

Tar Sands or Tarred Sense: The Political Economy of Environmentalist Thought
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Capitalism has provoked an ecological crisis by subordinating the necessary conditions for life on this planet to the domination of the market and profit. Each year, the world consumes a third more than what the planet is capable of regenerating. At this rate of wastage by the capitalist system, we are going to need two planets by the year 2030.

Document of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), April 2009¹

The response of some [critics of high-paced oil sands development] is that we “touch the brake”. That approach has been rejected by my government. It’s my belief that when government attempts to manipulate the free market – bad things happen.

Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach, June 2007²

Political economists have often contemplated the relationship between the material mode of production and the subjective structure of society that characterizes cultural and political thought. Does the former “condition” the latter, as Marx suggested in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,³ or was his claim tainted by “economic determinism”, as some critics have argued? By examining mainstream environmentalist thought – a phenomenon that has taken over civil society by storm in recent years – it is possible to witness a more dialectical relationship between materiality and subjectivity. That is, the forces and relations of production play a role in conditioning the way we think, culturally, about political issues such as the environment, and yet the same conditioning works in the opposite direction. How else can one explain such starkly different environmentalist beliefs as those showcased (in the prologue above) by the socialist member states of ALBA on the one hand, and the neoliberal capitalist

¹ Socialist Voice (Translation), “Document of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA) countries for the 5th Summit of the Americas,” Cumaná: April 17, 2009.

² Premier Ed Stelmach, “Speeches: Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) Oil and Gas Investment Symposium,” Calgary, June 19th, 2007.

³ Marx, Karl, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Originally written in 1859), Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.

province of Alberta on the other? It is clear that both the new left in Latin America and the neoliberal right in North America understand the ecological crisis to be inseparable from the way we structure society, both politically and economically. For the former, however, the task is to challenge capitalism and seek a new mode of production that exists in harmony with the planet's health, while for the latter the goal is to reproduce capitalist production by dressing the free market in 'green' clothing.

In a neoliberal capitalist country such as Canada, mainstream environmentalist thought is thus arguably conditioned by capitalist forces of production. In turn, market-based environmentalisms must be seen as helping to reproduce the capitalist mode of production in its supposedly 'ecologically sustainable' form. This raises the question: What is the mechanism whereby this mutual conditioning happens? Put differently, how is environmentalist thought transformed for the purpose of strengthening capitalism, and why should this process be of interest to political economists? This paper takes as a starting point the need to critically analyze the way mainstream "common sense" environmentalism takes shape in capitalist societies. I use the tar sands of Alberta as a case study, as it offers one of the best examples of the processes employed to shape the formation of capitalist environmentalism. Building upon Antonio Gramsci's terms "common sense", "good sense", and "transformism", I argue that the dominant form of environmentalism in Alberta – which I henceforth call "common sense environmentalism" – is incapable of yielding genuine ecological sustainability precisely because it is conditioned by (and helps to reproduce) the neoliberal policies that have characterized the province's political economy and that have enabled the development of the tar sands in the first place. In drawing normative conclusions, this paper argues that "good sense environmentalism" – an alternative environmentalism that poses a serious threat to the hegemony of neoliberalism in

Alberta – has in fact been co-opted and neutralized through a process best understood as “environmental transformism”. As a result, common sense environmental legislation is rendered impotent and is destined to fail in its attempts to curb the ongoing degradation of the natural environment caused by the province’s synthetic crude oil production. Finally, the implications of this case study would suggest that the transformism of environmental thought within capitalist societies spells disaster for the prospects of an ecologically sound future, and reminds us of the importance of working towards a post-capitalist mode of production if we are to adequately address the world’s environmental crises.

An Environmental Puzzle

In a public relations pamphlet produced in March 2008, the Government of Alberta claimed to have “shown leadership through legislation and policies involving land reclamation, water controls, air quality, and human ecosystem health.”⁴ In reviewing the province’s environmental programs and regulations, the claim can be considered entirely truthful, as the following examples demonstrate: Alberta was the first of any province or state in North America to legislate mandatory greenhouse gas reductions for large industrial emitters (companies that emit more than they are allocated have to pay a per tonne fee); The province has strong land reclamation policies that require tar sands companies to restore land to the way it was before development (including setting aside the capital required to carry out reclamation projects *before* any development occurs); The Lower Athabasca River Water Management Framework, a joint-program of the Provincial and Federal Governments, monitors the river’s water levels and forces oil sands companies to limit their withdrawals when the flow is below acceptable levels; Demonstration projects to limit excessive fresh water withdrawals have been put into place by oil companies like Petro Canada – which recycles municipal wastewater from the City of

⁴ Government of Alberta, “Alberta’s Oil Sands: Opportunity: Balance.” March 2008. p. 4.

