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Water, Capitalism and Catastrophism Living Under the Shadow of a Sixth Extinction

by LOUIS PROYECT

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Two films concerned with water and environmental activism arrive in New York this week. “Groundswell Rising”, which premieres at the Maysles Theater in Harlem today, is about the struggle to safeguard lakes and rivers from fracking while “Revolution”, which opens at the Cinema Village next Wednesday, documents the impact of global warming on the oceans. Taking the holistic view, one can understand how some of the most basic conditions of life are threatened by a basic contradiction. Civilization, the quintessential expression of Enlightenment values that relies on ever-expanding energy, threatens to reduce humanity to barbarism if not extinction through exactly such energy production.

This challenge not only faces those of us now living under capitalism but our descendants who will be living under a more rational system. No matter the way in which goods and services are produced, for profit or on the basis of human need, humanity is faced with ecological constraints that must be overcome otherwise we will be subject to a Sixth Extinction. Under capitalism, Sixth Extinction is guaranteed. Under socialism, survival is possible but only as a result of a radical transformation of how society is organized, something that Marx alluded to in the Communist Manifesto when he called for a “gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equitable distribution of the populace over the country.”

“Groundswell Rising” covers some of the same ground as Josh Fox’s “Gaslandia” but is more about the activism that has taken off ever since people became aware that fracking was a threat to their health and economic well-being. While most of us are probably aware that water that catches fire is probably not a good thing to drink, PBS veteran filmmakers and brothers Matt and Renard Cohen make the case that fracking’s economic benefits are dubious at best. For every farmer or rancher who has leased his land for drilling, there are many homeowners living nearby who get nothing but the shitty end of the stick: pollution, noise and a loss of property value.

One of these homeowners in rural Pennsylvania inherited his house and land from his father who taught Craig Stevens “conservative rightwing values” but it was exactly those values that turned him into an anti-fracking activist. Rooted in a space that has belonged to his family for 180 years, Stevens was shocked to discover that Chesapeake Gas owned the mineral rights underneath his land without ever having been given access to anything on the surface. His property has become collateral damage as mud spills poured across his land from nearby hills where Chesapeake cut trees in order to create a clearing for their equipment. The noise and fumes that emanate from the drilling have destroyed his way of life, so much so that Stevens is happy to speak at rallies alongside people whose views on private property are radically different than his own.

What gives the film its power is the attention paid to people like Stevens who organized petition drives and showed up at town council meetings to voice their opposition to fracking. They look like Tea Party activists or Walmart shoppers, mostly white and plain as a barn door, but they know that they do not want drilling in their townships and are willing to fight tooth and nail to prevent it. For all of the left’s dismay about its lack of power, the film’s closing credits reveal that there are 312 local anti-fracking groups in Pennsylvania made up of exactly such people who will likely be our allies as the environmental crisis deepens.

The film benefits from a number of experts on fracking who have become increasingly politicized as the White House and its friends in the Republican Party push for fracking everywhere as part of a strategy ostensibly to make American energy-independent but more likely to increase profits for a decisive sector of the capitalist economy. Chief among them is Tony Ingraffea, a Cornell professor in the Civil and Environmental Engineering Department with a long career consulting for companies that would likely see eye to eye with the oil and gas industry. A Mother Jones profile pointed out:

Ingraffea isn’t the likeliest scientific foe of fracking. His past research has been funded by corporations and industry interests including Schlumberger, the Gas Research Institute, General Dynamics, and Northrop Grumman. His original doctoral work, in the 1970s, involved the study of “rock fracture mechanics”—in other words, how cracks in rock form and propagate, a body of knowledge that is crucial to extractive industries like oil and gas. “I spent 20, 25 years working with the oil and gas industry...helping them to figure out how best to get oil and gas out of rock,” Ingraffea explains.

But it was exactly such a background that prepared him to become a whistle-blower who now warns about the dangers of earthquakes and water contamination from fracking. Like Craig

Stevens, Tony Ingraffea came to realize that there were some things more important than corporate profits, namely the right of citizens not to be poisoned by polluted water.

Besides causing earthquakes and making water undrinkable, fracking has another downside that runs counter to the claims made for it. As an alternative to the coal burning that is responsible for greenhouse gases that cause global warming, fracking also imposes a severe toll. According to Ingraffea, up to 8 percent of the methane gas that is created as part of the natural gas extraction process leaks into the environment where it hastens global warming. Because it is 80 to 90 times more potent than coal in creating the greenhouse effect, its unintended consequences negate its advertised benefits.

