

After Burnaby Mountain: Does this Change Everything?

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Blockadia. There are many lessons we can draw from the recent community resistance to Kinder Morgan’s planned pipeline expansion on Burnaby Mountain—not the least of which concerns the abuse of the courts, both by corporations willing to launch blatant SLAPP suits, and governments willing to pass legislation of questionable constitutionality (such as Bill C-51), and wait to see who challenges them in court. One thing that’s certain about Burnaby Mountain is the fact that it is now a significant “location” on the utopian map of what Naomi Klein calls “Blockadia.”



BURNABY MTN COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY PROTECTORS WERE UNBREAKABLE.

Photo: Scott Knowles.

Blockadia is not a specific location on a map but rather a roving transnational conflict zone that is creeping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill, whether for open-pit mines, or gas fracking, or tar sands oil pipelines.¹

* Republished from *Contours*, Issue 6: 2016. Edited and reformatted for publication.

I don't know that one could claim that Burnaby Mountain has "changed everything;" certainly, it is a high-water mark for the resistance to extraction in an urban setting. What it highlights for me, ultimately, is our need to build better, more capable social movements of resistance. Blockadia is still vulnerable, under-populated, and scattered amongst a far-flung archipelago. We have much work to do to realize our demand for the impossible: a realistic alternative to, and transition from a fossil-fuel driven global capitalism.

What I find myself reflecting on, and wanting to write about, are activist tactics and our wider strategies—the methods by which we might knit the imagined territories of Blockadia together. I do so tentatively, because I ultimately haven't made my own mind up yet—I'm sifting through the debris and rhetoric, trying to find the way to a better, more coherent movement. But I don't have all the answers—just questions I feel I need to articulate.

I think whatever success the Burnaby Mountain resistance had it was largely success on the "public relations" side of things: many people heard about and supported the action (a late December 2014 Angus Reid poll suggests well over half of British Columbians were "closely" or "very closely" following the story, while 54% opposed the pipeline and supported the protest²); and Kinder Morgan's advertising efforts, and decision to drop the civil suit, even if that means they have to pay the defendants' court costs, is a clear sign they, too, feel they lost the public relations battle.

How was this "success" (remembering that, so far, no pipeline has been stopped) achieved? First, it helped that all this unfolded in an urban environment, where many people felt directly concerned, and where the media had ready access to the scene of the action and the many participants. As someone who played a spokesperson role, I can say that I have never before seen such (largely) sympathetic media: reporters also seemed to consider themselves directly concerned

about the project, and often expressed outrage or surprise when asking questions about the company's tactics. Secondly, it helped that the City of Burnaby was so vocally opposed to the project. Thirdly—and no doubt building from these first two factors—the campaign on the mountain was able to draw together a fairly broad “coalition” of activists, ranging from elderly local residents, First Nations elders, and seasoned activists, to young anarchists and first-time protestors. It was a wide swath and cross section of society, and included a very wide range of approaches and commitments.

What wasn't always clear, on the surface at least, was how fractious and volatile this mix of individuals and groups was. In my reading of the situation, there were three main groupings. First, there were local residents and general “concerned citizens,” many of whom had been organizing opposition to Kinder Morgan's plans under the umbrella of BROKE (Burnaby Residents Opposing Kinder Morgan Expansion) for some time prior to the fall of 2014. This grouping tended to favour less confrontational tactics: town-hall discussions to raise awareness about the issue, rallies or street marches, pressuring various levels of government through their representatives, and working closely with the City of Burnaby. BROKE successfully applied for intervenor status with the NEB, in order to have a voice in the decision process.

The second group was comprised of diverse grassroots activists, including First Nations, who organized via loose affinity groups to take up a more direct action-oriented position: on the ground occupation, and eventually a blockade of the proposed work site. This group was very small at first, more or less structureless and leaderless, and committed to placing their bodies in the direct path of the project.

Finally, the third group were the seasoned activists—many of them affiliated with environmental NGOs, and all of them with the experience of multiple previous campaigns



NASTY KM FACES AT BORE HOLE #2.



MILITANT PICNICKERS AT DRUMMOND WALK AND TREE FAERIES AT BORE HOLE #1.
Photo: SK.

