THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Capitalism vs. The Climate

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2014

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New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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BLOCKADIA

The New Climate Warriors

"Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation."

–The United Nations Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992[1]

"An honest and scrupulous man in the oil business is so rare as to rank as a museum piece."

–U.S. Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, 1936[2]

"Passport," says the cop, tear gas canisters and grenades hanging off his bulletproof vest like medals of honor. We hand over the passports, along with press passes and other papers attesting that we are nothing more exciting than a vanload of Canadian documentary filmmakers.

The riot cop takes the documents wordlessly, motioning to our translator to get out of the car. He then whispers at length to a colleague whose eyes remain fixed on the enormous biceps bulging from his own crossed arms. Another cop joins the huddle, then another. The last one pulls out a phone and painstakingly reads the names and numbers on each document to whoever is on the other end, occasionally shooting a question to our translator. More uniformed men mill nearby. I count eleven in total.

It's getting dark, the dirt road on which we have been apprehended is a mess and drops off sharply on one side. There are no streetlights.

I have the strong impression we are being deliberately screwed with—

that the whole point of this lengthy document check is to force us to drive this rough road in the dark. But we all know the rules: look pleasant; don't make eye contact; don't speak unless spoken to. Resist the impulse to take pictures of the line of heavily armed cops standing in front of coils of barbed wire (happily it turns out our camera guy was filming through his mesh hat). And Rule No. 1 on encounters with arbitrary power: do *not* show how incredibly pissed off you are.

We wait. Half an hour. Forty minutes. Longer. The sun sets. Our van fills with ravenous mosquitoes. We continue to smile pleasantly.

As far as checkpoints go, I've seen worse. In post-invasion Iraq, everyone had to submit to full pat-downs in order to get in and out of any vaguely official building. Once on the way in and out of Gaza, we were scanned eight different ways and interrogated at length by both the Israeli Defense Forces and Hamas. What's strange about what is happening on this dirt road is that we are not in a war zone, at least not officially. Nor is this a military regime, or an occupied territory, or any other place you might expect to be held and interrogated at length without cause. This is a public road in Greece, a democratic state belonging to the European Union. Moreover this particular road is in Halkidiki, a world-renowned tourist destination that attracts many thousands of visitors every year, drawn to the peninsula's stunning combination of sandy beaches, turquoise waters, olive groves, and old-growth forests filled with four-hundred-year-old beech and oak trees and dotted with waterfalls.

So what's up with all the riot police? The barbed wire? The surveillance cameras strapped to tree branches?

Welcome to Blockadia

What's up is that this area is no longer a Greek vacationland, though the tourists still crowd the white-washed resorts and oceanfront tavernas, with their blue-checked tablecloths and floors sticky with ouzo. This is an outpost of a territory some have taken to calling "Blockadia." Blockadia is not a specific location on a map but rather a roving transnational conflict zone that is cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill, whether for open-pit mines, or gas fracking, or tar sands oil pipelines.

What unites these increasingly interconnected pockets of resistance is the sheer ambition of the mining and fossil fuel companies: the fact that in their quest for high-priced commodities and higher-risk "unconventional" fuels, they are pushing relentlessly into countless new territories, regardless of the impact on the local ecology (in particular, local water systems), as well as the fact that many of the industrial activities in question have neither been adequately tested nor regulated, yet have already shown themselves to be extraordinarily accident-prone.

What unites Blockadia too is the fact the people at the forefront—packing local council meetings, marching in capital cities, being hauled off in police vans, even putting their bodies between the earth-movers and earth—do not look much like your typical activist, nor do the people in one Blockadia site resemble those in another. Rather, they each look like the places where they live, and they look like everyone: the local shop owners, the university professors, the high school students, the grandmothers. (In the quaint seaside Greek village of Ierissos, with its red roofs and lively beach promenade, when an anti-mining rally is called, the owners of the tavernas have to wait tables themselves because their entire staffs are off at the demos.)