Global warming's impact on the oceans is what led 36-year-old Canadian filmmaker to make "Revolution", a film that is a follow-up to the 2007 "Sharkwater". "Sharkwater" was made to protest their slaughter for shark fin soup, a delicacy in Chinese restaurants that has been reduced drastically partially as a result of the campaign the film helped to inspire.

"Revolution" emerged out of concerns that had been troubling Stewart ever since a question was posed to him during the Q&A of a screening of "Sharkwater". If all marine life is facing extinction by the end of the 21st century, what good does it do to protect sharks that cannot survive when fish beneath them on the food chain have disappeared?" The film shows Stewart scratching his head after hearing the question and failing to come up with an answer. It is the new film that now tries to provide one.

Before making films, Stewart was a photographer who worked for the Canadian Wildlife Federation's magazines. His skills with underwater photography and an undergraduate science degree were the preparation he needed to make the two films.

The first 1/3rd of "Revolution" consists of underwater footage of some of the world's best-known coral reefs, including the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. These reefs consist of millennia of accreted organic material that serves as a hub for all sorts of fishes. Without them, marine life will certainly disappear. But to Stewart's consternation, it is the coral reef that is disappearing. Without them, there will be no fish, including the shark that sits on the underwater empire's throne.

This discovery led him on a search to understand what was causing the collapse of coral reefs. It turned out that a rise in ocean temperature is to blame. While most people are familiar with the threat that carbon emissions pose to the atmosphere, it is arguably more of a threat to life underneath the water. CO₂ gas leads to acidification in ocean waters and thus the bleaching of coral reefs that finally leads to their destruction.

Once this became apparent to Stewart, he embarked on a mission to hear what global warming activists were doing and to put himself at their disposal. The fruit of this is contained in the final 1/3rd of the film as he shows up at the Climate Change Conference that took place in Cancun in 2010 where he was appalled to learn from activists that his native country was the world's leading polluter. On their behalf, he accepted the Swiftian inspired "Fossil of the Day" award for Canada, a country that is host to the Alberta Tar Sands drilling sites. Activists have fought to

close it for the same reasons that activists oppose fracking in the USA: it despoils the land and water while it increases global warming. It is the source of the natural gas that would have been transported by the Keystone XL pipeline, which was overruled by Obama but remains a threat to the environment as long as big oil and gas interests continue to buy politicians. As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton said she was “inclined” to approve Keystone XL. Does anybody think that she will do anything differently as President?

Largely as a result of the publication of books like Elizabeth Colbert’s “The Sixth Extinction” and Naomi Klein’s “This Changes Everything”, as well as a myriad of scientific reports warning about the collapse of human and animal life as the 21st century stumbles forward on a path of environmental degradation, a debate has opened up on the left about what our response should be.

In the collection “Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth”, Eddie Yuen takes issue with an “apocalyptic” streak in exactly such articles since they lead to fear and paralysis. A good deal of his article appears to take issue with the sort of analysis developed by Naomi Klein, a bugbear to many convinced of the need to defend “classical” Marxism against fearmongering. Klein is a convenient target but the criticisms could easily apply as well to Mike Davis whose reputation is unimpeachable.

Klein’s latest book has served to focus the debate even more sharply as her critics accuse her of letting capitalism off the hook. This is not how Swedish scholar Andreas Malm views Klein’s work. In an article on “The Anthropocene Myth” that appeared in Jacobin, Malm credits Klein with laying bare “the myriad ways in which capital accumulation, in general, and its neoliberal variant, in particular, pour fuel on the fire now consuming the earth system.”

He sees Klein as an alternative to those who believe that “humankind is the new geological force transforming the planet beyond recognition, chiefly by burning prodigious amounts of coal, oil, and natural gas.” Some who share this belief, according to Malm, are Marxists.

Those who adhere to the Anthropocene myth tend to elevate the use of fire as a kind of original sin. Malm quotes Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill: “The mastery of fire by our ancestors provided humankind with a powerful monopolistic tool unavailable to other species, that put us firmly on the long path towards the Anthropocene.”

This evokes the myth of Prometheus, the Greek god who was punished for bestowing fire to mankind and who was admired by Karl Marx for the words that Aeschylus attributed to him: “In simple words, I hate the pack of gods.”