Edmonton;⁵ The province works with regional municipalities to monitor air quality to alert residents when harmful gases are released; Finally, Alberta's official climate change plan intends to promote energy conservation, green energy production and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies in order to reduce the province's 2050 Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to 14 per cent below 2005 levels. As part of the province's environmental action plan, the government has already invested \$2 billion in CCS infrastructure, as well as another \$2 billion for the Green Transit Incentives Program (Green TRIP), which will improve and expand local and regional transit systems.⁶ The list of environmental policies, programs, and initiatives goes on.

However, the fact that Alberta's environmental framework looks so impressive on paper is puzzling. It is puzzling because the hard facts and environmental indicators suggest an entirely different picture than that on paper: First, the notorious wastewater holding areas used by tar sands companies, the "tailings ponds" (lakes of toxic sludge containing polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and naphthenic acids, so massive that they are visible from space) continue to grow exponentially.⁷ Second, as exemplified in the highly publicized tragedy last May when a flock of some 500 migrating ducks drowned after landing in Syncrude's tailings pond shows,⁸ and as the 50% decline in populations of endangered woodland caribou and 80% decline in some Boreal bird species proves,⁹ the tar sands have a negative impact on wildlife habitats and the region's biodiversity. Third, the water withdrawals from the Athabasca River have frequently exceeded

⁵ Petro Canada, "Oil Sands", *Petro-Canada.ca*, Found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.petro-canada.ca/en/environsociety/4548.aspx>

⁶ Alberta Energy, "Carbon Capture and Storage," Found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.energy.gov.ab.ca/Initiatives/1438.asp>

⁷ Andrew Nikiforuk, *The Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2008).

⁸ CBC, "Few survivors after 500 ducks take dip in Alberta oilsands waste," *CBC.ca*, (April 30, 2008), Found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/edmonton/story/2008/04/30/ducks-follo.html>

⁹ Simon Dyer and Richard Schneider, *Death By a Thousand Cuts*, The Pembina Institute and CPAWS, 2006.

natural limits. As the Pembina Institute notes, current oil sands operations divert 349 million cubic meters of water from the river each year (equivalent to double the amount of water used in the city of Calgary). Fourth, as the Nune Health Board Society in Fort Chipewyan has found, there appear to be elevated levels of arsenic, phenols and lead in water, plants, fish and wildlife downstream from the tar sands (also suggesting a potential link to the high rate of rare bile duct cancer in the Fort Chipewyan community).¹⁰ Fifth, if industry plans are carried-out in the tar sands, we will eventually see a 140-square kilometer area of boreal forest (an area the size of Florida), entirely destroyed by clear-cutting for mining operations, or by the construction of seismic lines, roads and pipelines for in situ operations.¹¹ Finally, the annual production of some 50 Megatonnes of carbon dioxide makes the tar sands the largest single contributor of GHG emissions in the country, producing nearly 3.5% of Canada's total.¹² In sum, the environmental impacts of growing tailings ponds, species loss, increasing water withdrawals, decreasing water quality, deforestation, and growing greenhouse gas emissions seem to contradict the environmental initiatives depicted above.

How can we resolve this puzzle? How do we make sense of this trade off between strict environmental policies on the one hand and continued environmental degradation on the other? How is it that a strong environmental policy and legislative framework has failed to bring about genuine ecological improvements in the province of Alberta? In order to address this puzzle, I argue that it is necessary to reintegrate environmental politics with critical analyses of political

¹⁰ Jessica Kalman, "Downstream from the tar sands, people are sick, dying," *The CCPA Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (October 2008): p. 24 and Meera Kaunanathan, "Poisoned Waterways: Alberta Tar Sands Development Threatens Local Watersheds," *Canadian Perspectives*, (Autumn 2008), p. 10.