Resistance to high-risk extreme extraction is building a global, grassroots, and broad-based network the likes of which the environmental movement has rarely seen. And perhaps this phenomenon shouldn't even be referred to as an environmental movement at all, since it is primarily driven by a desire for a deeper form of democracy, one that provides communities with real control over those resources that are most critical to collective survival—the health of the water, air, and soil. In the process, these place-based stands are stopping real climate crimes in progress.

Seeing those successes, as well as the failures of top-down environmentalism, many young people concerned about climate change are taking a pass on the slick green groups and the big U.N. summits. Instead, they are flocking to the barricades of Blockadia. This is more than a change in strategy; it's a fundamental change in perspective. The collective response to the climate crisis is changing from something that primarily takes place in

closed-door policy and lobbying meetings into something alive and unpredictable and very much in the streets (and mountains, and farmers' fields, and forests).

Unlike so many of their predecessors, who've spent years imagining the climate crisis through the astronaut's eye view, these activists have dropped the model globes and are getting lower-case earth under their nails once again. As Scott Parkin, a climate organizer with the Rainforest Action Network, puts it: "People are hungry for climate action that does more than asks you to send emails to your climate-denying congressperson or update your Facebook status with some clever message about fossil fuels. Now, a new antiestablishment movement has broken with Washington's embedded elites and has energized a new generation to stand in front of the bulldozers and coal trucks."[3] And it has taken the extractive industries, so accustomed to calling the shots, entirely by surprise: suddenly, no major new project, no matter how seemingly routine, is a done deal.

In the Skouries forest near Ierissos where our van was stopped, the catalyst was a plan by the Canadian mining company Eldorado Gold to clear-cut a large swath of old-growth forest and reengineer the local water system in order to build a massive open-pit gold and copper mine, along with a processing plant, and a large underground mine.[4] We were pulled over in a part of the forest that will be leveled to make way for a large dam and tailings pond, to be filled with liquid waste from the mining operation. It was like visiting someone who had just been given six months to live.

Many of the people who reside in the villages nearby, who depend on this mountain for freshwater, are adamantly opposed to the mine. They fear for the health of their children and livestock, and are convinced that such a large-scale, toxic industrial operation has no place in a region highly dependent on tourism, fishing, and farming. Locals have expressed their opposition through every means they can think of. In a vacation community like this, that can make for odd juxtapositions: militant marches past miniature amusement parks and heated late night political meetings in thatched-roof bars that specialize in blender drinks. Or a local cheese maker, the pride of the village for his *Guinness Book of World Records* largest ever goat cheese, arrested and held in pretrial detention for weeks. Based on circumstantial evidence, the cheese maker and other villagers were suspects in an incident in which mining trucks and bulldozers were torched by masked intruders.*[5]

Despite its remote location, the fate of the Skouries forest is a matter of intense preoccupation for the entire country. It is debated in the national parliament and on evening talk shows. For Greece's huge progressive movement, it is something of a cause célèbre: urban activists in Thessaloniki and Athens organize mass demonstrations and travel to the woods for action days and fundraising concerts. "Save Skouries" graffiti can be seen all over the country and the official opposition party, the left-wing Syriza, has pledged that, if elected, it will cancel the mine as one of its first acts in power.

The governing, austerity-enforcing coalition, on the other hand, has also seized on Skouries as a symbol. Greek prime minister Antonis Samaras has announced that the Eldorado mine will go ahead "at all costs," such is the importance of protecting "foreign investment in the country." Invoking Greece's ongoing economic troubles, his coalition has claimed that building the mine, despite the local opposition, is critical to sending a signal to world markets that the country is open for business. That will allow the nation to rapidly move ahead with a slate of other, highly controversial extractive projects currently in the pipeline: drilling for oil and gas in the Aegean and Ionian seas; new coal plants in the north; opening up previously protected beaches to large-scale development; and multiple other mining projects. As one prominent commentator put it, "This is the type of project that the country needs to overcome the economic crisis."[6]

Because of these national stakes, the state has unleashed a level of repression against the anti-mine movement that is unprecedented in Greece since the dark days of dictatorship. The forest has been transformed into a battle zone, with rubber bullets reportedly fired and tear gas so thick it caused older residents to collapse.[7] And of course the checkpoints, which are staggered along all the roads where heavy construction equipment has moved in.

