Oil Is Thicker Than Water: The Global Thirst for Oil vs. the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

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Capitalism, by ignoring the finite nature of resources and by neglecting the long-term well-being of the planet...threatens our existence
Jeremy Grantham, financier (Klein, 2015: 233)

In 2012, the world utilized more than 80 million barrels of oil per day, an indication of the high dependence upon the fossil fuel around the globe, and signifying a vastly growing culture of high-carbon lifestyles (Urry, 2012). Industrial and post-industrial societies are characterised by this reliance upon oil to power lives day to day; the 20th and 21st centuries becoming defined by an abundance of oil enabling the movement of people and goods around the globe (Urry, 2012). Particularly in the 20th century, the symbol of growth, wealth, and individual mobility was the car, which gave people a sense of freedom, which hadn’t been available before.

Fitzgerald illustrates this in ‘The Great Gatsby’: “he was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with the resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American” (Fitzgerald, 1992: 41). The conception of high carbon lifestyles as ‘progressive’ is a characteristic of the ‘growth-obsessed’ culture of capitalism, in which individuals lose sight of the necessities in life whilst chasing the material (Meadows et al, 2005). Arguably, this lifestyle is reified within western society as a true representative of social existence, becoming an objective reality to so many who cannot imagine an alternative (Lukács, 1971). When people go to the oil pump to fuel their cars, this is seen as a ‘right’ of the western world: a notion that we are entitled to
the resources without thinking of the many
global and local impacts or human rights that
are ignored in order to provide the western
world with oil.

The Indigenous peoples of the world are some
of the most marginalised groups, consistently
oppressed by modernity and the demands of
rapidly developing societies around the globe. It
is estimated that there are more than 5000
distinct Indigenous peoples, making up 5% of
the global population identifying as those with
“strong cultural links to specific territories and
resources” (Jimenez et al, 2015: 69-70).

Yet due to the ignorance and
homogenising qualities of
modernisation, these traits that
Indigenous peoples possess leave
them suppressed on a global scale.
Indigenous peoples around the
globe often inhabit land that has
the potential for the extraction of
oil, for example the native Ogoni
tribe in Nigeria, and are among
those who are most
disproportionately affected by extractive
projects (Jimenez et al, 2015). The effect which
these ‘projects’ have on quality and supply of
water sources is one of the most significant
concerns, simply because it is vital to the
survival of so many Indigenous communities
who rely on the natural water sources, but
ultimately, the survival of all humankind.

Extractive projects are among the activities that
cause the most pressing changes in the quality
and availability of water for indigenous peoples,
and this is echoed through the coverage of
many conflicts between Indigenous peoples and
both governments and large corporations
(Jimenez et al, 2015).

The damages that are caused by the use of fossil
fuels, particularly oil, span much wider than
climate change, and these impacts are often
overlooked so the western world can satisfy its
need for oil, guilt-free.

A mapping exercise of
global conflicts
between Indigenous
people and mining
corporations found
that 60% had water
related impacts
(Jackson & Barber,
2015: 82). The human
right of subsistence is
simply about having the minimal conditions for
survival, such as drinking water, yet the global
consumption of oil robs Indigenous
communities around the globe of the ability to
do just that. These human rights violations stem
from a globalised need to gain control over
scarce resources, which are so highly in demand (Szabo, 2015).

As Horkheimer wrote, domination of nature requires the domination of man, in this case the Indigenous peoples (Doherty & Doyle, 2008). The highly ‘carbonised’ lifestyles that support the notion of ‘progress’ within modernity, are constructed as if representative of all people, therefore homogenous (Szabo, 2015). This leaves little space for the differing lifestyles of Indigenous peoples, and in turn their basic human rights become selfishly overlooked as not in the interests of progress.

The oil industry has a destructive life-cycle, which negatively impacts the lives of Indigenous peoples at every stage. Indigenous peoples face being displaced from their territory in order to make way for extractive purposes, and in turn the destruction of their traditional homelands on which they rely for the survival of their physical, cultural and spiritual being (Williams, 2012). The native Ogoni people of Nigeria are victims of mass human rights violations and environmental destruction when Shell (Petroleum Development Corporation) “exploited oil reserves...with no regard for the health or environment of the local communities” (Williams, 2012: 662). The processes of extraction in the region resulted in oil spills occurring with an ‘alarming rate’, as discovered by the UN (Vidal, 2016). As a result, groundwater contamination became more than 4,500 times the Nigerian recommended levels, rendering the water supply not only unusable, but dangerous for the Ogoni people (Vidal, 2016). Despite the obvious dangers, the Ogoni tribe “continue to use the water for bathing, washing and cooking because they have no alternative” (Pegg & Zabbey, 2013: 399).