¹¹ International Boreal Conservation Campaign, "Canada's Tar Sands: America's #1 Source of Oil has Dangerous Global Consequences" (Factsheet). Found on the World Wide Web at www.interboreal.org

¹² Matthew McCulloch, Marlo Reynolds and Rich Wong, *Carbon Neutral 2020: A Leadership Opportunity in Canada's Oil Sands*, (Drayton Valley: Pembina Institute, 2006): p. 5. The tar sands emissions accounted for 3.4% of Canada's total emissions in 2003 and are projected to contribute 41-47% of the business-as-usual growth in Canada's total annual emissions between 2003 and 2010. See also Government of Canada: Table A11-18 1990-2006 GHG Emission Summary for Alberta http://www.ec.gc.ca/pdb/ghg/inventory_report/2006_report/ta11_18_eng.cfm

economy. This is by no means a new suggestion: Eco-Marxists have been pointing to the inherent political economic nature of the environmental crisis for decades.¹³ Along these lines, Frank Richter and Michael Black proclaimed in *Greening Environmental Policy: The Politics of a Sustainable Future* (1995), that “the pursuit of sustainability cannot proceed without significant changes in our economic enterprises, public institutions and personal lives,” thus calling for new types of environmental policies to address hard issues within the realm of political economy, such as our social conceptualization and valorization of the meanings of economic growth, progress, wealth, consumption and production.¹⁴

The Hegemony of Neoliberalism in Alberta

First, however, it is necessary to identify the nature of our existing political economy. In a Gramscian sense it is possible to see how Alberta’s mode of production has come to be characterized by neoliberalism. Dennis Soron explains how Albertans, for the last 15 years, have offered “consent” for a “neo-liberal programme of economic deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity, and democratic downsizing,” thereby declaring neoliberalism as the hegemonic ideology in the province.¹⁵ A recent collection of essays compiled by Trevor W. Harrison relentlessly details the variety of neoliberal attacks on the public interest in Alberta, including the government’s attempts to privatize health care, the tourism industry, public radio, and liquor stores; the disastrous deregulation of electricity and natural gas sectors; the protection of private companies when in conflict with citizens’ advocacy groups; the marketization of precious water resources; the outright attack on labour organizations; the use of civic funds to construct a public

¹³ For a seminal eco-Marxist critique see James O’Connor’s “The Second Contradiction of Capitalism”, pp. 197-221 of Ted Benton [Editor], *The Greening of Marxism*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1996. (Essay originally published in 1988).

¹⁴ Frank Fischer and Michael Black (Editors) *Greening Environmental Policy: The Politics of a Sustainable Future*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press): back cover.

¹⁵ Dennis Soron. “The Politics of De-Politicization: Neo-Liberalism and Popular Consent in Alberta,” pp. 65 – 81 in Harrison, Trevor W. Harrison [Editor], *The Return of the Trojan Horse: Alberta and the New World (Dis)Order*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2005): p. 66.

relations body for the Conservative Party; and the adoption of extreme fiscal austerity. Since the early 1990s, Alberta has arguably become a neoliberal “capitalist paradise”.¹⁶ Perhaps it has been put best by the forefather of Alberta’s neoliberal ideology, former Premier Ralph Klein, when he reflected on his legacy: “The next Alberta will continue to rely on the economic and fiscal policies that have served the province so well: no deficits, no debt, low taxes, economic stability, and the constant elimination of red tape and regulation, which together have attracted tremendous private sector investment.”¹⁷

In turn, the tar sands themselves serve as a crucial politico-economic space where neoliberal policies are prominently exercised in Alberta. However, the full ‘neoliberalization’ of the tar sands has required the commitment of *both* the province and the federal state: The former has ensured that access to bitumen is controlled by the free market, and has conceived of a framework through which rights to the ownership of bitumen reserves can be allocated to private interests. The state, on the other hand, has negotiated trade deals to try to minimize tariffs or trade barriers faced by Canadian energy exports imposed by the United States, and it has ensured that its border remains open to inbound capital flows. Both the state and province have attempted to attract private and foreign investment by maintaining a relatively low corporate and property tax regime and (in the case of the Bank of Canada) by trying to manipulate the exchange rate of the Canadian dollar.

The first steps towards neoliberalizing the oil sector at the federal level took place in the mid-1980s when Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservative Party enacted the Canada Petroleum Resources Act and later signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement with the United

¹⁶ “Worldbeaters: Ralph Klein,” *New Internationalist*, (November 2002, Issue 351), Downloaded from the World Wide Web at <http://www.newint.org/columns/worldbeaters/2002/11/01/ralph-klein/>

¹⁷ As quoted in James M. Byrne, “Silent Lies and Alberta’s Looming Water Crisis,” pp. 173-189 in Harrison, Trevor W. [Editor], *The Return of the Trojan Horse: Alberta and the New World (Dis)Order*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2005): p. 173.

