# Untrodden Ground Is Fertile Ground

## On the Space between Climate Policy and Direct Action Against Fossil Fuels

**Spring 2015**

**Arnold Schroder**

**landwithoutseasons@protonmail.com**

*This article originally appeared in the Eostar (Spring) 2015 issue of the* Earth First! Journal.

As the climate crisis worsens, and industrial capitalism appears to be in the final stages of guaranteeing a hostile earth for millennia to come—for our species and many others—clear distinctions have emerged between decentralized, grassroots, “radical” efforts to address this crisis and those of the more politically mainstream and better-funded nonprofits. To some extent these distinctions reflect how broad ideological divergences translate into specific tactical divergences, and have thus been mirrored in social and ecological struggles of the past. However, certain aspects of the current situation are unique. It is worth noting these unique differences and assessing their implications—and any unstated assumptions that may underlie them—in an effort to ensure we're all making the very best use of our time during the earth's Sixth Great Extinction.

Succinctly: environmental nonprofits pressure policymakers, while radical organizers more typically focus on directly confronting fossil fuel extraction and infrastructure projects.

There is no particular reason these efforts can't be complementary, nor do the respective sectors truly adhere to any rigid binary: the grassroots also pressure public officials, and nonprofits do fight individual projects. For that matter, the distinction between “radical” and “mainstream” climate organizing is not always perfectly clear. But this broad characterization is true in a great number of cases.

A recent example of this was the People's Climate March in New York City, where hundreds of thousands of people were mobilized by 350.org and others to demand action from world leaders gathered for UN climate talks—thinking that said leaders would act if they understood the magnitude of our current crisis, or at least how angry people are about it. The march was criticized by many grassroots organizers as a performance for an empty room, an expenditure of resources that would have been better spent in direct confrontations with the forces that are destroying our world—the assumption being that policymakers are already well apprised of the magnitude of our current crisis, and don't particularly care.

At the root of this debate are fundamental and sometimes unspoken differences in values. Direct action is often seen as a form of struggle in which our right to a livable world is asserted, rather than requested of the existing political system, and thus is ultimately a venue for dismantling the prevailing institutions engaged in ecocide. The “professional” environmental sector, on the other hand, sees the acute physical and temporal parameters involved in the climate crisis and scrambles to find a mechanism as hastily as possible to address it, not fighting for broader, systematic change.

In a sense, everyone's right. By appealing to the powers that be, the Big Greens have sold their souls to a system anyone possessing a shred of sense can see is inherently destructive. Likewise, with even fewer tangible achievements than the Big Greens, the more radical elements of this fight are poorly positioned to deflect the critique that they are dreamers.

This writing is not about these broad ideological, and subsequent tactical, differences per se. Rather it is about what is missing—what could occupy the spaces where these disjunctions currently exist.

Fierce resistance to fossil fuels is occurring throughout North America. Long-term blockades of pipelines and extraction projects by indigenous land defenders, such as the Unist'ot'en and Elsipogtog, have simultaneously thwarted violations of native sovereignty while keeping carbon in the ground. Utah Tar Sands Resistance is impeding the progress of tar sands and shale extraction on the Colorado Plateau. Rising Tide collectives in Oregon and Washington are blockading oil trains. The Michigan Coalition Against Tar Sands is obstructing pipeline construction. Tar Sands Blockade and Great Plains Tar Sands Resistance fought a pitched battle against the southern portion of the Keystone XL pipeline, and Lakota land defenders have vowed death or prison before letting the northern section be constructed. The list goes on.

Not only does this work matter for its immediate effects, for any delay in the production of fossil fuels it causes, and for any financial or logistical difficulties it creates for climate killers, but also because it always contains the possibility, no matter how hopeless it might seem on any given day, of planting the seeds of some larger uprising—a resistance capable of shutting down the fossil fuel economy on its own. Furthermore, although not largely discussed, direct action also matters because it provides a context in which to articulate far more clear and effective policy demands than exist at present.

At the beginning of Obama's presidency, some measure of unity and clarity on broad climate policy existed within the professional environmental sector, but essentially vanished somewhere around 2009 or 2010, with the defeat of federal cap and trade legislation and the deterioration of the UN talks in Copenhagen into an appalling display of small-minded, amoral pettiness. Since then, the Big Greens' messaging has shifted from advocating specific actions on climate to advocating “action” in general.

