

Injustice anywhere threatens Justice everywhere

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I would like to start with a quote from a colleague, Larry Lohmann, who works with me at The Corner House: and then to ask a question, well several questions actually.

Larry was interviewed a year or so ago and asked about the work we do at Corner House. One of the questions put to him was: “What needs to change to achieve justice?”

Here’s Larry’s response:

“When the cry of injustice goes up from a crowd, it is usually an expression of a consciousness in the making. What’s happening to us? How does it happen? How does it work? Who is doing this to us? How are they making alliances against us? What alliances should we make?”

Larry’s point was (and is) that justice does not come in the form of some policy tool kit. We are not in the terrain of Blue Peter’s “Here’s-one-I-made-earlier” – of some ready-made set of policies that just have to be taken out of a box and implemented.

On the contrary, justice is better viewed as a dynamic process of discussion and enlightenment, as an expansion in the awareness of oppression.

This has important implications for political organising.

For the ‘policy demands’ that emerge (as they invariably do) from justice-as- discovery are not demands that are shaped by the need to formulate bullet points for busy politicians.

They arise from the pressing need to build alliances and to expand political space. They are born not of ‘politics as the art of the possible’ but of politics as ‘the art of the impossible’.¹

¹ Žižek, S. (1999) *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

Expanding awareness of oppression is key to this politics. For it is when people who may previously been opposed or indifferent to each other come to see something of their own struggle in someone else's, and vice versa, that the existing political constellation of what is possible is most vulnerable to change.

So that's Larry's quote. Now to the question.

And the question is this: what "flashes of mutual recognition" might arise from deepening processes of mutual learning between communities criminalised by the "War on Terror" and communities criminalised by what might be termed "The Securitisation of Everything". Those whose oppression is located, for example, in opposition to "Energy Security" or "Environmental Security".

I am thinking here of communities whose activists have been jailed, murdered (three a week in 2015) or placed under surveillance for opposing the expropriation of their land to create carbon sinks.

Or for questioning supposedly "green energy" projects such as windfarms that undermine their access to the land on which they rely for their survival.

Or for *supporting* windfarms but *opposing* fracking, oil pipelines and other forms of resources extractivism.

Or for fighting against laws that forbid the gathering of forest products from lands designated as national parks or carbon trading schemes.

I am thinking too of those whose lives and livelihoods are now subject to a new wave of enclosures as land, rivers, estuaries and forests in the South are "grabbed" by multinational corporations and investors from Europe and elsewhere in a scramble to acquire, produce and trade energy – all in the name of energy security.

Of those priced out of the energy market through privatisation programme, who now find themselves criminalised when they "steal electricity" from privatised grids – with one private electricity company in Uganda even calling for the death penalty for those caught.

And I am thinking of those at the sharp end of "energy security" policies that are being used to justify the increasing militarisation of energy supply routes and points of production.

And I wonder: what connects the criminalisation of communities through "energy" and "environmental" security or the War on Terror to previous waves of criminalisation that have

historically accompanied the expansion of capital? Criminalisations that have outlawed the mundane, plural protections that are necessary to ensure that everyone (not just the few) have a right to survival.

One obvious connection is the “security” promoted through the War on Terror or “energy security” is the security that matters to ruling elites; security of property and privilege, as well as access to enough force to contain any gains made, or to counter the resistance by the dispossessed or deprived.

For this is a world where “security” is all about “secure supply routes”, “secure markets” and “secure investment”. A world of defence treaties and trade agreements that protect the *security* of corporations against the local difficulties of national constitutions and popular resistance.

It is also a world which “security” is no longer just a background condition for social life – but about profit.

A world in which security is increasingly commodified and subjected to market logic.

New manufactured security threats emerge every day. Not just “energy” and “environment” but “the youth bulge” in the global south (all those civilisation-threatening young Arab youths), refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples resisting extractivism, kids playing computer games, you name it. Even women in countries where the UN has peacekeeping missions have been designated as a security threat because they might be infected by AIDS.

In sum, what Statewatch calls the “perpetuation of the sense of fear and insecurity” is now central to economic expansion.

The implications are clear. The War on Terror, in all its manifestations, and the accompanying criminalisation of communities is NOT something that can be “stopped” through campaigns to decriminalise specific communities, necessary and vital as these campaigns are.