States. The 1985 Act was designed to dismantle Pierre Trudeau’s National Energy Program and overturn his “made-in-Canada” price for synthetic crude oil. This had the effect of increasing investment prospects as the profit margin for pioneering tar sands companies like Syncrude and Suncor grew substantially (since the international market price at the time was significantly higher than the federally-mandated price). However, the tar sands resurgence was short lived, as the international price of oil plummeted in 1986 to under \$10 per barrel. Meanwhile, Mulroney attempted to repair Canada’s relationship with foreign investors and American-based oil companies, claiming on one trip to the United States that “Canada is open for business again.”¹⁸ Finally, Mulroney dismantled the Foreign Investment Review Agency and replaced it with Investment Canada, whose goal it was to specifically seek out overseas investors.¹⁹ These actions initiated the neoliberal trend on a federal level, which continues to this day, by thoroughly uprooting Trudeau’s nationalist approach to the extraction, production and even the distribution of the country’s energy resources. In fact, all federal governments since the late 1980s have towed the neoliberal line – even subsequent Liberal governments led by Jean Chrétien (1993-2003) and Paul Martin (2003-2006). Both of these leaders, for example, played a key role in negotiating and instituting the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the so-called ‘proportional energy sharing’ clause within it, which according to the federal government, is specifically designed to “prevent the Canadian government from implementing policies that interfere with the normal functioning of energy markets in North America.”²⁰ In other words, NAFTA legally prevents the federal government and even provincial governments from enacting legislation that contravenes the neoliberalization of energy markets.

¹⁸ Paul Chastko, *Developing Alberta’s Oil Sands: From Karl Clark to Kyoto*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004): p. 200.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Michael Holden, *Canadian Oil Exports to the United States Under NAFTA*, November 16, 2006. Found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/prb0633-e.htm>

The neoliberalization of the tar sands has also been pursued at the provincial level. Former Alberta Premier Ralph Klein dedicated his years in office towards rebuilding the province's heavy oil industry that had dwindled in the 1980s, by joining the private sector in giving "sustained attention to three areas... the regulatory environment, technological developments, and the search for markets."²¹ To put it bluntly, the business regulations for developers were stripped bare, and markets were actively sought in the United States. The province's Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB), whose stated mission it is "to ensure that the discovery, development and delivery of Alberta's energy resources take place in a manner that is fair, responsible and in the *public interest*,"²² has in fact never fully turned down an application to extract oil and gas resources put forth by a major energy company. In fact, the ERCB, notes journalist Andrew Nikiforuk, is largely funded by the oil industry and staffed by lawyers and engineers from the energy sector.²³

The extremely low royalty rate and competitive tax regime in Alberta is another crucial element of Klein's neoliberal effort to invite private and foreign investment to the tar sands. While assuring Albertans that they were getting their fair share of the economic value of the massive resource, Alberta's ambassador to the United States, Murray Smith, was trying to sell the tar sands to investors there by appealing to the practically non-existent tax and royalty structure: "The royalty structure for oil sands is we 'give it away' at a one per cent."²⁴ The province also maintains one of the lowest tax rates in the world, and despite theoretically owning the resource on a constitutional level, earns less from corporate taxes in the tar sands than does

²¹ Chastko, *Developing...*, p. 197.

²² ERCB, "About the ERCB" *Energy Resources Conservation Board*. Downloaded from the World Wide Web at http://www.ercb.ca/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_299_260_0_43/http%3B/ercbContent/publishedcontent/publish/ercb_home/about_the_ercb/ *Emphasis added*.

²³ Nikiforuk, *The Tar Sands*, p. 28.

²⁴ As quoted in Nikiforuk, *The Tar Sands*, p. 141.

the federal government. Within a span of 20 years (between 2000 to 2020), the Canadian Energy Research Institute notes that the federal government will earn \$51 billion from taxing the oil sands while the province will earn just \$44 billion. And yet EnCana – just one of dozens of private corporations involved in the tar sands – recorded \$6.4 billion in annual profits in just one year (2007), *after* paying royalties and taxes and recovering costs!²⁵ The province advertises itself as a business-friendly regime with fresh opportunities to invest in the resource sector: “Alberta is blessed with an abundance of natural advantages that form the foundation of its thriving economy. The Alberta government has built on this foundation by fostering a positive business climate based on low taxation that attracts investment, creates diversity, and encourages Alberta businesses to compete successfully around the globe.”²⁶ Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s the business model in the tar sands called for large mega-projects “financed by government loans” and domestic sources, by the early 1990s the federal and provincial governments largely withdrew funding from the oil industry, causing corporations to turn solely to private investors: “No longer would the Province of Alberta be involved directly in oil sands projects. Instead, Edmonton would strive to create a favourable investment climate for the *private sector* to continue research and development.”²⁷ Finally, The federal government and the province of Alberta joined forces in 1993 to launch the National Oil Sands Task Force, along with oil industry representatives. The Task Force published *The Oil Sands: A New Energy Vision for Canada*, which put forth a plan to entice private investment in the oil sands by enacting changes to the financial regulations at the provincial and federal levels. Among the report’s eight “levers