(including a group of Clayoquot Sound veterans). This group came in late, and it is indeed on the ground of the actual conflict—after the attempt by Kinder Morgan contractors to begin work on October 29, 2014, and after the subsequent injunction hearing in early November, when the enforcement of the injunction began on November 20—that all three of these groups “came together.”³

There are many things to say about NGOs, but I’m not going to focus on them here. What interests me, and seems to me to be at the heart of the matter, is the ability, or inability, of those first two groups to work together. The first group was anxious about the second group’s direct action focus, worried that more “radical” tactics like occupations and blockades would wind up losing the support of the “general public,” and felt that, tactically, a more moderate approach, loosely affiliated with the City of Burnaby, was most likely to succeed under these circumstances. The second group, in turn, felt that the first group’s tactics would take too much time, that Kinder Morgan would waltz in to do its work despite popular

opposition and the attempts of the City of Burnaby to stop them (which of course turned out to be true), and that, contrary to the first group's worries, the "general public" would be galvanized and motivated by the actions of protestors on the ground, giving their all to stop the pipeline. This is all old hat to anyone who has spent any time around activism and social movements. This division reigned at Occupy Vancouver, just as it did on Burnaby Mountain. The point, to me, is not who is right and who is wrong—whose tactics are better, or more likely to succeed, and whose are doomed to failure. We could armchair quarterback this through the next fifty Superbowls and still not get anywhere. The question to me is how a diversity of tactics—which is what was more or less on display on Burnaby Mountain—might actually function, and how coalitions might—if they can be—be built around this functional diversity.

The dramatic and fast-moving events on Burnaby Mountain left these two groups little time to either a) completely split from each other, or b), really work out a means of organizing together. Rather, they were thrown together, had little time to do more than groan and complain about their differences, and, as the drama crested and the NGO activists moved in, the differences of these two groups in some ways disappeared behind the sound and fury of more than a hundred arrests, the appearances of "star" activists like David Suzuki, and the headline-catching stories of the arrests of 84 year old grandmothers and 11 year old daughters. Once again, the opposition of the state (in the form of the courts and the RCMP) did not allow time for a true movement to flourish—or collapse under its own weight. It never does. So what can we do?

Civil Disobedience

One of the most tried and true forms of political resistance is civil disobedience (CD). As I continue to study its history and practice, what I find I'm constantly coming up against is the *limits* of CD,

its necessarily constrained definition, and the larger question and range of “actions” and tactics into which CD fits as one potential mode of resistance.

Dr. Kimberly Brownlee, speaking recently at SFU in a series of talks on CD that I (along with my colleague Lynne Quarmby) have organized, noted that CD is characterized by “civility” (nonviolence), and that it is “communicative” (its intention is to be seen/heard, for a “message” to be delivered).⁴ CD is not something you keep secret: the dissenter gives themselves over to the state (via arrest), as a way of conveying the message that a particular law or situation is unjust, and so the breaking of the law, and subsequent arrest, are undertaken in order to draw public attention to the injustice. Typically, the person engaging in CD openly announces their intention in advance (I am reminded here of Lynne Quarmby’s speech to the media before she crossed the Kinder Morgan injunction zone and gave herself up for arrest: she did so declaring that she was striving to be “the best citizen I can be”⁵). There is no subterfuge here—everything is out in the open.



SILENT WITNESS TO CONFRONTATION.



LOCKDOWNS AT CHEVRON, MAY 2014.



BURNABY RESIDENTS OPPOSED TO KINDER MORGAN (BROKE) AND NORTH SHORE NO PIPELINE EXPANSION (NOPE) WATER PROTEST, FRONT OF BBY KM STORAGE FACILITY (SEPT. 2014). *Photo: Brad Hornick.*

A few things are already clear: CD can be distinguished from more militant/radical forms of resistance. It is often noted that CD, strictly speaking, is an act that accepts the state’s legitimacy to set laws, make arrests, and determine consequences, generally; it is a *particular* law or situation that is the focus of CD—not the system writ large or the state as such. Indeed, the democratic state is being appealed to in CD, and the person(s) engaging in CD often continue to think of themselves as “good citizens” making legitimate “asks” of a system that should, if functioning correctly, respond to their demand for justice. David Graeber, in *Direct Action*, notes that this is very much the democracy that evolved in the 18th and 19th centuries—while direct citizen participation in governance was limited via systems of representation, the freedom to challenge and lobby representatives was enshrined as a “right”: “public speech and assembly became inalienable rights at the moment they were definitively rejected as a means of actual political decision making.”⁶

Thus it makes less sense to refer to the actions of militants and radicals in terms of CD if they have, by definition, rejected the legitimacy of the state and current system of governance. No appeal is made here for the state to “fix” what is wrong; the state is what is seen as wrong.

