

Green Nightmares

Fossil fuel resistance and repression are escalating

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TERROR is defined by the power it threatens. Blocking the flow of carbon energy is terrifying to the fossil fuel industry and its sphere of influence. The crushing repression of anti-pipeline movements in today's law-and-order era shows how far the terror label has stretched to encompass not only oppressed groups often deemed enemies of the state, but even old white liberals more accustomed to performing civil disobedience in less dangerous times. The resurgence of "eco-terrorism" allegations in particular shows how the rich can sic the state on organizers who threaten their profit margins.

You could see the backlash forming a year ago. In October, five people stationed at critical pipeline valves in four states shut down the flow of millions of barrels of oil sands. The sands were being transported from Canada to the United States through lines owned by Enbridge, Spectra Energy, TransCanada, and Kinder Morgan, whose combined earnings in 2015 were somewhere around \$7 billion. The activists stated in a press release that they were compelled to act because they believed there existed "no plausible means or mechanism" by which fossil fuel extraction could be stopped "on the timeline now required by any ordinary, legal means." Scientific consensus has confirmed again and again that even under the U.N.'s Paris Agreement, the Earth will continue warming to a degree that ensures today's flooding, species extinction, severe heat, and chaotic weather patterns that will intensify and kill millions of people by 2100.

The activists who shut off the valves were nearly all white and middle-aged, and at least one had once worked for a few environmental non-profits. They're of a generation and demographic familiar with performative civil disobedience and its necessary acquiescence to state forces; one activist stressed the facts that she made safety calls to the company and waited over an hour for the sheriff to come and arrest her. But despite activists' privileges of being white and bourgeois, the reaction from the industry was alarmist. "The steps taken by these individuals to sabotage pipelines," said David Holt, president of the Consumer Energy Alliance oil and gas trade group, "clearly show that their agenda has nothing to do with protecting the environment and everything to do with shutting down the American economy and hurting everyday Americans."

At the forefront of the movement to slap environmental activists as terrorists has been billionaire Kelcy Warren and the company he chairs, Energy Transfer Partners. Leaked documents revealed that the company hired a security firm called TigerSwan to conduct counterterror operations on the movement to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline, which it labeled "an ideologically driven insurgency with a strong religious component." The mercenary set the tenor for patrolling the pipeline, acting as a resource and coordinator for multiple law enforcement agencies and facilitating the arrests of hundreds of people. "It's just terrorism," Warren said of protesters to the *Dallas Morning News* last October, emerging from the shadows after plonking over one hundred thousand dollars into Donald Trump and RNC coffers. The company is now alleging in court that Greenpeace, Earth First!, and other groups are liable for inciting terrorist acts and vandalism when protests against the pipeline were at their height. Oil now flows through

the line, and Warren’s winning horse now controls the country’s vast counterterrorism apparatus.

With the industry holding the reigns of government power, any militant action viewed as an existential threat by fossil fuel companies is now likely seen as such by the White House. It was Secretary of State and former Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson, after all, who last March called carbon energy “the lifeblood of economic growth,” a sentiment repeated nearly verbatim by the conservative think tank Competitive Enterprise Institute (connected to Exxon through various financial and professional channels), whose director, Myron Ebell, oversaw the transition of the Environmental Protection Agency. The president has called out anarchists and other radical groups by name, emboldening their persecutors and prompting paranoia that any protester could now be charged with economic terrorism (not as of this moment).

THE nature of environmental resistance defies temporal boundaries by definition, which can make it even scarier to carbon barons. To cut the flow of carbon is not only a revolt against present conditions for the sake of the future, but also a “full scale onslaught on the structural nightmares bequeathed by the past,” as Andreas Malm writes in his book *Fossil Capital*. That is: A war against infrastructure built by dead masters of the Earth to keep us locked in a fossil fueled civilization long after our own deaths. The rising tides that will swallow coastal cities are fed by already-built exhaust pipes, refineries, and power plants that are spewing carbon right now. And even if this infrastructure were to be shut off or smashed this moment, we would still not be freed from the effects of locked-in greenhouse gases for at least a few decades. Struggle against the fossil fuel economy in the present alleviates us from the legacy of carbon infrastructure in order to liberate our future. It is also, in Malm’s formulation, anti-capitalist.

He argues that the development of a fossil fuel-powered civilization is inseparable from advances in capitalistic accumulation, a process he calls “fossil capital value creation.” Nations have always seen attacks on capital as attacks on the nation itself. After locating the roots of the fossil economy in property relations on the British Isles, he develops a theory of carbon combustion as a material requirement for value creation. Because the valorization of capital has been based in rising fossil fuel consumption since the beginning of industrialization, companies that want to develop renewable sources of energy today face steep obstacles to profitability. Renewables like wind, solar, biomass, and geothermal power only made up about 1.4 percent of global energy consumption in 2015, a rate that has remained relatively flat the last few years. A big part of why oil and gas are so profitable is that companies can manipulate supplies to create artificial scarcity; they can’t do that with sunlight, which is everywhere.