²⁵ Extrapolating over a twenty-year period, the one corporation would earn \$128 billion, much more than even the provincial and federal governments combined would make from taxing all tar sands companies. Nikiforuk, *The Tar Sands*, p. 142-145.

²⁶ “Alberta Economic Quick Facts,” *AlbertaCanada.com*, Edmonton: Alberta Finance and Enterprise, November 2008. Downloaded from the World Wide Web at <http://www.albertacanada.com/statpub/1172.html>

²⁷ Chastko, *Developing...*, p. 198. *Emphasis added.*

of development” for the oil sands were the creation of a “market –driven” system of production, the introduction of “competitive and fixed royalty and taxation regimes”, an effort to acquire a “diverse, *internationally based* capital finance formation”; and “aggressive national and *international* marketing for bitumen and oil sands products.”²⁸ The report anticipated that such a neoliberal financing structure would “attract capital from a wide range of sources, including banks, insurance, mutual funds, and the equity markets.”²⁹

The neoliberal policies of Alberta, when combined with those policies of the federal government and the growing international market price of oil, have created a financing structure that is so favourable to private and foreign capital as to have caused a major boom in oil production by the mid-1990s. In the last two decades, production of synthetic crude oil has quadrupled. The intensity of bitumen production already makes the tar sands the largest single energy project in the world, and yet output of synthetic crude oil is scheduled to double over the next decade reaching approximately 500 million barrels in 2017.³⁰ Major growth in tar sands operations in the last fifteen years have seen the expansion of a network of pipelines and bitumen upgrading facilities, the arrival of 700,000 workers from all over the world, and impressive infrastructural growth in oil communities such as Fort McMurray.³¹ In short, coupled with federal laws on free trade and attempts to attract foreign investment, the provincial and federal regulatory framework for oil production, financing and exportation effectively render the tar sands a shining example of neoliberal policy in practice.³²

²⁸ Ibid., p. 216. *Emphasis added.*

²⁹ Ibid., p. 218.

³⁰ ERCB, *ST98-2008: Alberta’s Energy Reserves 2007 and Supply/Demand Outlook 2008-2017*, (Calgary: Energy Resources Conservation Board, June, 2008): p. 3.

³¹ Nikiforuk, *The Tar Sands*, p. 24.

³² A quick caveat is thus in order: The projection of a *deregulated* ‘neoliberal’ tar sands may seem contradictory given that preceding paragraphs conjured up an impressive environmental policy framework that guides oil development in the province. The caveat is that this theoretical puzzle is precisely the dilemma that emerges when

Common Sense and Good Sense Environmentalisms

Both Alberta's mode of production and the tar sands themselves can be said to be dominated by neoliberal beliefs. This would seem to suggest that environmental opinions regarding the tar sands must also be characterized by the province's hegemonic political economy. We can use Gramsci's theoretical perspective to help shed light on how different types of environmentalism(s) can be borne from different politico-economic ideologies. Ideas, for Gramsci, become dominant, or "hegemonic", when they acquire the general acquiescence of the polity in question: "Hegemony is a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of *consent* by means of political and ideological leadership".³³ Of course, acquiring "consent" within civil society has always been easier for the capital class, given the impressive financial resources it has, the louder voice it usually has within a corporate-owned media, and the close associations and ties it has within government. In addition, capital has its own set of powerful "organic intellectuals" helping to disseminate and reinforce dominant ideologies (such as the lawyers, professors, consultants, etc., who work in the interests of capital).³⁴

The neoliberal development of the tar sands can arguably be said to encompass what Gramsci would have called "common sense", given how this development philosophy has become normalized. He defined common sense as "the traditional popular conception of the world" or "the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude".³⁵ Gramsci's "common sense" refers the body of ideas that are dominant within civil society. In short, if civil society is the space where hegemony is built, then common sense is a representative map of the hegemonic ideology. The

studying the oil sector – how it is that oil companies and oil investors appear to operate *de facto* as if there were no regulations in an atmosphere that is in fact marked, *de jure*, by an impressive set of regulations!