But in this outpost of Blockadia, the police aren't the only ones with

* The villagers insist their struggle is committed to nonviolence and blame outsiders or even provocateurs for the arson.

checkpoints: In Ierissos, local residents set up checkpoints at each entrance to their village after over two hundred fully armed riot police marched through the town's narrow streets firing tear gas canisters in all directions; one exploded in the schoolyard, causing children to choke in class.[8] To make sure they are never taken by surprise like this again, the checkpoints are staffed by volunteers around the clock, and when police vehicles are spotted someone runs to the church and rings the bell. In moments the streets are flooded with chanting villagers.

Similar scenes, more reminiscent of civil war than political protest, are unfolding in countless other pieces of contested land around the world, all of which make up Blockadia's multiplying front lines. About eight hundred kilometers to the north of the Greek standoff, the farming village of Pungesti, Romania, was gearing up for a showdown against Chevron and its plans to launch the country's first shale gas exploration well.[9] In the fall of 2013, farmers built a protest camp in a field, carted in supplies that could hold them for weeks, dug a latrine, and vowed to prevent Chevron from drilling.

As in Greece, the response from the state was shockingly militarized, especially in such a pastoral environment. An army of riot police with shields and batons charged through the farm fields attacking peaceful demonstrators, several of whom were beaten bloody and taken away in ambulances. At one point angry villagers dismantled the fence protecting Chevron's operation, sparking more reprisals. In the village itself, riot police lined the streets like "a kind of occupying army," according to an eyewitness. Meanwhile, the roads into town were bisected with police checkpoints and a travel ban was in force, which conveniently prevented media from entering the conflict zone and even reportedly blocked residents from grazing their cattle. For their part, villagers explained that they had no choice but to stop an extraction activity that they were convinced posed a grave threat to their livelihoods. "We live on agriculture here," one local reasoned. "We need clear water. What will our cattle drink if the water gets spoiled?"[10]

Blockadia also stretches into multiple resource hot spots in Canada, my home country. For instance, in October 2013—the same time that Pungesti was in the news—a remarkably similar standoff was playing out in the province of New Brunswick, on land claimed by the Elsipogtog First Nation, a Mi'kmaq community whose roots in what is now eastern Canada go back some ten thousand years. The people of Elsipogtog were leading a blockade against SWN Resources, the Canadian subsidiary of a Texas-based company, as it tried to conduct seismic testing ahead of a possible fracking operation. The land in question has not been handed over by war or treaty and Canada's highest court has upheld the Mi'kmaq's right to continue to access the natural resources of those lands and waters—rights the protesters say would be rendered meaningless if the territory becomes poisoned by fracking toxins.[11]

The previous June, members of the First Nation had announced the lighting of a "sacred fire," a ceremonial bonfire that would burn continuously for days, and invited non-Native Canadians to join them in blockading the gas company's trucks. Many did, and for months demonstrators camped near the seismic testing area, blocking roads and equipment as hand drums pounded out traditional songs. On several occasions, trucks were prevented from working, and at one point a Mi'kmaq woman strapped herself to a pile of seismic testing gear to prevent it from being moved.

The conflict had been mostly peaceful but then on October 17, acting on an injunction filed by the company, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police moved in to clear the road. Once again, a rural landscape was turned into a war zone: more than a hundred police officers—some armed with sniper rifles and accompanied by attack dogs—fired beanbag rounds into the crowd, along with streams of pepper spray and hoses. Elders and children were attacked and dozens were arrested, including the elected chief of the Elsipogtog First Nation. Some demonstrators responded by attacking police vehicles and by the end of the day, five cop cars and one unmarked van had burned. "Native shale-gas protest erupts in violence," read a typical headline.[12]

