

Unmasking the Petro-Narrative: Shifting Discourse on Alberta's Oil Sands

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Historically, the public perception of oil and its influence on human society has been heavily influenced by narratives and rhetoric controlled by those who stand to benefit most from the capitalist distribution of oil. This propaganda-infected public discourse has played a large part in shaping the cultural attitudes around the tar sands in Alberta. While many Albertans feel that oil is essential to Alberta's economy and culture, it is difficult to tell how much of this feeling is based on truth, and how much of it is based on big oil's extensive marketing and public relations campaigns. Furthermore, much of the discourse around curtailing oil usage cites the possible catastrophic consequences of continued environmental abuse. While likely true, these images evoke feelings of loss and despair, which are likely less effective in persuading people to a cause. In this essay, I suggest that much of the support for the tar sands is due to a failure on the part of anti-oil and environmental advocates on affecting discourse and that a new strategy should be adopted in order to change the narrative about oil in Alberta. Specifically, I propose that anti-oil discourse adopt more similar rhetorical techniques as the pro-oil crowd to alter the Albertan public consciousness about the oil-sands controversy.

It is not a uniquely Albertan issue for oil discourse to be heavily influenced by selfish capitalist entities. Even though it is taken for granted, a large part of North American life is underpinned by a deliberately constructed, oil-dependent economy. As put by Timothy Mitchell in referencing oil capitalists' efforts to ensure their profitable business in the early 20th century, "The second method of preventing energy abundance involved the rapid construction of lifestyles in the United States organized around the consumption of extraordinary quantities of

energy.”¹ However, oil as a cultural symbol is taken perhaps even further in Albertan culture by being revered as integral to the province's very identity, as shown in contexts such as being the symbol of the Edmonton Oilers and Alberta being commonly known as the “Energy Province.” This cultural attitude is due in no small part to the efforts of similar capitalist interests to those who manufactured the American Dream. Randolph Haluza-Delay details how the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) has influenced Albertan attitudes towards oil in *Assembling Consent in the Tar Sands* by highlighting some of the narratives and rhetoric used to glorify oil.² Running a campaign called “Alberta is Energy” and using phrases such as “Energy is what makes us Albertan” are clear efforts to manipulate the minds of Albertans, yet they are still effective in winning over the support of a large portion of the population.³ Why is it that these campaigns are so effective in getting people to feel attached to something that clearly does so much harm, and how should one address these problems of discourse in order to unshackle Alberta from its oil-soaked identity? I suggest that it is the superior rhetorical techniques of the pro-oil lobby that undermine the well-documented problems of scarcity and environmental collapse commonly highlighted by the oil opposition.

1 Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*. London: Verso, 2011, 405.

2 Randolph Haluza-Delay "Assembling Consent in Alberta: Hegemony and the Tar Sands." In *A Line in the Tar Sands: Struggles for Environmental Justice*, edited by Toban Black, Tony Weis, Stephen D'Arcy, and Joshua Kahn Russell, 30-45. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014.

3 Haluza-Delay, “Assembling Consent in Alberta: Hegemony and the Tar Sands,” 37

Climate change and oil scarcity have been well-known topics of public conversation for decades, not just in Alberta but globally. Oftentimes, well-established scientific evidence is misrepresented and falsely opposed by pro-oil propagandists in order to make environmental concerns as confusing and opaque as possible for the general populace. Tactics such as the bankrolling of scientists and magnification of climate-change dissenting voices are outlined in Oreskes and Conway's *Merchants of Doubt*.⁴ These climate denying sentiments are displayed at all levels of society, from local Albertan blue-collar workers to Donald Trump broadcasting his doubts on climate change for the world to see during his presidency. It is very difficult for people to commit to concrete changes in their lives when, for many, climate change is still up for debate. Even though, among the majority of legitimate scientists, climate change is a fact, this does not prevent the public consciousness from being infected with propaganda. It seems as though when opposed by the skilled rhetoric of big oil, spitting out more numbers and facts about the potential consequences of climate change is not always effective in promoting belief or action. Instead, environmental advocates must consider the specific tactics and psychological mechanisms that are being targeted by pro-oil propagandists.

In Everything You Wanted To Ask Jacques Lacan About The Oil Sands But Were Too Afraid To Ask Professor Richard Kover explains specifically how the Canadian energy

⁴ Naomi Oreskes, and Erik M. Conway. "Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming." New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

establishment has used rhetoric to ostensibly align itself with the Albertan identity.⁵ Kover references Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to describe how the oil industry taps into the deeper psychological drives of Canadians by presenting oil as no mere commodity, but an integral part of identity and community.⁶ By utilizing Lacan's concepts of desire and symbolic order, Kover illustrates that the oil industry creates a fantasy where oil becomes the "object petit a," an elusive object of desire that promises to fill a lack inherent in the subject.⁷ The strategic deployment of this positive affect advertising and invocation of fundamental human values exploits the sensitive and unconscious parts of people's minds, thereby making them more receptive to pro-oil narratives. References to values such as patriotism, progress, and personal fulfillment help to effectively shift people's emotional focus away from environmental degradation and ethical concerns. Similarly, the concept of "frontier masculinity" detailed in *Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry* supports this idea by exemplifying how the oil industry uses deeply ingrained cultural symbols to solidify its dominance.⁸ The oil industry in Alberta has purposefully associated itself with symbols like the "cowboy hero" and frontier heroism, emphasizing

⁵ T.R. Kover, "Everything You Wanted To Ask Jacques Lacan About The Oil Sands But Were Too Afraid To Ask." In *"The Rhetoric of Oil in the 21st Century,"* Routledge, 2019, 211-226

⁶ Kover, "Everything You Wanted To Ask Jacques Lacan About The Oil Sands But Were Too Afraid To Ask."