While I am inclined to agree with Malm that it is the drive for profit that explains fracking and all the rest, and that the benefits of energy production are not shared equally among nations and social classes, there is still a need to examine “civilization”. If we can easily enough discard the notion of the “Anthropocene” as the cause of global warming, the task remains: how can the planet survive when the benefits of bestowing the benefits of “civilization” across the planet so that everyone can enjoy the lifestyle of a middle-class American (or German more recently) remains the goal of socialism?

Eddie Yuen was most likely alluding to this problematic by citing the 1970s Italian revolutionary graffitiL

Con la rivoluzione caviale per tutti.

(After the revolution, caviar for everyone.)

This is presented as an alternative to the call some theorists and activists for a “managed downsizing of the scale of industrial civilization.” Speaking in the name of the poor in the Global South, Yuen wonders why they should forsake automobiles, air conditioning and consumer goods in order to pay for the climate debt incurred by their former colonial masters.

Ironically, this was the same argument made in the NY Times on April 14th by Eduardo Porter in an article titled “A Call to Look Past Sustainable Development”. He refers to the West’s environmental priorities blocking the access to energy in countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Cambodia now flocking to China’s new infrastructure investment bank that will most certainly not be bothered by deforestation, river blockage by megadams, air pollution and other impediments to progress.

Porter is encouraged by the findings of the Breakthrough Institute in California that has issued an “Eco-modernist Manifesto” that, among other things, proposes the adoption of nuclear energy to reduce greenhouse emissions. Not surprisingly, the Breakthrough people urge the rapid expansion of agricultural technology in the countryside and the resettlement of displaced farmers into the city since that would reduce the environmental impact on the land by backward rural folk.

For a useful response to the Breakthrough Institute, you might read Steve Breyman’s CounterPunch article titled “Climate Change Messaging: Avoid the Truth”. Breyman is appalled by their support for nuclear energy and fracking, even if muffled.

While Eddie Yuen would certainly (I hope) not identify with such charlatans, I am afraid that there is a strain of techno-optimism that is shared by both parties. Yuen’s article is filled with allusions to Malthusianism, a tendency I have seen over the years from those who simply deny the existence of ecological limits. While there is every reason to reject Malthus’s theories, there was always the false hope offered by the Green Revolution that supposedly rendered them obsolete. In 1960 SWP leader Joseph Hansen wrote a short book titled “Too Many Babies” that looked to the Green Revolution as a solution to Malthus’s theory but it failed to account for its destructive tendencies, a necessary consequence of using chemicals and monoculture.

The real answer to Malthusianism is the reunification of city and countryside as called for by Karl Marx so as to provide crops with the natural fertilizers that were common before urban life became necessary for industrial production based on profit—in other words, capitalism. In the midst of the industrial revolution, the river Thames gave off a stench of human excrement that was unbearable for those living too close while wars were fought off the coast of Latin America to gain control of the guano necessary for crops. This contradiction persists to this day, even if it takes different forms.

Finally, on Eddie Yuen's glib reference to caviar, there's a need to understand that even if Malthus was wrong about food production, nature is not like the goose that laid the golden eggs. Caviar comes from sturgeons. The International for the Conservation of Nature warns that they are more endangered than any other marine life:

Twenty seven species of sturgeon are on the IUCN Red List with 63 percent listed as Critically Endangered, the Red List's highest category of threat. Four species are now possibly extinct.

Beluga sturgeon in the Caspian Sea is listed as Critically Endangered for the first time along with all of the other commercially important Caspian Sea species, which are the main producers of wild caviar. Beluga sturgeon populations have been decimated in part due to unrelenting exploitation for black caviar – the sturgeon's unfertilized eggs – considered the finest in the world. The other species, Russian, stellate, Persian and ship sturgeon have also suffered declines due to overfishing as well as habitat degradation in the Caspian Sea region.

How will a future society guarantee everyone a comfortable and secure life? This question is not exactly germane to the struggles we are engaged with today, but there will come a time when our grandchildren or great-grandchildren will be forced to contend with it. To think of a way in which homo sapiens and the rest of the animal and vegetable world can co-exist, however, will become more and more urgent as people begin to discover that the old way of doing things is impossible. Films such as those reviewed in this article and the debate opened by Naomi Klein's book and the question of "catastrophism" make this discussion more immediate than they have ever been. I look forward to seeing how the debate unfolds.