

Preface

Popular discourses on looming catastrophes of all sorts tend to fall into two patterns: either we are doomed and there is nothing we can do about it or “the system” will fix itself and there is nothing we need to do about it. Both are, in a sense, excuses for ignoring alarm signals, and avoiding pro-active planning for change, in effect shielding complex problems from critical examination and reflection. Regardless of one’s interpretation of history, however, one would be hard-pressed to identify instances in which avoidance ever amounted to positive outcomes. This book is an attempt to dig deeper into just how avoidance becomes legitimated, even in those cases when doing something urgently would seem quite prudent. The case we focus on is the development of bitumen in northeast Alberta, Canada, known as the Athabasca tar sands, or more colourfully “Dirty Oil” to critics, and oilsands, or most recently “Ethical Oil” to proponents. The Athabasca tar sands has attracted the attention of concerned citizens across the globe. In response, state and industrial interests have made significant investments in research and technological innovations intended to “green” the bitumen extraction process, and even larger investments in discursive framing to assure observers that such technological innovation and new scientific knowledge will avert ecological catastrophe, among several other conceptual frames intended to divert or otherwise marginalise critical attention. Such efforts at reframing have met with mixed success. Many critics view such manoeuvres as efforts to justify the massive and destructive expansion of the tar sands for the purposes of generating wealth for the few, leading to a political dance played out on the media floor, in hearing rooms, and on the internet. Still other ramifications of non-conventional fuel development are entirely absent from political discourse, despite very good reasons for attention to them. The outcomes of such discursive theatre have at least as much to do with our present and future relationship to energy as do the activities of world leaders and petrochemical geologists, and are worth watching closely.

The Athabasca tar sands has received a significant amount of attention by journalists, politicians, and social movement activists, but relatively little from the social sciences. We consider this gap in urgent need of rectification, and hope that our contribution encourages further critical inquiry from the academy. While the Alberta

tar sands could be seen as just one of many industrial developments with harsh environmental consequences taking place across the globe today, and one that is in a rather remote geographic area that has not been subject to extensive global political attention previously, we consider this enterprise to have much deeper implications. Non-conventional fuels are those which require significantly larger amounts of inputs – in terms of raw materials, energy, labour, technology, processing, and so on – in order to transform them into a form that can be used. They are also, as one might anticipate, associated with much higher levels of waste and environmental degradation. To date, non-conventional fuels have not been developed extensively due to the relatively large input costs. More recently, however, increasing oil prices, combined with technological developments, and the precipitous decline in discovery rates of new conventional sources have drawn attention to the globe's several deposits of heavy oil, shale, bitumen, and deepwater reserves. Due in no small part to the perseverant advocacy of the Provincial state of Alberta, the Athabasca tar sands is the first large-scale non-conventional fossil fuel development that has become a significant producer of oil for the global marketplace. What happens here in the Athabasca tar sands could determine whether it is the first of many more such developments to come, or the last.

This book will contribute to the study of environmental and natural resource politics, and to the sociology of language and power, but on a much broader level, this book is about social change, a topic of urgent contemporary interest both within the academy and beyond. How modern social systems respond to our rapidly disintegrating relationship with easy energy can tell us much about the potential for collective agency on a macro-scale. As dictated by the context in which energy development occurs, we embrace contemporary conceptualizations of society as a complex system of flows and mobilities, rather than static entities, and yet simultaneously highlight the extent to which modernity is indelibly rooted in place, with both material and ideological implication. Within this turbulent system – as is the case in any dynamic, complex system defined by unpredictability and interconnected networks – lay sources of crisis, but also hope for positive societal transformation.

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Calamity

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