In reality, I would argue, life in a contemporary democracy is a constant negotiation with those parts of the democratic system that seem redeemable and (at least in principle or potentially) just, and those parts of it which seem to be beyond repair, or chronically unjust. And this essential *unevenness* is reflected spatially, across democracies, as well as (and indeed especially) according to the specific position and experience of communities and individuals within democracies (i.e., privilege: in some cases the system seems just, if you are white and gainfully employed; it is clearly unjust, and for the most part systemically so, if you are a recent immigrant, First Nations, poor, etc.).

There are contexts in which we might choose to appeal to democratic mechanisms to change local injustices, while there are simultaneous contexts in which we find ourselves compelled to challenge the entire character of the system and its ingrained, even foundational injustices. It’s for this reason that we need the idea of a diversity of tactics and dual-power forms of organization (which I will turn to below): sometimes CD is the right tactic, because there are potential channels in the existing system to adjust/ change/respond to the injustice in question. But sometimes we need to be more radical in our demands, because the injustice is a systemic one the current system simply cannot redress adequately, because the injustice in question is constitutive of the current system.

If CD is an action taken with an audience in mind (generally, the state and possibly the “general public”/public opinion as well), more radical forms of action either have no specific audience in mind, or the audience is in a sense “internal,” and the action directed towards a

community of resistance whose capacity is being extended through the action taken.

In the context of climate change and climate justice, a question that needs to be asked is this: is the current socio-economic system's reliance on fossil fuels and industrial extraction something that can be adjusted through popular social movements employing tactics like CD? Or is the system so totally enmeshed with the wealth, power, and the infrastructure of the energy sector that it has become entirely unresponsive to democratic processes like CD? In other words, are we facing an adjustment to the system, or system change?

And while part of what I have suggested above is that the very *unevenness* of contemporary democracies makes the one-size-fits-all approach of many activists problematic, it is becoming more and more difficult to access the mechanisms of justice when not only are “citizens’” abilities to participate in the decision making process increasingly constrained (the NEB process being a case in point), but the freedom to seek redress through CD is also under increasing attack.

From Diversity of Tactics to a Dual Power Movement

David Graeber offers a useful taxonomy of political “action” in his book *Direct Action*, covering a spectrum of “anything from leafleting in front of a supermarket to shutting down a global summit.”⁷ Graeber’s taxonomy includes: (1) marches and rallies, which in most cases are not technically direct actions at all ... (2) picket lines, (3) street parties, (4) classic civil disobedience (blockades and lockdowns), and finally (5) Black Bloc actions.⁸ This gives one range of what we might call a *diversity of tactics*—from the more non-confrontational and indirect forms of action to the more confrontational and direct forms of action—and success, as Graeber and others



Photo: Zack Embree.

maintain, depends upon “a combination of several different kinds of action.”⁹

Diversity of tactics does not mean “anything goes,” and it does not necessarily include actions that can legitimately be called “violent.” Indeed, going by everything I know of, say, in the past five years in Canada—from Occupy to Elsipogtog, Idle No More to Burnaby Mountain—I would not call any action taken by activists or Indigenous land defenders “violent”—though certainly there were moments of state violence carried out by the police. I would,

however, note that most of these moments of resistance deployed a diverse range of tactics—and the more impact the moment had, the wider or at least more apparent the range of tactics tended to be.

The choice of tactics and actions taken is contingent upon the people and communities involved and the goals they have. Thus, another way of explaining diversity of tactics is by noting that political action is *context-based* (what do people need to do in a given context? What are they capable of/prepared to do? What is likely to succeed in this context?). There is no one-size-fits-all option, and no universally “better” tactical approach to social change—in part, as I have argued, because of the *unevenness* of contemporary democracies (there are some contexts in which our current system “works,” or can be made to “work,” and many others in which it very clearly does not).

Harsha Walia, in her excellent book *Undoing Border Imperialism*, also notes that “the question of whether a tactic is effective or not is entirely contextual,” and adds two very important details to any discussion of diversity of tactics: first, that it means “respecting a range of tactics”—I’m emphasizing the aspect of “respect” here—and, second, “maintaining *communication* to ensure comfort and alerting others.”¹⁰ I think, diversity of tactics can be claimed as a boon to social movements only when it involves a basic *respect for difference*—difference of experience, contextual difference that shapes a given community’s choice of action—and clear *communication* about those differences and the different tactical choices they lead to.

