

Water and Extractivism: from North to South, one model, many movements

Mines, oil and gas wells, industrial plantations or animal farms, gigantic hydroelectric dams... Every day, more land is transformed into sacrificial zones that are meant to provide raw materials and energy. Large-scale exploitation of nature and its resources is accelerating at an exponential rate in developing countries, stuck in this “role” since the era of colonization. Inevitable social upheaval and cultural transformations, the alteration of ecosystems which is often irreversible, pollution that has devastating effects on health - the impact of the extractive industries are known and have been denounced. In developed countries, the predatory activity advances: the recent avalanche of oil and gas drilling in western world countries show that, even though the context is different, no land is perfectly safe. All over, in the southern and northern hemispheres, conflicts arise between the people (victims or people in danger), private enterprise, and government. In many places around the planet, resistance movements are being organized, creating structures for themselves, and giving birth to popular movements that oppose “megaprojects” which exploit nature.

“Water is worth more than gold.” This is what the graffiti says on the walls of cities and villages of Argentina, Peru, and Colombia... Elsewhere, in France, anti-shale gas activists are saying: “Have a drink or take a drive, make your choice.” Water is “priceless” and is almost always in the middle of these conflicts. Very often, water access, availability and quality are directly threatened. Each industry has its black book. Pits pollute water bodies and aquifers (toxic products and heavy metals coming from acid drainage), degrade zones of hydric reloading, and cause deterioration of glaciers and permafrost. In regions that are already victims of hydric stress, millions of liters of water are used everyday for mining activities to the detriment of the populations' needs. The extraction of shale gas also requires enormous quantities of water. Each hydraulic fracturing operation consists of injecting 10 to 20 million liters of water to the underground, mixed with sand and chemical adjuvants, of which only a part rises back up to the surface and of which the re-treatment poses serious questions. Oil drilling has significant consequences: freshwater and saltwater pollution, accidental pollution (oil spills), or systematic pollution (Niger Delta, the Amazon in Ecuador and Peru...) that cause veritable environmental, sanitary and human tragedies. Large hydroelectric dams are the root of the disappearance of fish in many rivers, which equates to the destruction of local fishing-based economies. The list is long...

The term “extractivism” comes from Latin America. At the beginning it referred to activities that involved extracting, such as in mining and oil and gas, and it is now used more and more among university students and activists to refer to the increased pace of the exploitation of natural resources at an industrial level (including chemical agriculture and infracture that facilitates these different activities) and the central place of these sectors for the export economies of raw materials. Finally “extractivism” also defines one of the essential characteristics of the dominant economic and social system, which cannot remain durable and reproductive without continually extracting “natural resources.” The overexploitation of these resources supplies a material base that is indispensable to our growth-oriented economies and our consumer societies. The exploitation of nature at the lower price possible (without regard for the environment or people) fulfils the promise of “development” in regions and countries which are sentenced to following this path, always fleeing, but this exploitation of nature is so necessary for systems that guarantee continuous prosperity.

During FAME, representatives from farming and indigenous communities, members from popular assemblies, citizen groups, universities and associations from different countries will meet and do activities under the theme “water and extractivism” and share experiences and ideas, reaffirming the centrality of water as a source of life and a common good to humanity, all while examining questions about alternatives to today's models. These different ways of thinking can be pursued thanks to our discussions made possible by this forum.

[*Note: The meaning of “extractivism” in Latin America and elsewhere is different from the meaning in Brazil where it specifically applies to obtaining samples and commercializing products from the non-cultivated forest (glue, fibers, fruits, wood).]

The workshops under the theme “Water and Extractivism” will take place on March 15 and 16:

- Thursday March 15, 10am to 12.30pm at Dock des Suds E

Black gold against blue gold: citizen resistance in face of advancing transnational oil companies

With conventional hydrocarbon reserves being exhausted, the race towards other fields, in particular non-conventional ones, has become worldwide. Oil companies push back everyday the borderlines of possibility, but above all, of acceptability, and the people and environment are paying the price. In particular, regardless of the type of project, the extraction of hydrocarbons strongly affects water and has irreversible environmental and social consequences all over the planet: offshore, far out at sea, on land, in primary forests, in humid zones, around big cities... How can people organize themselves and show resistance towards multinationals? Since legal tools are rarely available to them, what are their means of action?

- Thursday March 15, 1pm to 6pm at Cabaret Rouge 3

Water and mining industry in Latin America: ecological disasters, social resistance.

While the large-scale exploitation of metals for export started in what was called “Latin” America, with Spanish and Portuguese colonization, these past decades have seen a heightened acceleration of mining projects in the region (Latin America became the world's leading mining investment destination in the 2000s). The mining megaprojects, led mostly by transnational companies, invariably have a serious social and environmental impact (destruction of ecosystems and “life systems” of native and farming communities, occupation of territories, cultural and social transformations). These mining projects threaten in particular the quality and availability of water since the mining industry uses enormous quantities of water (compromising locals' access to water, degrading and polluting water sources, destroying glaciers, etc). The expansion of the “mining megaindustry” causes many conflicts and brings resistance from communities that are victims or under threat, who are often treated as criminals and are brutally repressed. This series of three round tables “Water and extractivism in Latin America” brings people together who are directly involved in popular movements. They will help us understand the context and the foundation for today's mining boom, learn about the main impact of large-scale mining, understand the motifs and strategies of resistance movements, and think about tools and means of action.

- Friday March 16, 10am to 12.30pm at Cabaret Rouge 2

Water that fizzes: water and shale hydrocarbons. Workshop.

All over the planet, oil and gas companies have set their hearts on energy resources for which their extraction calls for techniques that are extremely destructive to environment and dangerous for the inhabitants, such as the hydraulic fracturation and many other techniques used to stimulate rock or fields. Hydraulic fracturing - or fracking - wastes precious water resources and poses an enormous risk as regards the quality of the water.

Resistance movements are developing worldwide, in particular against gas and shale oil mining, in order to oppose these practices, preserve land, and develop alternatives. Thanks to these citizen initiatives, hydraulic fracturation is now banned, or done under restrictions or moratoriums, in more than 90 places on the planet in half a dozen countries.

This workshop, which brings together experiences from different countries, is for sharing information, exchanging ideas about the situation in our own countries, creating an international resonance to our struggles, and discussing future shared initiatives on a European and national level.

- Friday March 16, 1pm to 3.30pm at Cabaret Rouge 2

Water and dams.

The objective of this round table is to debate the relationship between water and hydroelectric dams from two perspectives: the perspective of activists who are involved in local movements against the dams; and a more general perspective, one that seeks to understand political and economic contexts that lead to hydroelectric generation projects. This round table brings together representatives from civil society and victims of hydroelectric dams for a better understanding of trends and impact from the development of hydroelectricity.

- Friday March 16, 3.30pm to 6pm at Cabaret Rouge 2

Countering extractivism, defending water. Round table summarizing main theme.

This round table brings together people from different activities under the theme “water and extractivism” (hydrocarbons, shale oil and gas, mines and dams) for an “intersectoriel” debate where different groups can present their conclusions and start thinking as a group about actions and the possibility of joining together. After we initiate work during FAME, will the defence of water unite us and help build concrete and useful ties between diverse movements that can fight the multiple faces of extractivism in developing and developed countries?