³³ Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., 1982): p. 22. *Emphasis added.*

³⁴ For an excellent Gramscian analysis of corporate elites and the "organic intellectuals" of the capital class in Canada, see William K. Carroll, *Corporate Power in a Globalizing World*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

³⁵ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith [Editors and Translators], *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers): p. 199, 421.

task of progressive thought, according to Gramscian theory, is to “disarticulate the reactionary elements of common sense from the positive strands within it” and thereby advocate a turn to “good sense”.³⁶ As David Harvey puts it, “Common sense is constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as the ‘good sense’ that can be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day. Common sense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices.”³⁷ In turn, the ‘common sense’ narrative on oil development provided by the hegemony of neoliberal political economic thought has had a definitive influence on the sociological formation of environmental thought in the province. We can thus refer to this brand of environmentalism as “common sense environmentalism”. In short, common sense environmentalism in Alberta is presently defined by a belief that neoliberal capitalist economic growth can be achieved in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Indeed, the social discourse on Alberta’s oil industry within civil society (at least the discourse which can be captured within news stories, media reports, blogs and various journals and publications) is dichotomized into two environmental narratives – one portraying the tar sands as an environmental disaster and the other depicting it as a sustainable development project. Presently, the latter narrative is winning the so-called “battle of ideas”.³⁸ In part, this is because the provincial government has allocated \$25 million in 2008 towards a public relations campaign designed to inform critics and American consumers alike about all the ‘green’

³⁶ Steve Jones, *Antonio Gramsci* (London: Routledge, 2006): p. 54.

³⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): p. 39.

³⁸ This does not necessarily indicate that a majority of people agree with this narrative. Rather, in the Gramscian sense, the sustainable development narrative is “hegemonic” in that it has acquired the “consent” of the polity. Signs of change are afoot, however. A forthcoming publication of *National Geographic* (March 2009) contains a 24-page spread featuring the tar sands, which the Government of Alberta views as a public relations disaster of unprecedented magnitude, given the magazine’s worldwide readership of 50 million people. See Don Martin, “National Geographic delivers a PR hell to Alberta,” *National Post*, February 24, 2009.

initiatives that are taking place in the tar sands.³⁹ The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), a lobby group representing the tar sands corporations, also goes to great lengths to demonstrate such green projects.⁴⁰ However, another reason is that Albertans, generally speaking, deeply care about the environment, and there exists a notable cultural appreciation for nature and ecology in the province. Personal discussions with farmers, students, members of the NGO community – and even Alberta’s government employees and workers making a living in the oil and gas industry – reveal that Albertans are highly aware of the environmental impacts caused by the production and consumption of fossil fuels, and therefore are keen to promote ‘green’ processes for bitumen extraction and upgrading. While environmentalist beliefs are hard to measure on account of their intangibility, perhaps evidence of the existence of this ecological sentiment can be found within the recent federal election of 2008, when the Green Party’s vote share in Alberta (8.78%) was higher than all other provinces in Canada, with the exception of British Columbia (9.4%).⁴¹ What is important to note here is the way that neoliberal ideas of sustainable development have come to be accepted as “common sense” in Alberta, and that in turn, a particular brand of environmentalism has emerged as a result.

One of the best examples of common sense environmentalism is found in an Alberta government publication titled “Alberta’s Oil Sands: Opportunity. Balance.” As the title suggests, the booklet is designed to convince skeptics that the development of the tar sands can be carried out in an environmentally responsible manner. Its main argument is that “environmental

³⁹ CBC, “Alberta warns U.S. will pay more for fuel it if snubs oilsands,” *CBC News*, (Thursday, June 26, 2008), Downloaded from the World Wide Web at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/story/2008/06/26/oil.html>

⁴⁰ As exemplified by the free green tour they organized for Warren Buffet and Bill Gates last summer: “Buffett, Gates tour Alberta oilsands,” *CBC News*. Wednesday, August 20, 2008. Downloaded from the World Wide Web at <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/edmonton/story/2008/08/20/edm-gates-buffet.html>

⁴¹ CBC. “Interactive Results Map,” *Canada Votes 2008*. Found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canadavotes/map/2008/>

protection and economic development can happen at the same time.”⁴² This rhetoric of sustainable development was clearly expressed by Lloyd Snelgrove (who happens to serve as both the president of the Alberta Treasury Board and the Minister responsible for the Oil Sands Sustainable Development Secretariat), when he recently suggested in a very definitive tone: “The oilsands are going to be developed, they’re going to be developed for a long-time and they’re going to be developed in an environmentally responsible way. So, the discussion isn't anymore are they going to be closed, are they going to be scaled down. They're going to be developed.”⁴³ To be sure, the common sense environmental approach in Alberta begins with the presumption that the bituminous sands must be exploited in full.