Blockadia has popped up, too, in multiple spots in the British countryside, where opponents of the U.K. government's "dash for gas" have used a range of creative tactics to disrupt industry activities, from protest picnics blockading the road to a fracking drill site in the tiny hamlet of Balcombe,

West Sussex, to twenty-one activists shutting down a gas power station that towers over the abandoned historical village of West Burton and its beautiful river, the "silver" Trent, as Shakespeare describes it in *Henry IV*. After a daring climb, the group set up camp for more than a week atop two ninety-meter-high water cooling towers, making production impossible (the company was forced to drop a £5-million lawsuit in the face of public pressure). More recently, activists blocked the entrance to a fracking test site near the city of Manchester with a giant wind turbine blade laid on its side.[13]

Blockadia was also aboard the *Arctic Sunrise*, when thirty Greenpeace activists staged a protest in the Russian Arctic to draw attention to the dangers of the rush to drill under the melting ice. Armed Coast Guard officers rappelled onto the vessel from a helicopter, storming it commando-style, and the activists were thrown in jail for two months.[14] Originally facing charges of piracy, which carry sentences of ten to fifteen years, the international activists were all eventually freed and granted amnesty after the Russian government was shamed by a huge international campaign, which included not just demonstrations in at least forty-nine countries but pressure from numerous heads of state and eleven Nobel Peace Prize winners (not to mention Paul McCartney).

The spirit of Blockadia can be seen even in the most repressive parts of China, where herders in Inner Mongolia have rebelled against plans to turn their fossil fuel–rich region into the country's "energy base." "When it's windy, we get covered in coal dust because it's an open mine. And the water level keeps dropping every year," herder Wang Wenlin told the *Los Angeles Times*, adding, "There's really no point living here anymore." With courageous actions that have left several demonstrators dead outside the mines and blockades of coal trucks, locals have staged rolling protests around the region and have been met with ferocious state repression.[15]

It's partly due to this kind of internal opposition to coal mining that China imports increasing amounts of coal from abroad. But many of the places where its coal comes from are in the throes of Blockadia-style uprisings of their own. For instance, in New South Wales, Australia, opposition to new coal mining operations grows more serious and sustained by the month. Beginning in August 2012, a coalition of groups established what they call the "first blockade camp of a coal mine in Australia's history,"

where for a year and a half (and counting) activists have chained themselves to various entrances of the Maules Creek project—the largest mine under construction in the country, which along with others in the area is set to decimate up to half of the 7,500-hectare (18,500 acre) Leard State Forest and to wield a greenhouse gas footprint representing more than 5 percent of Australia's annual emissions, according to one estimate.[16]

Much of that coal is destined for export to Asia, however, so activists are also gearing up to fight port expansions in Queensland that would hugely increase the number of coal ships sailing from Australia each year, including through the vulnerable ecosystem of the Great Barrier Reef, a World Heritage Site and the earth's largest natural structure made up of living creatures. The Australian Marine Conservation Society describes the dredging of the ocean floor to make way for increased coal traffic as an "unprecedented" threat to the fragile reef, which is already under severe stress from ocean acidification and various forms of pollution runoff.[17]

This is only the barest of sketches of the contours of Blockadia—but no picture would be complete without the astonishing rise of resistance against virtually any piece of infrastructure connected to the Alberta tar sands, whether inside Canada or in the United States.

And none more so than TransCanada's proposed Keystone XL pipeline. Part of the broader Keystone Pipeline System crisscrossing the continent, the first phase of the project, known as Keystone 1, got off to an inauspicious start. In its first year or so of operation, pump stations along the pipeline spilled tar sands oil fourteen times in the U.S. Most spills were small, but two of the biggest forced the entire pipeline to shut down twice in a single month. In one of these cases, a North Dakota rancher woke up to the sight of an oil geyser surging above the cottonwood trees near his farm, remarking that it was "just like in the movies when you strike oil and it's shooting up." If Keystone XL is constructed in full (the southern leg, from Oklahoma to export terminals on the Texas coast, is already up and running), the $7 billion project will add a total of 2,677 kilometers of new pipeline running through seven states and provinces, delivering up to 830,000 barrels per day of mostly tar sands oil to Gulf Coast refineries and export terminals.[18]