Switch back to Burnaby Mountain this past fall. Using Graeber’s taxonomy, we can clearly identify BROKE, as I did above, as employing less direct and less confrontational tactics—largely determined by the context of that community (an older, suburban resident community). The group often referred to as the “Caretakers,” by contrast, employed more direct and at times more confrontational tactics—again, I would argue, something that should largely be understood contextually: the “Caretakers” were generally younger, more socially marginalized, and many had had prior experiences with the police and state violence, thus limiting their “faith” in the existing system and its likelihood of responding to their “peaceful protest.”

Again, these two groups tended to be critical of their different approaches, and only the intensity and speed with which events unfolded prevented either a complete break between the groups (though it came close), or a potential reconciliation between them.

My question is intentionally simplistic and perhaps naïve: what if these groups had respected their differences, openly acknowledged and discussed them (as being rooted in different social and community experiences), and found a way to allow room for their different tactical approaches? What would this take? What if, on September 13, 2014, the groups planning a

peaceful community rally in Burnaby Mountain Park, and those planning a confrontational lockdown at the gates of Kinder Morgan's Westridge Terminal, had respected their different approaches, and communicated and coordinated closely so that neither group felt like the other was "stealing their thunder" or compromising their action?

This last example may be a minor one (nothing that happened on September 13 altered the course of future events much—but it did sow the seeds of disagreement between the two main groups organizing resistance to Kinder Morgan's work on Burnaby Mountain). Nevertheless, I think it is indicative of the larger problem: how are we going to alter the course of the current socio-economic system? How are we going to stop a pipeline, begin the transition to renewable energy, and ultimately *do something* about climate change? Again—I don't believe any *one* tactic or approach will do it on its own, and what we need is respect for a range of tactical approaches, and better communication and coordination between our diverse actions.

I'm sure I am not alone in growing tired of desperate calls for "direct action," couched in criticisms of those who are not leaping into the fray (without any consideration of *why* others might not be), and lacking a sense of wider strategy/goals—just as I'm equally tired of the vast majority of people (and I mean here people who acknowledge climate change, inequality, and that "something is wrong" with the status quo) doing nothing *impactful enough* about the massive, systemic problems we currently face (perhaps simply because their privilege shields them from the immediate effects of these systemic problems). There has to be another way forward—and I think it is the sometimes uncomfortable way of allowing room, and even respect, for our different experiences—communicating and coordinating together—even when this means those differences seem (depending on your position) more "radical," or more "liberal," than we'd normally be comfortable with.

I think it can help to map diversity of tactics onto the idea of dual power. A dual power movement is one which pursues two seemingly contradictory paths at once: one aimed at short term “reforms” or adjustments to the current system, using the existing channels a democracy affords, and one aimed at the longer term goal of building a “new society in the shell of the old” (as the IWW used to say). Dual power acknowledges what I have called the *unevenness* of contemporary democracy: there are instances and contexts in which the given system can in fact be used to achieve justice (though this will often involve things like rallies, street marches, and acts of civil disobedience); but there are other instances in which injustice is very much part of the system’s “normal” functioning (think structural, often racially deployed economic inequality, fossil fuel driven climate change and industrial pollution, expropriation and dispossession of land and resources, often, again, along racial lines, etc. etc.). Thus, what we really need to achieve is *system change*: an end to “market fundamentalism,” our reliance on fossil fuels and largescale



GRAND CHIEF STEWART PHILLIP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS (FOREGROUND), TSLEIL WAUTUTH NATION SUNDANCE CHIEF RUEBEN GEORGE ON BURNABY MOUNTAIN.

Photo: Zack Embree.

resource extraction, corporate influence over the political system, etc. etc.

System change takes time. But we don't have a lot of time. So we need to use the tools at hand to effect shorter-term change (for instance, voting, organizing in opposition to certain policies, proposals, pieces of legislation, etc.), and we need to explore and invent new tools to effect longer term, structural change. We need both. And we need them both now. So we need diverse social movements, where some are working the tools of short term and limited change, while others are working towards systemic change at a very deep level. And we need to acknowledge and respect these different goals and their attendant tactics and actions.

Maybe this is too much to ask. Personally, I want the revolution tomorrow. But I'm not so deluded that I think my wanting it will bring it, or that we are going to find the silver bullet tactic we can all get down with here and now. And I'm not willing to see people thrown under the bus while we figure the revolution out—not if there are means of alleviating injustice at our democratic disposal right now. Activism isn't an all-or-nothing situation. Social change is messy, uneven, filled with uncomfortable compromises, and often confusing. But it's also life-affirming, inspiring, community-building, and what we desperately need more of—in all its diverse forms.