⁷ Kover, "Everything You Wanted To Ask Jacques Lacan About The Oil Sands But Were Too Afraid To Ask."

⁸ Gloria E. Miller "Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry: The Experience of Women Engineers." *Gender, Work and Organization* 11, no. 1 (2004): 47-73.

qualities like rugged individualism and toughness.⁹ These cultural narratives align with Lacan's symbolic order by embedding oil deep into Albertan identity, both culturally and psychologically. These powerful associations have entrenched oil deep into the collective identity Albertans and consequently made climate change an even more distressing topic for many.

Marie Kari Norgaard further explores the psychological mechanisms of climate inaction in her chapter *Climate Denial: Emotion, Psychology, Culture, and Political Economy*.¹⁰ In contrast to Kover's article which speaks on the psychology of pro-oil sentiment, Norgaard investigates the apparent symptoms of psychological rejection regarding the realities of climate change. She posits that the lack of public response to climate change is not due to mere ignorance or apathy, but rather something akin to a "socially organized denial."¹¹ In the face of the frightening reality of climate change, motivated by emotions such as fear and guilt, people often engage in behaviors that maintain a sense of normalcy and avoid feeling the negative emotions that would typically come with such inaction. In other words, people are able to compartmentalize the different aspects of their lives and place their knowledge of climate change

⁹ Miller, "Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry: The Experience of Women Engineers." 47

¹⁰Kari Marie Norgaard, "Climate Denial: Emotion, Psychology, Culture, and Political Economy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, 396-413. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹¹ Norgaard, "Climate Denial: Emotion, Psychology, Culture, and Political Economy", 400

in a part of their mind that is not accessed in daily life. Espen Stoknes says something similar during a TED talk. He claims that people have been so bombarded with warnings and statistics that they have become desensitized to what he dubs “collapse porn.” To explain this “disaster fatigue,” Stoknes leans on current ideas within climate psychology suggesting layers of psychological barriers (distance, doom dissonance, denial, and identity) that allow people to disassociate from the immediacy of climate issues.¹² These resistances toward climate change, however, are not set in stone. People can be motivated and inspired towards action, but it will take a reappraisal of the ways in which anti-oil and green talks are conducted, especially in their rhetoric.

It is clear that a myriad of factors stand between how people currently feel about oil and the view environmental advocates hope to fashion in the near future. Not only do many Albertans identify culturally and economically with oil and oil sands developments, but even those who recognize its dangers feel complex social and psychological barriers to action. Current and past methods of climate advocacy have failed to fully combat these factors, and this is where a shift in strategy becomes crucial. Moving forward, it is paramount that climate advocates adopt more compelling and emotionally resonant methods of discourse, such as creating narratives and perhaps even adopting Lacanian calls to values and ideals as pro-oil discourse has utilized. This

12 Espen Stoknes,. "How to Transform Apocalypse Fatigue Into Action on Global Warming." TED Talk. Accessed June 8, 2024. https://www.ted.com/talks/espen_stoknes_how_to_transform_apocalypse_fatigue_into_action_on_global_warming.

may be fighting fire with fire, so to speak, but if that is what is necessary to change the public consciousness about oil and green futures, then that is what must be undertaken. This project would surely be multifaceted and require strategic deliberation on multiple fronts in order to combat all issues of perception that are currently faced. While an exhaustive strategy exceeds the scope of this paper, the following outlines key narratives and rhetoric that could best resonate with the current population of Albertans and motivate real change.

In order to get active participation and support for a green future, the first imperative would be to avoid making it a topic of tension and anxiety for Albertans and shift the tone in an optimistic direction. As articulated by Stoknes and Norgaard, if bombarded with warnings of catastrophe and apocalypse, people will eventually tune out in favor of listening to more appealing news and opinions. Not only that, but often talks about emissions and reducing oil usage often connote a loss of freedom to many people. For many people, the idea of not having a personal vehicle is alien and frightening. Worse yet, environmental discourse rarely mentions any additional freedom a green future would provide to offset the loss of oil and gasoline vehicles. This is where a shift from negative framing to positive framing must be established. Instead of motivating people to give things up through fear, the discourse should make people want to accelerate towards a better and more sustainable future. This can be accomplished through marketing and PR campaigns like those utilized by big oil for over a century. A campaign could highlight the ways in which people's lives would be directly affected for the better in the new future and could be centered around calls to values and ideals through a Lacanian signifier that resonates with Albertans. Imagine a campaign slogan such as "Pioneering a Sustainable Tomorrow" or "Innovation Drives Us Forward." These phrases evoke feelings of hope, resilience, and provincial pride instead of the helplessness and despair often agitated by

talks of climate catastrophe. By framing the transition to green energy as a continuation of Alberta's pioneering spirit and commitment to innovation, we can inspire a collective shift in mindset that embraces sustainability as the usurper of oil as the cornerstone of Albertan identity.

In conclusion, the pro-oil sentiments that are deeply embedded in the Albertan consciousness are not due to Albertans' genuine love of oil, but a result of well-crafted propaganda and psychological manipulation by powerful oil interests. To effectively challenge this narrative, environmental advocates in Alberta will need to adopt equally compelling strategies of affecting discourse in their favor. These new approaches to discourse should fill Albertans with hope and optimism, instead of the fear and dread much climate discourse has perpetuated in the previous decades. Through crafting narratives and highlighting potential futures that resonate with core Albertan values, advocates can inspire a collective shift towards sustainability. Only then can Alberta be unshackled from its oil-dependent identity and pave the way for a brighter and greener future.

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