Nor will the criminalisation of communities be challenged solely by revealing the racism, islamophobia, homophobia and other phobias that fuel such criminalisation, necessary and vital as it is to expose such manifestations.

For the criminalisation is structural. It is a necessary driver to the expansion of the system.

The pressure is to securitise everything.

Mines, oil fields, roads, transportation hubs, distribution outlets, even consumption patterns must be protected; not just here and there but *everywhere*.

Not just against the *expected* threat but also the *unexpected*.

Not just against “them” (whoever they may be) but also against “us” (who in a stroke of pen can be transformed into “them”).

In effect, *everything* must be protected against *everything*. For, once security is commodified, you can just never get enough “security”.

And each “securitisation” necessarily creates necessarily creates new communities to criminalise, not least because securitisation’s regime of “fear and insecurity” is a regime in which the very *right* to subsist is remorsefully undermined.

Fear of a slowing economy and result insecurity for the rich, for example, is being used to drive an infrastructure agenda that will displace millions worldwide.

Illustrative are plans to criss-cross the globe with a series of infrastructure corridors. No (inhabited) continent is excluded. Some of the plans are national in scale, others regional and still others (such as China’s One Belt One Road programme) continent-wide or near-global.

The driver is a very capitalist dilemma. What economists call the ‘production-consumption disconnect’.

Raw materials are now extracted from regions far from where they will be used. Goods manufactured in areas of cheap labour far from where they will be consumed.

And the longer that goods take to get to market, the greater the squeeze on profits.

Infrastructure corridors are the proposed “solution”. To cut the time between manufacturing a product and exchanging it, whole land masses and the seas connecting them are therefore to be reconfigured into ‘production and distribution hubs’, ‘transit zones’, ‘development corridors’, ‘export zones’, ‘spatial development initiatives’, ‘interconnectors’ and ‘intermodal logistics terminals’.

A new wave of “accumulation through dispossession” is thus threatened, creating new “objects” for criminalisation in the process. Communities who stand in the way of the intended new infrastructure. Migrants who, displaced from their sources of livelihood, are forced to seek a living elsewhere. And so on.

Resisting these trends is unlikely to cut much ice unless grounded in a deep structural understanding of the root causes, in this instance capital's relentless need to overcome space and time through "just-in-time" distribution systems.

Hence the insistence of the Southern movements with which I work on never being satisfied with proximate causes but always seeking to delve into the deeper historical entanglements that have brought us to where we are today.

And, in my view, it is amongst such movements – and such expanded awareness of oppression - that the most promising strategies for challenging the criminalisation of communities and other forms of "securitisation" are likely to emerge.

I count CAMPACC as a group that has always shown itself at the cutting edge of solidarity work.

My plea tonight would be to deepen the many relationships CAMPACC is already developing with communities that are criminalised not just because of the war on terror but because they resist the onslaught of capital on their means of collective survival.

And to create spaces where, through mutual learning and unlearning, new strategies of resistance can be explored.

For the need to break out of old moulds of organising is acute.

To give one example. Challenges to the "energy security" agenda often fall into two camps. One sees the way forward as simply changing the vocabulary. If "energy security" no longer means "keeping the lights on and homes heated" because it has been appropriated by capital for other ends, then let's banish the term and use, say, "energy democracy".

But such reflexes tend to miss how deeply embedded in modern history the ambiguity of energy security is – and why redefining it or eliminating it from the dictionary will be accomplished, if at all, only through political organising that takes on a wide range of issues.

Ditto, in my view, "national security".

For it is precisely the polyvalence of the word "security" that makes it such a convenient tool for politicians, bureaucrats and corporate chiefs.

Instead, one might find – as many of the movements in the South with whom I work are finding – that a more effective challenge is to root opposition in a different conversation,

particularly what the discourse on “energy security” (or “environmental security” for that matter) masks.

I have learned a great deal, for example, from the instance of unions in South Africa that energy cannot be treated as a matter of electrons whose supply must be “secured” but as a social issue and, above all, as a labour issue.

Understanding of the many entanglements between between labour and energy has proved eminent helpful in developing a more nuanced understanding of the many blockages to change.