Despite this, Shell’s initial offer of compensation for the residents of Boho in Nigeria for the destruction of their homeland and way of life after two oil spills in 2008 was just “50 bags of rice, 50 bags of beans, 50 bags of garri (a cassava product), 50 cartons of sugar, 50 cartons of milk powder, 50 cartons of tea, 50 cartons of tomatoes and 50 tins of groundnut oil” (Pegg & Zabbey, 2013: 401). Frustratingly, glaring disregard for human life has not tainted the global thirst for oil, particularly in the
western world, and in 2013, Shell received more revenue than any other company in the world (Klein, 2015).

The lack of justice for the Ogoni peoples, and the loss of their territory, is indicative of the individualised values of western society, which are result of neoliberal, capitalist policy. Western capitalism is more concerned with short-term success and personal gain, which creates a competitive culture in which individuals have no concern for the long-term consequences of their actions, but cannot if they are to keep up with the pace of capital accumulation within this culture (Turner et al, 2014).

The environmental imperialism of the ‘resource-hogging’ north obviously impacts the resource-rich countries of the global south, such as Nigeria (Buell, 2001, pg.63). However, the cultural genocide that is generated by these extractive practices is not limited to the global south. Human rights violations have also been witnessed within North America itself, silently displacing and polluting the territory of Native Americans.

For example, the conflict between the Standing Rock Sioux and ‘Energy Transfer Partners’ over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The pipeline itself is being constructed with the intention to transport as many as 570,000 barrels of crude oil every day from North Dakota to Illinois, travelling underneath the Missouri River, which is the primary source of drinking water for the Standing Rock Sioux (Worland, 2016). If the pipeline were to leak or rupture at any time it would have devastating impacts not only on the surrounding environment, but importantly, the source of water for the 10,000 people in the tribe (Worland, 2016). The discourse of ‘development’ which is propagated by the western interest in oil, suggests that there is a naivety to the Indigenous peoples’ way of life, which can be ‘corrected’ by industrial practices that can control nature, rather than respect and cherish nature (Doherty & Doyle, 2008). An embodiment of this ignorance, President-elect Donald Trump said “we’re going to deal with real environmental challenges, not the phony ones we’ve been hearing about” (Parker & Davenport, 2016: n.d.).

The ecological sustainability of the Indigenous peoples is based on the knowledge, which is
transmitted via oral traditions, spiritual connections with their environment and a respect for nature which is disregarded within industrial, western culture (Vaden & Salminen, 2013). The ‘holistic nature’ of this understanding and knowledge of the world is the only sustainable mode of living, and the west’s thirst to consume is destroying the only lifestyles that protect the environment in which humanity can survive (Vaden & Salminen, 2013). Fitting with the dominant and narcissistic nature of western modernity, these processes of destruction lead to a reified belief that sustainability is in fact unattainable, and thus, belief that desire for oil should take precedent over the survival of Indigenous cultures. For Vandana Shiva, the western ‘dominant knowledge systems’ deny the existence of local knowledge systems, such as that of the many Indigenous communities, producing a ‘monoculture’ (Doherty & Doyle, 2008), which will ultimately fail in protecting the natural environment in the long-term.

These neoliberal blind spots illustrate the plight of Indigenous peoples around the world, and while the western world continues to demand oil, Indigenous peoples will continue to pay the price. It is vital that non-Natives become aware of the institutions in place which attempt to erase Indigenous culture, marginalise Indigenous communities and in turn separate Native peoples from their connections with the land and the natural resources which sustain them. Indigenous peoples do not possess the political power or monetary resources to enable them to enforce their rights, and need recognition and solidarity. To quote Faith Gemmill, “you cannot separate environmental impacts from subsistence impacts, for they are the same” (Klein, 2015: 376). If the world continues in this manner, not only will we lose valuable lives and cultures, but the plight of Indigenous peoples will become the plight of everyone. Once we credit water with the value we associate with oil, then constructive change can occur.
Bibliography


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