Return to Blockadia

Somewhere near the heart of Blockadia's centreless network lies the tar sands, Klein argues, and "the prominent role played by women."¹¹ "In the 1990s," Klein continues, "it was trade deals that brought huge and unlikely coalitions together; today it is fossil fuel infrastructure."¹² Visiting the tar sands this year, and speaking to my Musqueam friend Audrey Siegl, the connection between women's bodies and the land was driven home to me. What are the tar sands but a missing and murdered landscape, a nonsite



Photo: Zack Embree.

where everything that might make “place” in this northern boreal locale—rivers, lakes, bogs, forests, animals, and its traditional Indigenous inhabitants—has been literally removed, in toto, by massive extractive machinery? Life itself, in the tar sands, is merely “overburden,” something in the way of the bitumen lying in layers beneath the surface of the land.

In Burnaby, on and around Burnaby Mountain, we are at the far end of a pipeline that has its source in that missing and murdered landscape. The tar sands are here too, flowing beneath our feet, and we stand, quite directly, it often strikes me, on one distant corner of that vast man-made desert in the boreal north. These connections—the imaginative work of seeing that we are all, now, directly affected by projects like the tar sands—are a necessary part of the work we are doing within Blockadia, the work of realizing and building the capacities of Blockadia. This is both a movement to wrest control of our environments from the existing structures of corporate capitalism, and a movement to found a new society based on a new relationship to the natural world. Klein writes:

Resistance to high-risk extreme extraction is building a global, grassroots, and broad-based network the likes of which the environmental movement has rarely seen. And perhaps this phenomenon shouldn't even be referred to as an environmental movement at all, since it is primarily driven by a desire for a deeper form of democracy, one that provides communities with real control over those resources that are most crucial to collective survival—the health of the water, air, and soil.¹³

This “deeper form of democracy” is either a democracy that is less “uneven” than the one we are currently ensconced in, or an entirely new system of participatory and locally-framed democracy that is ultimately something entirely new. In other words, we can make most sense of Klein here by thinking in terms of dual power, and Blockadia as a means of networking our dual power struggles.

In the end, whether a refurbished democracy or a new democracy such as we have never seen before, the work of Blockadia is one based upon a new/old relationship between human endeavour and the land upon which we dwell. For Klein, this means that Indigenous land struggles must be the foundation of Blockadia: the “connection to place is surely strongest in Indigenous communities where the ties to the land go back thousands of years, [and] it is in fact Blockadia’s defining feature,” Klein argues.¹⁴ From this perspective—this anti-extractive world view—one does not so much exercise “rights” over land, as carry “responsibilities” to the land. The land does not *belong* to us; we, in very primal and inescapable ways, *belong to the land*. Klein’s Blockadia is the prefigurative exploration of this belonging, and I would argue that it is our belonging to Blockadia, in turn, that might in the end enable greater respect for the diverse experiences we have, the diverse tactics we necessarily employ, and the seemingly contradictory goals—both, and unevenly, reformist and revolutionary—that we must pursue together. If this does change everything, we are still just opening this changed landscape of struggle, and welcoming each other into the resistance we will make there.

Notes

¹ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Toronto: Knopf, 2014), 294-295.

² See report in *The Vancouver Sun*, "Most Canadians support anti-Kinder Morgan protesters," December 18, 2014.

³ Full disclosure: I worked, at various points, with both of these groups, and actually saw merit (and sometimes fault) in both of their approaches. In time, I became more committed to the "caretakers" on the ground on Burnaby Mountain, and it was as the spokesperson for this group that I found myself being sued as a "conspirator" against Kinder Morgan's interests.

⁴ A recording of Dr. Brownlee's talk can be found at: <https://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/events/dreamcolloquium/DreamColloquium-ClimateChange/KimberleyBrownlee.html>

⁵ Video of the speech is available on the *Vancouver Observer* website: <https://www.vancouverobserver.com/news/video-lynne-quarmbys-arrest-and-speech-protesting-kinder-morgan>

⁶ David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 363.

⁷ Graeber, *Direct Action*, 359.

⁸ Graeber, *Direct Action*, 361.

⁹ Graeber, *Direct Action*, 360.

¹⁰ Harsha Willa, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2013), 186-187.

¹¹ Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 303.

¹² Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 316.

¹³ Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 295.

¹⁴ Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 342.