It was Keystone that provoked that historic wave of civil disobedience in Washington, D.C., in 2011 (see page 139), followed by what were then

the largest protests in the history of the U.S. climate movement (more than 40,000 people outside the White House in February 2013). And it is Keystone that brought together the unexpected alliance of Indigenous tribes and ranchers along the pipeline route that became known as "the Cowboy and Indian alliance" (not to mention unlikely coalitions that brought together vegan activists who think meat is murder with cattle farmers whose homes are decorated with deer heads). In fact the direct-action group Tar Sands Blockade first coined the term "Blockadia" in August 2012, while planning what turned into an eighty-six-day tree blockade challenging Keystone's construction in East Texas. This coalition has used every imaginable method to stop the pipeline's southern leg, from locking themselves inside a length of pipe that had not yet been laid, to creating a complex network of treehouses and other structures along the route.[19]

In Canada, it was the Northern Gateway pipeline, being pushed by the energy company Enbridge, that similarly awoke the sleeping giant of latent ecological outrage. The 1,177-kilometer pipe would begin near Edmonton, Alberta, and carry 525,000 barrels of mostly diluted tar sands oil per day across roughly one thousand waterways, passing through some of the most pristine temperate rainforest in the world (and highly avalanche-prone mountains), finally ending in a new export terminal in the northern British Columbia town of Kitimat. There the oil would be loaded onto supertankers and then navigated through narrow Pacific channels that are often battered by ferocious waves (resorts in this part of B.C. market winter as "storm-watching" season). The sheer audacity of the proposal—putting so much of Canada's most beloved wilderness, fishing grounds, beaches, and marine life at risk—helped give birth to an unprecedented coalition of Canadians who oppose the project, including a historic alliance of Indigenous groups in British Columbia who have vowed to act as "an unbroken wall of opposition from the U.S. border to the Arctic Ocean," to stop any new pipeline that would carry tar sands oil through their collective territory.[20]

The companies at the centers of these battles are still trying to figure out what hit them. TransCanada, for instance, was so sure it would be able to push through the Keystone XL pipeline without a hitch that it went ahead and bought over $1 billion worth of pipe. And why not? President Obama has an "all of the above" energy strategy, and Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper called the project a "no-brainer." But instead of the rubberstamp TransCanada was expecting, the project sparked a movement so large it revived (and reinvented) U.S. environmentalism.[21]

Spend enough time in Blockadia and you start to notice patterns. The slogans on the signs: "Water is life," "You can't eat money," "Draw the line." A shared determination to stay in the fight for the long haul, and to do whatever it takes to win. Another recurring element is the prominent role played by women, who often dominate the front lines, providing not only powerful moral leadership but also some of these movements' most enduring iconography. In New Brunswick, for instance, the image of a lone Mi'kmaq mother, kneeling in the middle of the highway before a line of riot police, holding up a single eagle feather went viral. In Greece, the gesture that captured hearts and minds was when a seventy-four-year-old woman confronted a line of riot police by belting out a revolutionary song that had been sung by the Greek resistance against German occupation. From Romania, the image of an old woman wearing a babushka and holding a knobby walking stick went around the world under the caption: "You know your government has failed when your grandma starts to riot."[22]

The various toxic threats these communities are up against seem to be awakening impulses that are universal, even primal—whether it's the fierce drive to protect children from harm, or a deep connection to land that had been previously suppressed. And though reported in the mainstream press as isolated protests against specific projects, these sites of resistance increasingly see themselves as part of a global movement, one opposing the latest commodities rush wherever it is taking place. Social media in particular has allowed geographically isolated communities to tell their stories to the world, and for those stories, in turn, to become part of a transnational narrative about resistance to a common ecological crisis.

