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AGAINST the DAY

Pipeline Politics

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Introduction: Pipeline Politics

The system of oil and gas pipelines constitutes one of the world's major infrastructure and logistics networks. In 2014, it was estimated that there were more than 3.5 million kilometers of pipelines on the planet—more than nine times the distance of the Earth to the moon. While the distribution of this pipeline network depends in part on whether a country is a producer of oil and gas (with petro-states having a larger network than non-petro-states), like other aspects of modern infrastructure (from road highways to their Internet variant), the presence of pipelines mirrors existing global divisions of power and wealth. The United States, for example, possesses close to 2 million kilometers of pipelines; by contrast, Venezuela, a major producer of oil, has a system of a little over 7,500 kilometers in size. The United States is more than ten times the physical size of Venezuela; however, its pipeline system is more than *two hundred and sixty times* that of Venezuela's—a figure that should prompt us to think more seriously about infrastructure's role in enabling and sustaining differences in economic and political power.

Over the past decade, pipelines have entered political discussion and debate as never before, becoming one of the most visible points of social conflict over infrastructure and logistics. Pipelines are now part of mainstream politics and a subject of front-page news. The most well-known example of recent pipeline politics is TransCanada's Keystone XL project. This pipeline, which was to have been the final part of a multi-stage pipeline project, was intended to link up oil extracted in Alberta, Canada, with storage facilities and refineries based in the United States. The fact that the pipeline crossed the

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US border (and so was a project that had to be addressed by the US federal government) presented an opening for the environmental organization 350.org. Founded by author Bill McKibben, 350.org used the Keystone project to bring increased public attention to the environmental threats posed by the continued expansion of the fossil fuel system—both its effect on levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide and its potential impact on the water used for drinking and irrigation (the organization takes its name from the part-per-million [ppm] of carbon dioxide that has been identified as safe upper limit; as of March 2015, global levels of carbon dioxide were more than 400 ppm [Vaughan 2015]). In addition to the successful campaign waged by the 350.org against Keystone XL—the pipeline project was killed in November 2015 by an executive decision of President Barack Obama—campaigns have been waged against the expansion of pipelines within Canada and elsewhere in the United States and at sites around the world where the public wants to draw attention to the links between the energy we use and its environmental consequences.

Pipelines were never meant to be involved in politics. Though the pipeline system is as old as that of modern oil extraction and constitutes a physical structure nearly as large as highway systems (e.g., Canada's total system of paved roads is 1.35 million kilometers; its pipeline system is 825 thousand kilometers [Government of Canada 2014]), pipelines are hidden from view—underground, off in the distance, so prominent in the landscape of modernity as to be taken as a necessary part of it. As historian Christopher Jones (2014: 124) points out, pipeline infrastructure was developed as a device for controlling who would profit from the flow of oil; it was not merely a technical device for getting oil to consumers. In the United States, oil pipelines emerged in the 1870s as a system by which a new oil company—Tide-Water—was able to circumvent Standard Oil's control of the transport of resources via railways, thereby moving its oil at cheaper rates than its competitor. One of unexpected outcomes of this struggle over ownership and profit was the disassociation of energy extraction from energy consumption, which has had profound implications for the environment. As Jones (2014: 143) points out, from the very beginning of the pipeline system, "the users of oil gained the benefit of cheap energy without assuming responsibility for its environmental damage." Until recently, pipelines have not played a role in politics in large part because they were, on the whole, as socially invisible as they were physically distant and out of sight, neither encountered by the public in daily activity nor featured in their social imaginaries.

The new visibility of pipelines is due to intensified anxieties about the impact of fossil fuel use on the planetary ecosystem and its repercussions for

the future of the environment. Concerns about global warming and climate change are no longer limited to specialists. Governments around the world and the constituencies they represent are fully aware of the environmental implications of a consumer capitalism that makes heavy use of natural resources and that has tended to treat the fossil fuels that it runs on as infinite and inconsequential. To date, this awareness of and interest in mitigating the effects of fossil fuel use has not translated into effective policies or practices. This gap between awareness and action has drawn the attention of academic researchers across the disciplines, from social psychology and sociology to political science and philosophy, and it remains one of the key challenges of environmental politics today.

Oil becomes visible when the oil system fails—witness the global media attention that followed the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill, which resulted in (among other things) the largest environmental fine in history (Macalister 2016; Rushe 2015). However, even in the context of oil spills and environmental anxieties, the true (if unexpected) reason pipelines have developed newfound visibility is because of the borders they cross. Pipelines have long been an example of what Keller Easterling (2014) has described as "extrastatecraft"—examples of infrastructural technology that contain and orchestrate the imperatives and ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism under the guise of being the dead, neutral objects required by modernity, whatever form they might take. In the attention that governments and communities now pay to the pipelines that pass through the territories they govern and inhabit, respectively, we are witnessing the transformation of objects of extrastatecraft into those of statecraft. In the process, pipelines and the fuels they carry are no longer treated as necessary or self-evident but as objects and processes that can—and, indeed, must—be questioned and challenged.