One obvious entanglement is the intimate connection between climate, energy and the squeezing of labour to extract maximum surplus value.

China, for example, is now “the chimney of the world”. Between 2000 and 2006, CO2 emissions rose by 55%. Almost half of that increase was directly attributable to the production of commodities that were shipped overseas – half of them produced by joint ventures or increasingly wholly foreign-owned companies. And that increase in CO2 emissions doesn’t take account of emissions caused by the construction of factories, highways to service them, apartment blocks for works and so on. China’s emissions surge cannot be explained in other words by a boom in domestic consumption or “changing Chinese lifestyles” or attempts to expand energy infrastructure and other services to poorer people. On the contrary, the FDI-fuelled growth of coastal industry has been associated with an explosion of protest – from suicides at Foxcom to strikes and demonstrations.

So why have investors moved to China? Is it to escape stricter pollution controls at home? No: the cost of complying with environmental regulation has seldom been a significant factor in investment decisions.

Is it a response to demands by ‘western consumers’? We, we certainly consume many of the goods. But it is absurd to suggest that the CO2 emissions have been caused by western consumers insisting they will buy only Chinese goods.

No, if “the working class now have a Chinese address”, to use Zizek’s phrase, it is primarily because companies have relocated to China because labour there is cheap and disciplined – and because the rate of surplus value extraction promises to be higher. And this transfer has only been possible through a new round of massive consumption of fossil fuels. The linkage between climate change and labour could not be clearer.

This should not surprise us. Historical research by academics such as Andreas Malm has scrupulously documented how the adoption use of fossil fuels has been intimately woven into the history variously of controlling labour, shifting production around the globe in search of cheap labour, increasing competitiveness through replacing labour-saving machines, and the speeding up of exchange (and the attendant squeezing of labour time) through just-in-time delivery, faster transport systems etc.

If we look back at the early history of industrialisation in Britain, for example, it was not price that persuaded early cotton mill owners to switch from water to coal as an ‘energy’ source for their mills; it was the opportunities opened up for squeezing labour by bringing coal-fired steam engines to towns where it was easier to procure labour ‘trained to industrious habits’.

There are lessons here, particularly at a time when mainstream climate ‘solutions’ aimed at achieving an energy transition through market mechanisms (such as the EU ETS) are proving a busted flush.

One lesson is this. Capital will cling to oil, gas and coal for as long as possible. No other source of thermodynamic work – which is how capital views energy – is as convenient. Oil, coal and gas can be transported relatively easily. They can be stored easily – and freely by nature. They can provide 24/7 thermodynamic work in the remotest regions without having to build new supergrids or to develop as yet non-existent forms of storing electricity. They don’t require the redesign of whole cities. And so on.

So moving from oil, coal and gas is not simply a matter of getting prices right, or replacing oil, gas and coal-fired plants with renewables or finding new sources of energy to power cars. The entanglements of fossil fuels with industrial capitalism are too embedded to permit such an apolitical approach. Much more is being taken on than just power plants. For fossil fuels are commodities whose extraction, use and control are fundamental to the shaping of labour relations and the extraction of surplus value. To neglect this is not only to risk being side-tracked by ‘solutions’ which are frankly impractical or which are likely to end up with renewables playing an ‘add on’ role in predominantly fossil fuel energy systems, to the detriment of human and non-human survival; it is also to risk crushing defeats because the scale of the political forces lined up against change. While many might shy from “taking on capitalism”, the entanglements between capital and fossil fuels are such that to challenge a fossil fuel plant *is* to challenge modern capitalism.

Many over-simple ‘renewables-can-replace-fossil-fuels’ exercises fail to recognise this – and consequently underestimate the challenge posed to alternative energy generation precisely because they ignore or downplay the role that modern energy plays in controlling and squeezing labour through enabling capital to relocate around the globe, through enabling round the clock factory shifts and the economies of scale that make it possible to exploit more and more inaccessible sources of cheap labour and cheap resources.

We ignore these political and economic realities at our peril. Fossil fuels are not a mere incidental, or detachable, part of industrial society. They are integral to continued accumulation. And unless we put labour – and resistance to capitalist forms of work - at the heart of the debate on energy transitions, we are unlikely to see transformative change.

And that is what I hope we might be able to explore a little more today.