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Increases in Offshore Drilling Fail to Secure a Habitable Future

The question of whether to continue down the path of climate destruction we are currently on or pivot to an emergency triage is today the most important question we face as a society. On the one hand, our current trajectory will in the short term bring us to what Naomi Klein describes as climate barbarism, the "marrying of white supremacist violence with vicious anti-immigrant racism," and an incarnation of the legacy of global colonialism (Klein "Seeing Climate Barbarism"), and in the long term we will reach extinction as a species. On the other hand, immediate and unequivocal action to change our energy consumption and production practices may still allow us some time to save the habitability of our planet. Luckily, the question has an easy answer. The U.S. should not expand offshore drilling because the environmental devastation it causes cannot be undone no matter how much money is spent to do so, the human lives that are lost due to accidents and pollution cannot soundly be assigned a monetary value to be repaid by the oil companies, and it is not a necessary means to achieve energy independence.

The damages from fossil fuel production are unable to be ameliorated and would only be exacerbated by an increase in offshore drilling. We do not as a society have the ability to completely clean up after such a massive ecological disaster as an oil spill. Even worse, the oil companies and the politicians who take their legal bribes (Wertheimer et al.), are the ones in charge of the cleanup efforts,

despite them having financial incentives to declare a rushed process complete well before it is. As Klein points out in her recounting of her journey on a science vessel searching for oil deposits after the BP oil spill, “It strikes me that there is a satisfying irony in the fact that Hollander’s cruise found oil that BP would have preferred to stay buried, given that the company indirectly financed the expedition,” (Klein “After the Spill” 17).

The damage caused by oil spills go beyond just some “oily birds,” as Bailey so nonchalantly describes these ecological problems (Bailey 1); some deleterious effects become deeply rooted in the ecological makeup of the environment. Klein emphasizes this point when explaining that the science vessel found damage to the organisms in the area, “[b]efore we left on the cruise, I interviewed [one of the scientists] in his lab; he explained that what was so ‘scary’ about these results is that such genetic damage is ‘heritable,’ meaning the mutations can be passed on.” (Klein “After the Spill” 14). Introducing a genetically inheritable mutation into aquatic organisms is a disaster that cannot reasonably be solved no matter how much money is thrown at the problem. Ultimately, an increase in fossil fuel production would make the already unsustainable climate catastrophe even worse, “[p]rojections of future climate change suggest that on a ‘business as usual’ trajectory, the average global temperature will increase by as much as 3–5 Celsius this century, a level of warming some scientists argue would be incompatible with continued organized human existence (New et al., 2011),” (Wright & Nyberg 9). Not only is ‘business as usual’ unsustainable, but a substantive increase in emissions would also drastically increase the speed at which the planet is destroyed.

As a human life is not something which can be assigned a value, the human mortality cost of oil production outweighs any incurred monetary benefits. In his article "Offshore Drilling Remains a Risk Worth Taking", Bailey mentions a study which incorporates “a Minerals Management Service estimate of $700 million as the cost of the environmental damage caused by producing 10 billion barrels of oil

offshore," (Bailey 2) and finds that "[a]t $50 per barrel the benefits of producing 10 billion barrels of offshore oil would be $323 billion greater than its costs," (Bailey 1). Cost-benefit analyses, however, are not a sound way of judging whether an action is ethical as they can obfuscate morally objectionable consequences as a mere monetary value. There is no doubt that human lives will be lost due to the negative effects of oil production, as Haskins points out: “Beyond the economic concerns, the threat to Maine’s environment could also lead to health complications among state residents. Boulos noted research has found negative health effects for workers on drilling rigs. In addition, air pollution could worsen already high rates of respiratory illness in Maine.” (Haskins 1). The $700 million estimate mentioned above includes "costs of local air pollution, and traffic congestion and accidents" (Bailey 2) which means part of this estimate is attempting to account for physical harm to people. This is a category mistake as human lives cannot have a price associated with them. There is no sound way to associate a dollar number with an arbitrary human life and consequently any cost-benefit analysis that relies on doing so is unfounded. If an argument for offshore drilling involves measuring its gross profit against a monetary valuation of damages caused by the destructive impact, then it will be unsound as it assumes the false premise that lives can be accurately included in the valuation.

If an argument for offshore drilling assumes that the only energy choices a country has are to generate its own oil production or import oil from another country, then it will be presenting a false dichotomy if alternative energy sources are extant and attainable. O'Malley points out in his article "Don't Drill Along the East Coast" that "offshore drilling fails to promote what must be our country's foremost energy policy objectives: achieving long-term energy security, creating sustainable jobs, supporting the development of new energy technologies and fighting climate change," (O'Malley 1). Green, renewable energy is a viable alternative to fossil fuel consumption, as O'Malley cites "at least 2.7 million" (O'Malley 1) potential jobs in the

industry and urges us to take "advantage of the vast economic opportunities clean energy presents," (O'Malley 2). So, any argument for offshore oil drilling needs to consider that better alternatives exist and then show that the risks of drilling outstrip the benefits of the alternatives. As a corollary, if an argument presupposes that oil production is the only plausible option, then it is unsound. Alternative, renewable, and green energy technologies and solutions exist and so we should not be resigned to expanding offshore drilling no matter the cost.

The consumption of fossil fuels has led to an environmental crisis and our current energy sector becoming unsustainable. Attempts to defend the expansion of offshore oil production fail because they assume there are no viable alternatives. Green alternatives do exist, they are viable sources of energy and jobs, and we can fund them by reallocating fossil fuel subsidies. The environmental impact offshore drilling causes cannot ever be fully mended and the human lives that are lost as a result cannot be compensated for by oil profits. Green energy is not just another option that we have, it is an option for which we have a moral imperative to choose as soon as possible. If we do not address this crisis immediately, we will careen violently into oblivion.

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