However, even when they do articulate something specific enough to be reasonably described as a “plan,” the strategies “professional” environmentalists tend to favor are highly problematic on any number of levels. For instance, there are ways in which ostensible solutions reinforce systematic injustice and ecocide, such as cap and trade's creation of a whole new commodity market to further enrich those who are already profiting from climate chaos. But their most fundamental drawback is their sheer ineffectiveness.

Where the political will exists for carbon taxes, cap and trade, renewable energy subsidies, and other darlings of the mainstream climate solutions paradigm, their capacity to actually reduce emissions appears speculative at best. Since Norway instituted its carbon tax in 1991, per capita emissions have risen by 15%. For all its agonizing economic minutia, California's much-vaunted climate plan is terribly vague on how it will actually achieve its targets. Europe's carbon trading scheme has been an overt disaster.

The direct action sector, however, has known all along that addressing climate change isn't nearly as complicated as policymakers—generating page after page of unreadable documents describing “emissions limits per megawatt hour of electricity generated by new coal-fired EGUs,” or “flexible performance standards designed to accelerate the availability and diversity of low-carbon fuels”—have convinced themselves it is. It's actually terribly simple.

The trick, you see, is to stop extracting, transporting, refining, and burning fossil fuels.

Really. There's nothing more to it than that. What happens after that is of tremendous importance. There would be the potential, in the massive restructuring of society, to address many of our culture's other insidious aspects. Let's not forget that climate change is simply delivering, in a

cohesive package and at a slightly accelerated timescale, the systemic ecological collapse, mass extinction, and unspeakable human suffering that industrial civilization has always been achieving through other means. But as far as fighting climate change itself, cutting it out with burning fossil fuels is all it would really take.

Policymakers systematically fail—or pretend to fail—to discern this simple fact. When they talk about fighting climate change they actually don't; they talk instead about various ways in which society could adapt to a world without fossil fuels. The only climate policies with any reasonable certainty of effectiveness are not ones that attempt complicated and speculative manipulations of the economy, nor are they predicated upon technological and social adaptations to a post-carbon world. Effective policies are ones that *directly keep fossil fuels in the ground*. Anything else has a tremendous risk of not reducing emissions.

But “anything else” is all the current dialogue consists of: the promotion of new technologies, new energy sources, changes in the building code. And, by and large, professional environmentalists—the ones who, unlike the direct action sector, routinely discuss things like state, federal, and international policy—speak this same meaningless language. Because it occupies precisely the nexus where policy would actually matter—the sites of fossil fuel extraction and the infrastructure of transport and refinement—the direct action sector is uniquely poised to offer a powerful, clear framework for addressing the climate crisis.

This requires going beyond opposition to a particular mine, or pipeline, or export terminal, and beyond generalities about phasing out fossil fuels. It would involve articulating a vision that is broad enough to be comprehensive, but detailed enough to be actionable. It would be quantitative and would name names, identifying the rates at which fossil fuel extraction would be phased out in specific regions, specifying dates by which various power plants and other industrial infrastructure would be decommissioned. There would be charts. Maps, even.

Let's say it together: Powder River Basin coal mining is to decline by 10% of its initial value per month for ten months; offshore drilling in the Gulf Coast will cease immediately; Chevron's oil refinery in Richmond, California will be allowed to operate for eighteen months, with all profits being allocated to San Francisco Bay wetlands restoration to buffer the effects of rising seas, and distributed among Richmond's low-income residents... If you're thinking to yourself right now that it's ludicrous to let Chevron keep poisoning Richmond eight months after Arch Coal ceases to despoil the grasslands of Wyoming, that's great. Time to start working on your own framework. Try it—it's fun!

And every time someone responds with a question about what will come next, we get to reinforce the central tenet that everyone from the UN to the Sierra Club pretends to miss—what comes next isn't the point. The point is that the fossil fuel economy is inimical to life on earth and must be immediately decommissioned. It's a simple, singular truth, whereas the paths our species can take after the age of carbon are infinite and complex.