Environmental Transformism

If the dominant ‘common sense’ narrative is characterized by a market liberal view on the environment, this would suggest that a ‘good sense’ narrative on oil development is a narrative that is both marginalized by and critical of neoliberal political economy. This brings up the concept of “transformism” – a Gramscian term I use to describe the quashing of good sense environmentalism in Alberta. As explained by Stuart Hall, ‘transformism’ involves “the neutralization of some elements in an ideological formation and their absorption and passive appropriation into a new political configuration.”⁴⁴ In this sense, transformism can be interpreted as a tool used by the ruling powers to maintain hegemony. In contrast to coercive tools used for the same purposes (which tend to marginalize subaltern groups and often leads to dissent), transformism is an instrument that, when used effectively, yields a more passive acquiescence. Like many terms, “transformism” is one that Gramsci reconfigured to fit within his own

⁴² Government of Alberta. “Alberta’s Oil Sands: Opportunity: Balance.” *JWP Publishing*, March 2008, p. 4.

⁴³ As quoted in Paul Wells, “Industry Says Implementation of Oilsands Strategy Will be Key,” *Oilsands Review*, (February 13, 2009). Found on the World Wide Web at http://www.oilsandsreview.com/issues/article.asp?article=dob%5C090213%5Cdob2009_fd0029.html

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (New York: Verso, 1988): p. 49.

revolutionary lexicon. Originally, the term *trasformismo* came to use in Italy in the 1880s in reference to the move by the leftist Prime Minister Agostino Depretis in appointing cabinet ministers from all political parties so as to co-opt the opposition. Yet Gramsci saw this process continually at work after Depretis' rule, and thus he applied the term to the entire period of Italian history thereafter until the rise of fascism (and even including the early fascist period).⁴⁵ Gramsci often uses the words “absorb”, “incorporate”, “liquidate”, and “molecular” in describing the process of transformism, as he saw it as a process that absorbed oppositional thought and liquidated it or fragmented it into molecules through partial incorporation. As Robert Cox notes, “*trasformismo* can serve as a strategy of assimilating and domesticating *potentially dangerous ideas* by adjusting them to the policies of the dominant coalition and can thereby *obstruct the formation of class-based organized opposition* to established social and political power.”⁴⁶ In this sense, Gramsci found the concept useful in explaining how Italian leftists reconciled with the irreconcilable in the early 20th Century; it explained how his contemporaries and other “leftist radicals became supporters first of imperialism and subsequently of Italian intervention the First World War.”⁴⁷ I use the term in a similar fashion, though I apply it specifically to the ideological co-optation of good sense environmentalism in our present-day society.

The concept of “environmental transformism” thus offers a theoretical explanation to the puzzle expressed at the outset of this paper. Again, the term forces us to recognize the potential of good sense environmentalism to genuinely threaten the interests of capital. The oil lobby and the provincial and federal governments are clearly aware of the threat posed by such an environmental movement – it jeopardizes nothing less than their proposed way of life (based on

⁴⁵ Gramsci, *Selections...*, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” pp. 49-66 in Stephen Gill [Editor]. *Gramsci, Historical Materialism, and International Relations*, (1993): pp. 49-66. (Article originally published in *Millennium*, 1983).55. *Emphasis added*.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Antonio...*, p. 15.

the yielding of profit), founded upon neoliberal principles discussed above. As such, this powerful consortium of decision-makers and wealthy capitalists – let us call it the “capital class”, for Gramsci’s sake – reacts to good sense environmentalism. Yet it does not react coercively! Rather, it reacts by passively co-opting environmentalism, by assuming it, and thereby controlling it. In practice, environmental transformism in Alberta encompasses the province’s bold plans to implement CCS and its impressive environmental policy framework (as laid out above), as well as its aforementioned public relations campaign. By enacting such policies, by demonstrating in *legal* terms their deep concern for the environment, the capital class beats the environmentalists at their own game. Yet when all is said and done, the real outcome of environmental transformism is revealed: Alberta’s environment faces severe decline, as out of control growth in the energy sector has seen the explosion of greenhouse gas emissions, the contamination of Alberta’s fresh water reserves, the poisoning of the air with hydrogen sulphides, nitrous oxides and sulphur dioxides, the deaths of local species of flora and fauna, and the destruction of ancient boreal forests.