The Keystone XL project is the most obvious example of the activation of a politics of pipelines in relation to border crossing. In addition to the work of activist groups, the movement of the pipeline across the border between the United States and Canada brought national, state, and provincial governments into play, either as advocates or as opponents of the project. Another multinational project—BP's Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which runs from Azerbaijan to Turkey's Mediterranean Coast—has drawn the attention of environmental activists, artists, and researchers, and has resulted in a range of critical inquiries that has made the pipeline, which BP had intended to be invisible, into a centerpiece of discussions about fossil fuel futures.[1] Even within countries, a range of sovereignties has come into play to disrupt

the once easy movement of pipelines across territories. The extended debate about pipelines in Canada, the focus of which extends beyond Keystone XL to include other mega-projects such as the Energy East, Northern Gateway, and Trans Mountain pipelines, has been generated by the distinct and conflicting imperatives of the polities involved: federal and provincial governments, municipalities, and, especially, First Nations communities, who have been asserting their sovereign right to determine whether pipelines should cross their territories.[2] Even private property has become a means of challenging the right of oil and gas companies to employ eminent domain (the "takings clause" of the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution) to lay their pipelines, in the wake of pipeline breaks and seepages that have rendered property unusable and imperiled health.

With the activation of pipelines as key sites of environmental politics, we appear to have reached a new stage in the political history of energy. For many, Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* has become an important text in explicating the relationship between energy form and political power. One of the many compelling claims that Mitchell makes in this book concerns the rise and fall of mass political actions in relation to dominant forms of energy. The most common form of mass action is the strike, which Mitchell connects with the job actions first taken at coal mines. "The rise of mass democracy is often attributed to the emergence of new forms of political consciousness," writes Mitchell (2011: 12). "What was missing was not consciousness, not a repertoire of demands, but an effective way of forcing the powerful to listen to those demands" (21). The widespread adoption of coal as an energy source meant that, for the first time, the vast majority of people in industrialized countries became dependent on energy produced by others. The production at specific sites across northern Europe of coal that then had to be channeled to other sites along narrow railway corridors, with specialized groups of workers operating in large numbers at both ends, generated the material conditions for a form of political agency—the strike—that could be asserted through the disruption of energy flow. The ability of workers to effectively and immediately disrupt energy flow through strikes or sabotage gave their political demands special force and led to major gains for workers between the 1880s and the interwar decades, while also contributing to the development of workers' social consciousness. For Mitchell, the switch to oil from coal as the primary energy source for the global north from the 1920s onward impeded the demands of labor and constituted the basis for a form of governmentality that managed and limited the struggle for genuine democracy. The production of oil requires fewer workers than

does that of coal in relation to the amount of energy produced; oil-extraction laborers remain above ground in the sight of managers; and from the 1920s onward, 60 to 80 percent of world oil production was exported (2011: 37), which made it difficult to impact supply through strikes. Mitchell is blunt in his claim: the mass politics that emerged alongside coal was defeated by the rise of fossil-fuel networks that made mass action more difficult and changed the conditions within which class struggle took place.

The existing global networks of pipelines have not become spaces for job actions; nor have mass demonstrations next to pipelines impeded the flow of oil and gas along them, although vandalizing and destroying pipelines has proved to be an effective way for oppositional groups from Nigeria to postwar Iraq to vent their frustrations and advance their political claims.[3] Pipelines have, however, increasingly come to be figured as sites for the articulation of environmental fears, critiques, and hopes. It would be difficult—and simply wrong—to suggest that pipelines today weaken or defeat political action due to their capacity to disappear from view or to generate distance from the site of extraction and site of consumption. Politically, we appear to have come full circle, from visible coal to invisible oil to visible pipelines. Indeed, if pipelines now figure politically in ways that they never have before, it is because they index and figure the means by which infrastructure helped produce fossil fueled modernity and generate its consequences: a global society fueled by dirty energy, whose quotidian operations constitute a threat to existence.

"Every round of new pipelines and tankers and deep-water drilling rigs encumbers the next decades with an even more ponderous mass of infrastructure into which carbon has been locked: the ruts of path dependency deepen" (Malm 2016: 9). Each contributor to this special section highlights the dangers of adding to the ponderous mass of pipelines—or, in some cases, the system of oil transport that arises to make oil invisible again—and the possibilities that open up when we escape the ruts of depending on them.

Notes

1 In addition to the critical work of artist Ursula Biemann's video *Black Sea Files* (2005), major studies of the BTC project include James Marriott and Mika Minio-Paluello's *The Oil Road: Journey from the Caspian Sea to the City of London* (2013) and Andrew Barry's *Material Politics: Disputes Along the Pipeline* (2013). Barry (2009: 69) notes perceptively how the construction of the BTC at a moment of pipeline visibility has generated a new regime of "visible invisibility." In order to hide the pipeline from view, it had to be protected via "an extraordinary regime of observation: a more or less organized system of as many as ten levels of monitoring, involving both experts and non-experts."

2 For an overview and analysis of pipeline politics in Canada, see Szeman, forthcoming.

3 For reports on recent developments in Nigeria, see, for instance, News Nigeria 2016. Pipeline bombings, which were common in years following the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2001, have continued, with recent violence in Iraqi Kurdistan. See Johnson 2016.

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