In the past 50,000 years, humans have spread from Africa into the far reaches of the globe, navigating open oceans in canoes to populate remote islands, living in Siberia at the height of the last Ice Age, traversing the edges of glaciers to venture into the Americas, and innovating an incredible array of adaptations to changing landscapes along the way. We can certainly adapt to life without something we didn't have—fossil fuels—until the last few centuries. But we can't adapt to life with them. And refusing to acknowledge this truth until the details of our adaptations are worked out is like refusing to run form a burning house until you've rented a new one.

If one were to seek out a precedent for something of this nature—a formal, comprehensive policy far outside the bounds of politically acceptable discourse—one could do far worse than to examine the Earth First! wilderness proposals of the 1980s. Like ourselves, the Earth First! of yore had visions of a world fundamentally and truly free, a world where the dominating force of civilization had been abolished, a world consisting exclusively of wilderness. Unlike ourselves, however, the Earth First! of yore was also willing to advocate broad, but detailed, policies that were intermediate points between this wild and boundless vision and the nightmare we currently occupy. Through the 90s and into the 2000s, ecological direct action collectives, while fundamentally framing our

struggle as one against the entire political and economic system which values profit over life, also advocated for actual pieces of legislation, like the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act and the National Forest Protection and Restoration Act, the latter of which would have ended all commercial timber sales on National Forests.

Our anarchistically-inclined movement has increasingly come to avoid talking about anything broad enough to be construed as "policy." We prefer instead to talk exclusively about local efforts to fight specific mines, pipelines, and rail terminals—efforts which we can overtly frame as assertions of people power against the dominant political and economic system.

Even if we regard policy as a potentially useful tool, admitting to ourselves that total revolution may not be directly around the corner, we avoid talking about it, considering it someone else's job. But if it's someone else's job, they're not doing it. The groups that center their efforts on policy changes are not actually advocating for meaningful ones. They don't even seem to know the terms in which they could describe a meaningful policy. They've bought into the dialogue about solar panels and carbon taxes.

We don't have to appeal to policymakers to affect them. Our broad, detailed vision doesn't have to be a piece of legislation we're trying to get introduced into Congress. It can simply be *our* plan, and we can announce that we're going to fight like hell with people power to put it into place. By having something more comprehensive to voice than opposition to a specific project, or to fossil fuels in general, we have the opportunity to not just shift the dialogue, but to replace it altogether.

Think again of the Earth First! wilderness visions from back in the day. These were models of audacity, maps of giant reserved that outraged industry and embarrassed the "voices of reason" within the environmental movement. But they were also biological necessities. The reasonable debate over public lands management involved extinction for numerous species. Over the course of the years, increasingly "politically unrealistic" tracts of land received protections. By the end of Clinton's presidency, when he signed his Executive Order prohibiting roads in the vast majority of the remaining National Forest roadless areas, the open season on old-growth and wildlands that was deemed a political inevitability in the 1980s was largely over.

These victories would have been far more difficult or impossible without the direct action movement. But we didn't help win them by asking for them. We helped win them by declaring the laws that allowed for the destruction of living systems invalid, by declaring the destruction of public old-growth and wildlands to be over.

The fossil fuel resistance is doing a good job of framing our struggle as one in which we simply assert our right, and the right of all life, to continue to exist, rather than asking for this right from those who are robbing us of it. But we could be doing a lot better at the part where we actually have a clearly articulated, actionable alternative to the status quo.

This fight clearly will not be won by appealing to the existing political system on its own terms, by lobbying or convincing policymakers the crisis is dire. It will not be won by these "mass movements" everyone keeps talking about needing to build, if they don't have anything to do other than march in New York every once in awhile. That mass movement already exists. Nor will it be won by isolated direct action collectives occasionally striking blows to the fossil fuel economy.

This fight looks dire from anywhere you look, no doubt, but the place it looks most hopeful is precisely the unoccupied territory between the Big Greens and ourselves. If we can cultivate a mass movement that is no longer asking for an end to global catastrophe, but forcing one—a mass movement engaged not in marches but in constant economic disruption—and if that economic disruption occurs in a framework that is clear, detailed, and broad—a framework that could translate into policy—we may possess a shred of hope yet.

If we loathe speaking in terms that sound similar to those of federal laws and international treaties, this approach might make some of us a little uncomfortable. But with shellfish crumbling, coral reefs dying, wolverine dens melting, and forests burning—with all of life at stake—we should be willing to feel more than a little uncomfortable.

This is a holy war if there ever was one. We should be willing to do virtually anything to win it.