

## **Early, Steve (2017) *Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money and the Remaking of an American City*, Beacon Press, Boston.**

### **Review by Tula Connell**

In the 1990s, after the religious conservative policy organization Focus on the Family moved to Colorado Springs, the state's second largest city was colonized by a pantheon of politically rightwing Christian groups, earning it a new nickname, 'the Evangelical Vatican.' By 2014, the city that had helped send Democratic environmentalist Richard Lamb to the governor's office in the 1970s was named the fourth most conservative city in the nation.

A similar dynamic occurred in the early 2000s in Richmond, California, but with a dramatically different outcome. People with left-liberal and Green political backgrounds moved to the economically depressed and environmentally besieged city, invited like-minded friends and colleagues to join them, and together they helped lead a political wave that challenged the town's political overlord, Chevron, championed economically and socially progressive issues, and revamped the city's policing structure. Once the poor cousin of Bay-area cities like Berkeley, Richmond in recent years has been hailed for its rebirth.

Among those newcomers, labor activist and writer Steve Early had the foresight to document the change process in *Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money and the Remaking of an American City*. Early, a longtime labor lawyer, organizer and union representative, has written extensively about union organizing campaigns, strikes, and politics, and explored broader themes of working-class empowerment throughout a career in which he has worked at the Mineworkers union, the Teamsters, and the Communications Workers of America (CWA).

Following many years at CWA, in 2011 Early relocated from his base in the Northeast to Richmond. There, he followed a group of left-liberal activists who had recently moved to the city and were taking part in a broad progressive political coalition, the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA), which had begun as a loose coalition of Greens in the early 2000s.

Shortly after arriving in Richmond, Early and wife were shaken by a fire at Chevron that required residents to 'shelter in place,' an official directive that recommended taping windows to seal out toxic chemical fumes. The 2012 disaster, caused by a faulty pipe—which had been unaddressed for more than a decade after being identified by Chevron engineers as needing repair—resulted in a \$1.86 billion drop in the city's assessed property values and sparked Early to detail, via 'participatory journalism,' the evolution of Richmond from company town to vibrant democracy.

Early contextualizes Richmond and its historical relationship with Chevron, beginning with the company's formation as Standard Oil of California in 1905. True to the Rockefeller playbook, as the Richmond-based refinery grew to become one of the world's largest, a combination of union-busting and company unionism succeeded in shutting workers out of genuine labor representation for much of the twentieth century.

An influx of African Americans to carry out ship production during World War II shifted the demographics of the white-majority city, which in the 1960s became home to the Black Panthers and ultimately; they became a 'majority minority.' As in most cities across the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans in Richmond were blocked from obtaining decent housing and often, good jobs. In the ensuing decades, while poverty rose, Chevron increasingly amassed economic and political clout, investing in large-scale real estate ventures and pouring money into local elections, backing candidates most favorable to its interests. By the early 2000s, many factories had closed, leaving vacant lots often toxic with chemicals. Financial mismanagement had created massive city debt and widespread crime gave Richmond a reputation as one of the most dangerous cities in the country.

A city-proposed power plant next to the Chevron refinery in 2004 proved to be the spark for change. A group of Greens coalesced to successfully oppose the move, arguing for alternative energy solutions. Led by an Argentine native and recent city resident, their organization soon evolved into the RPA, as it broadened to include Democrats, African Americans, Latinos and 'free spirits,' in the words of one council member.

Also in 2004, Gayle McLaughlin, another newcomer, successfully ran on an RPA slate for city council, and quickly was elected mayor. McLaughlin and RPA supporters championed a series of innovative and often highly controversial proposals that included a failed attempt to use eminent domain to stop foreclosures and a successful effort to force Chevron to pay a rare tax increase. At the same time, a new police chief from the Midwest implemented a series of reforms that significantly improved both the way police interacted with the community and lowered the crime rate.

The RPA also successfully fought creation of a casino and hotel on the shoreline that would have taken away space for running trails and parks, and campaigned in favor of a soda tax to fund youth sports programs and health initiatives in a referendum voters overwhelmingly defeated. Neither effort was supported by most African American council members, and in the case of the soda tax, the American Beverage Association spent more than \$2 million opposing the plan, targeting the African American and Latino communities with appeals to reject an elitist tax on the working class.

*Refinery Town* fittingly frames the two campaigns as Big Business versus the people, but does not examine how the political battles also highlight the recurring tensions between environmentalists, and working class and low-income residents for whom jobs and lower taxes are more important. The casino-hotel complex would have created many much-needed jobs in a community where 20 percent of the population lived in poverty. Jobs also proved to be a line in

the sand for union support of the soda tax. Some unions opposed the tax, including the Teamsters, whose members stood to lose jobs as delivery drivers and bottling plant workers.

The two-to-one rejection of the soda tax indicates that charges of liberal paternalism also had significant resonance. A deeper analysis of these fissures in Richmond could have shed valuable light on divisions brought to the fore in the 2016 elections between the ‘elite’ writ large and many working-class voters. And while *Refinery Town*’s emphasis on local leaders offers a close look at progressive politics from above, the voices of working-class residents and other community members would have added critical perspective to such divisive issues, including the role of newcomers as the city’s change leaders.

The political battles Early details in *Refinery Town* highlight not only Chevron’s cash-fueled city clout, but also tension between RPA allies and the entrenched Democratic officeholders who had long backed Chevron. Left unexplored is why these African American council members were strongly supported by their constituents—perhaps because even as Chevron bought politicians, polluted land and endangered residents, it also is the source of well-paid—and now unionized—jobs? Greater interrogation of working-class perspectives and actions here and throughout *Refinery Town* would have broadened and deepened the narrative, necessarily complicating our understanding of the city’s evolving class dynamics.

These are just a sample of the contradictions and complexities the book surfaces in Richmond, a city not so different in its competing priorities from many newly-revitalizing municipalities across the United States. Toward the end of the narrative, the RPA leaders recognize the need to diversify their ranks, acknowledging that the group had too many ‘old, white, economically comfortable retired people of leisure running things.’ A good start.

Even in its failures, the RPA served to open a new dialogue about what is possible in achieving justice for an underserved and often abandoned community, thereby opening a door for future social, political and economic advancement that had long been locked. In documenting the messy, often painful, jumpstarting of a city-wide change process, *Refinery Town* offers an important case study—both cautionary and visionary—for progressive politics.

### **Reviewer Bio**

Tula Connell, an historian of the United States focusing on 20th century labor and social movements, is author of *Conservative Counterrevolution: Challenging Liberalism in 1950s Milwaukee* (University of Illinois Press, April 2016). Connell has worked in labor communications for more than 20 years, including at the AFL-CIO and SEIU, and currently is Senior Communications Officer at the Solidarity Center, an international labor rights organization.