To act outside of our carbon-fueled political arrangement—to manually shut off the flow of tar sands oil from point A to point B—is to risk being labeled a conspiracist, extremist, or terrorist. This is at least in part because the propellant logic of fossil capital produced the materials that compose the political system in which we live, argues Timothy Mitchell in *Carbon Democracy*. The book complements Malm’s

study of fossil capital by tracing how the processes behind its accumulation, including wars, coups d'état and other political upheavals have shaped the dominant political consensus since industrialization. Even free-market orthodoxy is tied up in carbon: The false consensus among the victors of the Second World War that oil and gas supplies were limitless inspired their belief that nation's economies grew based on the "speed and frequency with which money changed hands," rather than their accumulation of gold, land, and coal. The increasingly complex expertise needed to work in oil and gas production also legitimized a form of politics that used supposedly rational economic calculation to manage geopolitical uncertainty; the Trump administration sees "a positive energy relationship" with the Gulf states as part of its anti-terrorism strategy. Toward the end of his book, Mitchell suggests that the elites' ability to manage crises in this way without risking global social rupture may be on the wane.

UNCERTAINTY about the future, together with a mass crisis of legitimacy in the global liberal order shown by extreme wealth inequality has created a power vacuum for the oil-rich to exploit. Trump's election was a coup for the class of oil moguls who modeled their mass deception of carbon's dangers using the tobacco industry's playbook. As president, he has expanded the industry at a rapid clip, and has an affinity for the industry: during the campaign, he had personal investments in TransCanada, Kinder Morgan, and Energy Transfer Partners, all recent targets of direct action by fossil fuel opponents. The ideology of the carbon lobby is currently submerging large swaths of the federal government even as icebergs melt into the oceans and mass species die-offs continue.

If the consequences of climate change become so horrible that even Trump can't ignore them, he may turn to methods like carbon capture, a corporate favorite. The method uses stratospheric sulfate aerosols, both of which require different forms of environmental manipulation—one by capturing carbon waste from the sky and depositing it into the ground, and the other by spraying sulfur into the stratosphere to absorb heat. Billionaires Bill Gates, and Richard Branson are among top financiers of such geo-engineering techniques, while other proponents include the elite conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute (where Dick Cheney is a board member) as well as corporations like Exxon, Shell, BP. Far from reducing human impact on the Earth, these methods would be another means by which the rich and professional class could experiment on the planet at everybody else's expense, and continue to profit off of carbon (now through its maintenance, not just its combustion).

Law and order won't tolerate fossil fuel disruption. Hitting them too hard in their money maker has always been dangerous, and pursuing environmental groups and other organizers with RICO and conspiracy like mobsters and terrorists is a method to cripple movements regardless of legal outcome. The racketeering suit brought by Energy Transfer Partners against Greenpeace and others seems like a privatized version of criminal cases brought against animal rights organizers in the past. Much the same way that ETP argues in its lawsuit that research by environmental groups highlighting investors in DAPL incited economic disruption, the group Stop Huntington Animal

Cruelty's (SHAC) campaign in the early 2000's targeted financiers of the vivisection contractor Huntington Life Sciences. SHAC aggressively harassed investors, customers and stockbrokers in Huntington, eventually getting it delisted from both the London and New York Stock Exchanges. ETP currently argues that the "coordinated strategy to interfere with financing for the banks" began when Food and Water Watch published research on DAPL financiers.

For SHAC, their successes had criminal consequence. Seven of them who ran a website supportive of SHAC actions, known as the SHAC 7, were charged in 2006 under the Animal Enterprise Protection Act, a law passed to punish actions that either instilled fear in employees of animal enterprises or forced them to lose profits. The SHAC 7 case also motivated Congress to pass the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) that same year, which updated the terms of the older bill. While criminal charges for organized crime haven't been brought against groups like Greenpeace yet, there are hundreds, including alleged organizers of actions against DAPL, who are headed to trial on felony riot and conspiracy charges. Current trends and the carbon extremism of the federal administration could mean the feds will go after big green nonprofits in ways they hadn't before.

That's frightening, because our melting and dying world demands escalation against the fossil fuel regime and its fossil capital accumulation. Especially if you're under 50 years old. Our words and actions are being weighed against the profit margins of the richest companies in the world, and the capitalist logic animating a ravenous security state is clearer than ever. It's terrorism to starve fossil fuel companies of capital. It's also freedom.

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