So busloads of anti-fracking and anti-mountaintop-removal activists traveled to Washington, D.C., to protest the Keystone XL pipeline, knowing they are up against a common enemy: the push into ever more extreme and high-risk forms of fossil fuel. Communities in France, upon discovering that their land has been leased to a gas company for something called "hydraulic fracturing"—a previously unknown practice in Europe—got in contact with French-speaking activists in Quebec, who had successfully won a

moratorium against the practice (and they, in turn, relied heavily on U.S. activists, in particular the documentary film *Gasland*, which has proved to be a potent global organizing tool).*[23] And eventually the entire global movement came together for a "Global Frackdown" in September 2012, with actions in two hundred communities in more than twenty countries, with even more participating a year later.

Something else unites this network of local resistance: widespread awareness of the climate crisis, and the understanding that these new extraction projects—which produce far more carbon dioxide, in the case of the tar sands, and more methane, in the case of fracking, than their conventional counterparts—are taking the entire planet in precisely the wrong direction. These activists understand that keeping carbon in the ground, and protecting ancient, carbon-sequestering forests from being clear-cut for mines, is a prerequisite for preventing catastrophic warming. So while these conflicts are invariably sparked by local livelihood and safety concerns, the global stakes are never far from the surface.

Ecuadorian biologist Esperanza Martínez, one of the leaders of the movement for an "oil-free Amazon," asks the question at the heart of all of these campaigns: "Why should we sacrifice new areas if fossil fuels should not be extracted in the first place?" Indeed, if the movement has a guiding theory, it is that it is high time to close, rather than expand, the fossil fuel frontier. Seattle-based environmental policy expert KC Golden has called this "the Keystone Principle." He explains, "Keystone isn't simply a pipeline in the sand for the swelling national climate movement." It's an expression of the core principle that before we can effectively solve this crisis, we have to "stop making it worse. Specifically and categorically, we must cease making large, long-term capital investments in new fossil fuel infrastructure that 'locks in' dangerous emission levels for many decades . . . step one for getting out of a hole: Stop digging."[24]

So if Obama's energy policy is "all of the above"—which effectively means full steam ahead with fossil fuel extraction, complemented with renewables around the margins—Blockadia is responding with a tough philosophy that might be described as "None of the below." It is based on the simple principle that it's time to stop digging up poisons from the deep and shift, with all speed, to powering our lives from the abundant energies on our planet's surface.

* Maxime Combes, a French economist and anti-fracking activist, observes, "The scene in the film where landowner Mike Markham ignites gas from a water faucet in his home with a cigarette lighter due to natural gas exploration in the area has had a far greater impact against fracking than any report or speech."

Operation Climate Change

While the scale and connectivity of this kind of anti-extraction activism is certainly new, the movement began long before the fight against Keystone XL. If it's possible to trace this wave back to a time and place, it should probably be the 1990s in what is surely the most oil-ravaged place on the planet: the Niger Delta.

Since the doors to foreign investors were flung open near the end of British colonial rule, oil companies have pumped hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of crude out of Nigeria, most from the Niger Delta, while consistently treating its land, water, and people with undisguised disdain. Wastewater was dumped directly into rivers, streams, and the sea; canals from the ocean were dug willy-nilly, turning precious freshwater sources salty, and pipelines were left exposed and unmaintained, contributing to thousands of spills. In an often cited statistic, an *Exxon Valdez*–worth of oil has spilled in the Delta every year for about fifty years, poisoning fish, animals, and humans.[25]

But none of this compares with the misery that is gas flaring. Over the course of extracting oil, a large amount of natural gas is also produced. If the infrastructure for capturing, transporting, and using that gas were built in Nigeria, it could meet the electricity needs of the entire country. Yet in the Delta, the multinational companies mostly opt to save money by setting it on fire, or flaring it, which sends the gas into the atmosphere in great pillars of polluting fire. The practice is responsible for about 40 percent of Nigeria's total CO_2 emissions (which is why, as discussed, some companies are absurdly trying to collect carbon credits for stopping this practice). Meanwhile, more than half of Delta communities lack electricity and running