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Environmental Conflict, Capital as Power . . . and a Nice Trip to London

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Anti-fracking protest outside Cuadrilla's shale gas exploration site at Preston New Road, Lancashire (Saturday, 20 October 2018).

Environmental Conflict, Capital as Power . . . and a Nice Trip to London

By Adam Marshall

May 25, 2023

Postgraduate Research at Manchester Met Research Blog

<https://www.manmetpgr.co.uk/blog/05-2023/environmental-conflict-capital-as-powerand-a-nice-trip-to-london/>

In recent years, as governments and corporations have intensified their efforts to locate, extract and monetise oil, gas, and various other biophysical resources, the world has simultaneously witnessed a proliferation of [social resistance to these efforts](#). While such resistance can take many forms, it is invariably motivated by a diverse range of objections regarding the social and ecological impacts of these extractive projects. Occurring in a context of [climate and ecological breakdown, and rising inequality](#), these 'environmental conflicts' are arguably symptomatic of a wider socio-ecological crisis rooted in the prevailing [political economic order](#).

In an ideal world such conflicts – which can be extremely costly for those at the sharp end – would not need to occur in the first place. For example, Global Witness reports that 200 'land defenders' were [murdered](#) in 2021 during the course of their struggles – the vast majority of whom were located in the Global South. Although environmental activists in the Global North rarely suffer this fate, they do nevertheless still experience various forms of state-corporate [violence and surveillance](#). At the same time, however, it has also been argued that the environmental justice campaigns that emerge during these conflicts can be [powerful forces for sustainability](#). Accordingly, because these campaigns challenge the power structures and institutions that perpetuate unsustainability and social injustice, they are uniquely placed; not only to halt such projects, but to help catalyse the radical social and political economic transformations that sustainability and social

justice requires. Viewed from this perspective, investigating the political economic drivers and dynamics of environmental conflict constitutes an important area of academic enquiry; especially for researchers who also want to support transformations towards a more sustainable and socially just society.

Within the last decade or so, the proliferation of [conflicts](#) over the expansion of ‘unconventional’ oil and gas extraction (colloquially referred to as ‘fracking’) has been a particularly noteworthy development. Bursting onto the scene in the United States in the late 2000s, [the fracking revolution](#) enabled oil and gas companies to commercially access large quantities of ‘unconventional’ oil and gas that had hitherto been beyond their reach. While pro-fracking actors have heralded this development as an opportunity for a new era of prosperity based upon cheap abundant energy (a highly contentious and increasingly [questionable claim](#)), the [harmful social and ecological impacts of fracking](#) have spawned fierce social [resistance](#). For example, since 2010 the UK has witnessed an intense and dynamic [conflict over fracking](#). During this period, a coalition comprising the UK government and various fossil fuel interests mounted a concerted – albeit (so far) unsuccessful – campaign to kickstart fracking in the country in the face of significant public opposition. In my PhD thesis, which I am currently in the process of writing up, I explore the [UK fracking conflict](#) as a means of elucidating its political economic drivers and dynamics. In the process, I hope to also shed light on the political economic drivers of socio-ecological conflict and crises more broadly. To achieve these aims, my research combines a novel theory of capitalism – the [capital as power](#) (CasP) approach to political economy – with a unique mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods. While my thesis contributes primarily to debates at the intersection of [ecological economics and political ecology](#), it also aims to extend the frontiers of research on CasP.

First developed by [Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler](#), CasP represents a [highly novel political economic approach](#) which offers useful theoretical and methodological tools to help elucidate the relationship between capital(ism) and environmental conflict. CasP rejects dominant understandings of capital (both neoclassical and heterodox) that conceptualise it as a material-productive entity. CasP also rejects the assumption that it is analytically useful to separate ‘the political’ realm from the so called ‘economic’ and to sub-divide the latter into a nominal sphere of finance, money, and prices; and a real sphere of production and consumption. Instead, CasP theorises capital as a symbolic representation of power (measured in monetary units) and the dominant social institution that continually transforms and (re)orders capitalist society. Moreover, as a power institution that is inherently conflictual, capital should be understood in relative or differential (as opposed to absolute) terms. Thus, there is no capital in general, but rather the incessant construction and reconstruction of competing capitalist coalitions whose alliances are forever in flux. Although the sphere of production is still important within CasP, it represents just one domain of social relations amongst many, over which ‘dominant capital’ – the largest corporations and government agencies with which they are intertwined – must exert its power to ‘beat the average’ (thus achieving differential accumulation). Drawing heavily on CasP and his own

empirical analysis, [Tim Di Muzio](#) has argued compellingly that ‘the capitalist mode of power’ – and the ‘[petro-market civilisation](#)’ with which it is intertwined – is highly dependent on the continued expansion of the oil and gas sector. This latter argument is especially pertinent to my research on the UK fracking conflict.

Although the CasP approach has been around for more than a decade now, it is not very well-known and only a handful of academics have used it in their research. The majority of these researchers are located in Canada and are former PhD students of [Professor Jonathan Nitzan](#), who is based at York University, Toronto. As far as I am aware, there are only two other researchers in the UK who draw on CasP in their research, both of whom are based in London. For this reason, prior to applying for the [Research Support Award](#), I had not had the opportunity to discuss my research face-to-face with others knowledgeable about the CasP approach. I am therefore extremely grateful that the Research Support Award helped to facilitate such discussion by covering my expenses to travel down to London on Friday, 22 October. During this engaging trip, I had the privilege to meet with [Dr Sandy Hager](#) (Senior Lecturer in International Political Economy at City University) and [Dr Joseph Baines](#) (Senior Lecturer in International Political Economy at King’s College London) and discuss our shared research interests in CasP and the oil and gas sector. Sandy and Joseph, who both completed their PhDs in Toronto under the supervision of Jonathan Nitzan, have published many research [papers](#) that draw on the CasP framework. Sandy’s 2016 book [Public Debt, Inequality, and Power](#) (which explores the political economic implications of the 1 per cent’s increasingly concentrated ownership of the U.S. public debt) also draws heavily on CasP. I really enjoyed our informal discussion and am very grateful that they were willing to take the time to meet with me. Given Sandy and Joseph’s shared expertise on CasP and the [UK oil and gas sector](#), I have no doubt that my PhD thesis has been much-strengthened as a result of this engagement. I would also like to thank all those who generously gave up their time, knowledge, and experience for this project. I have learned so much from you all!
