anarchist circles and environmental associations.

In her introduction, Szolucha speaks of how her study of shale gas fever has provided a “frank, sometimes embarrassing and funny, and sometimes uplifting picture of ourselves and our approach to issues that are identified as those of state interest, and therefore – of interest to all of us” (Szolucha 2021:14), but it is especially with reference to the farmers,

the villagers who challenged the “shale Eldorado,” that we get such an image. Although interviews with officials and scholars also form part of the research material, Szolucha reconstructs the central events mainly by analysing documents and establishing a chronology of events. Locality, on the other hand, is embodied, the tactics used by the farmers are surprising and unpredictable, and the emerging alliances have the dimension of human relationships that transcend social divisions – this is how they are described by the author, who dedicates the book’s final chapter, titled “Disenchanted Gas in Żurawłów,” to the performativity of protest.

Long quotes from the interviews allow the author not only to reconstruct the course of events, but also to capture the temperature of emotions, and the nature of the language and the drama surrounding the events. Participants of the protest, by sharing their reflections with the author and recalling important facts from the history of the protest, co-created a kind of “archive for the future.” This phrase, which was coined by Macarena Gómez-Barris, initially referred to artistic practices of resistance to the cleansing of areas affected by colonial-extractivist projects (Gómez-Barris 2017: 133). It fits well with the chapters that describe the actions of the residents. An “archive for the future” is an extremely valuable resource for creating an alternative environmental history – one not to be found on government websites, the occupychevron.tumblr.com blog, or in existing social science studies of would-be shale gas extraction in Poland.

Unlike in earlier publications on shale gas, the author abstracts from the materiality of this resource: the ways it is explored and extracted, which give rise to the organisation of specific forms of “social” work that extend far beyond geological features on the one hand, and economic issues of profits from extraction on the other. In the case of shale gas, its designation as an “unconventional” resource, and the unpredictability and uncertainty associated with it, “has been useful as a material determinant of the special status of shale gas in law, the planning process, and political debate. It served to dis-embed exploration from the social and the political” (Szolucha 2019: 2). The exclusion of the local community from decision-making processes regarding gas extraction in the context of the extractive industry is not surprising. What is puzzling in this context, however, is the characterisation of anticipatory extraction policies as justified by the magical power of shale gas.

Would uncertainty have been more difficult to turn into a tool of power if it had been stripped of the huge quantity of projections of Poland as a “shale giant” with “energy security” – phantasmagorias that allowed

civil society and other futures than those associated with the state mining complex and corporate interests to be disregarded? In the first chapter, titled “Shale Diplomacy,” the author draws attention to the specific temporality of the exploration process. Exploration decisions were made before any data about the resources had been made available. In 2007, when the mayor of the municipality of Grabowiec consented to grant an exploration license, the actual amount of gas obtainable in a given area and the depth and nature of seismic and drilling work were unknown, and experience of the consequences of hydraulic fracturing in specific geological, social, and landscape conditions was nonexistent. The decision of the mayor, and the opinion of the Ministry of the Environment that “the planned activity [...] does not constitute a project that could have a significant impact on the environment [...] or a project for which an environmental impact report should be required” (Szołucha 2021: 22) are characterised by a degree of certainty that does not accord with the speculative nature of the investment.

As in the case of researchers working in science and technology studies and dealing with the would-be production of shale gas in Poland (cf. Stasik 2019; Lis & Stasik 2017), uncertainty is also a subject of investigation for Szołucha. However, her book asks different questions – not about who participates in the creation of facts about shale gas, but about the symbolic surplus of extraction infrastructures, which consolidate before the actual mines are built, in the form of mechanisms of authoritarian governance in the bosom of democracy. The book does rather well in documenting the processes by which uncertainty about the actual amount of gas and the possibility of extracting it turns into a tool for managing and mobilising support for its extraction. In the literature on pre-extraction exploration, there are records of what factors led to obtaining inflated estimates of resource availability. In the case of oil, “overestimated” volumes led to a more enthusiastic response from the administration, exploration companies, and investors, resulting in a specific kind of feedback loop: acceptance of inflated estimates, stimulation of investment, higher profits for extraction companies (Graf 2014: 141). The initial Cambridge Energy Research Associates report and the Energy Information Administration’s estimate worked similarly. In contrast, the situation of uncertainty was interpreted differently by the residents of Żurawłów, as their actions revealed. They expressed their right to control their lives within a democratic reality – with unexpected consequences in the form of learning about both shale gas and the ways institutions work in practice, and also about the emotional cost of engaging in a prolonged protest.

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✂ *Coltan, Oil Shale* (2021, Kunstfest Weimar); editorial: *The Make Yourself at Home Guide to Warsaw* (2015, with R. Al Rajji and Monnik), *Artists' Initiatives, and Galleries* (2014, with A. Pindera and W. Szczupacka).

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