Dangers and Implications

Needless to say, there are thus a number of inherent dangers and implications built into the process of environmental transformism: First and foremost is the emergence of the bizarre dichotomy laid out within the introductory puzzle above – between apparent *de jure* environmentalism and *de facto* ecological degradation. Secondly, as a result of environmental transformism, it becomes evident that often, environmental policies are not generally designed to bring ecological relief; rather, environmental policies are designed to enable further economic (though supposedly “sustainable”) growth. Perhaps the most poignant example of this is offered by Alberta’s climate change plan (which appears to have acquired the tacit approval of America’s new presidential administration). The plan calls for a 200 Megatonne reduction in

GHG emissions by 2050, with 70% of that planned reduction expected to occur through CCS. This amounts to 140 Megatonnes of carbon dioxide that the province plans to capture and store *each year* by 2050. Clearly this unrealistic goal is designed to protect big oil's current investment interests in the province's oil deposits. In this light, CCS is a convenient political tool to displace the problem of carbon emissions to future generations, when "miraculous" technologies will allow us to get away with pumping pollution into the ground. The most important flaw to note with CCS, however, is the empirical one. That is, many experts have suggested that CCS is an untested and uncertain technology, meaning that the amount of GHG emissions will continue to rise astronomically into the future if (and when) the technology fails to work as planned. Recently, a secret government document acquired by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) through freedom-of-information legislation indicates that both the provincial and federal governments are well aware that there are major practical limitations to applying CCS technology in the tar sands, and that "just a small percentage of the carbon dioxide released in mining the sands and producing fuel from them can [actually] be captured."⁴⁸ A third danger of environmental transformism is that the capital class is able to guide the environmental discourse and civil society's debate on ecological issues. As an example, the concept of "dirty oil" which has often been used to refer pejoratively to the tar sands, has somehow come to be solely associated with its high intensity carbon output. This has the effect of taking other pressing environmental problems and removing them from the discussion. The new meaning of "dirty oil" was noted in news articles that addressed discussions between U.S. President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Stephen Harper after the former's visit to Canada, all of which focus solely

⁴⁸ CBC, "Secret advice to politicians: oilsands emissions hard to scrub." *CBC News*. (Monday, November 24, 2008), Downloaded from the World Wide Web at <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/11/24/sands-trap.html>

on GHG emissions without mention of deforestation, nor water usage, nor toxic air and water pollutants, nor loss of biodiversity.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The preceding discussion contains an implicitly normative conclusion: Opening up our framework of environmental analysis to include a broader politico-economic assessment of the mode of production would have a profound effect on the way we conceptualize the environmental problems posed by capitalist development, and therefore radically alter the kinds of environmental policies and programs that are put into place. Contrarily, a non-reflexive perspective that arrives at the analysis with preconceptions about the possibilities of sustainable development and a presumed acceptance of neoliberalism will ultimately yield problem-solving environmental policies. The objective of such problem-solving, common sense policies (as they exist today) is to find a way to “green-up” the resource extraction, production and consumption process. In short, common sense environmentalism takes the full-scale development of the planet’s remaining natural resources as a given. Alternatively, a more reflexive and historicist analysis – like that offered by Antonio Gramsci – would consider broader questions about the implications of different development philosophies and incorporate the long term and social impacts of environmental degradation that could be caused by natural resource extraction. However, such ‘good sense environmentalism’, as noted above, is likely to be considered as a threat by capital. In turn, capital’s reactionary attempt to transform good sense environmentalism into common sense environmentalism suggests a framework of political action that confronts the

⁴⁹ See, for example, Clark Campbell, “Obama’s message to Canadians: Alliances matter, ‘dirty oil’ not so much”, *The Globe and Mail*, February 18th, 2009. Found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/freeheadlines/LAC/20090218/OBAMA18/national/National> Another example is the use of the term “oil sands”, which has come to use as a result of a concerted communications strategy implemented by the provincial government and the oil lobby. Not even a decade ago, the term “tar sands” was the label of choice. Needless to say, words and meanings matter, as they preferentially highlight certain factors while obfuscating others.

state's attempts at imposing passive revolutionary changes; it suggests declaring what Gramsci would have called a "war of position" as a *modus operandi* for genuine environmentalists. In short, environmental transformism necessitates a solution based in praxis – one that seeks the construction of new post-capitalist modes of production. Otherwise, without any challenge to the existing state of neoliberal capitalism and its corresponding market ecology, the planet faces a dismal environmental fate.