

How Russia's Ukraine War and the West's Response to it Accelerate Environmental Havoc

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In the midst of panic in energy markets - caused by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the West's sanctions policy - all climate goals and demands for environmental, let alone transition, justice are thrown out the window, warns us anthropologist, activist, and author Florin Poenaru in his fearless contribution to the BG's "After Extractivism" text series.

One of the immediate and long-term casualties of the Russian aggression against Ukraine is the climate and our collective capacity to prevent its further deterioration. The sound of Russian bombs fired against people and infrastructure in Ukraine silenced the stark warnings of the [sixth UN IPCC report](#). As an ominous sign of our current and future predicament, the Ukrainian scientists that contributed to the report had to leave the online meeting dedicated to the approval of the conclusions in order to take shelter. Immediate threats trump worries for the future.

It is no coincidence, but a symptom that the regime waging war against Ukraine is leading a nation-state that is among the world's ten biggest carbon-polluting and energy-consuming countries and, ultimately, a wannabe superpower whose might is based on extractivism: not just oil and gas, but also agricultural products and rare metals.

Prolonging the ruinous and murderous

Naomi Klein [wrote](#) about the nostalgia for a time when oil and gas could be extracted from the soil and pumped into the economy and subsequently into the atmosphere without having to face the consequences of a mass extinction. This nostalgia is, according to her, what unites Putin, Trump, and the Canadian truck convoys.

But for nostalgia and melancholia to set in, as Sigmund Freud wrote long ago, something must be lost first. Do we really face a crisis of the extractivist model that led to the pathway of climate catastrophe and extinction? Is Putin (or Trump, or Bolsonaro) fighting a lost battle in trying to prolong a state of affairs that is both ruinous and murderous? If anything, the war and the reaction to it point in the opposite direction: the quest for neo-extractivist avenues, policies, and rents in the global (post-)pandemic climate, marked by severe economic downturn and social upheavals.

Timothy Mitchell [insightfully noted](#) that the extraction and transportation of oil and gas require a smaller number of workers compared to coal - the 19th century prime source of energy for industrial capitalism. Being limited in numbers and having fewer opportunities to disturb extraction and transportation, the workers tend to submit to the working discipline imposed by their bosses and find it harder to organize themselves as a social force. Mitchell concludes that societies structured around the consumption of oil and gas tend to be less democratic, more authoritarian, and

increasingly dependent on heavy military power to protect their reserves.

Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the US Dollar

Russia and Saudi Arabia are typical examples of what Mitchell refers to. They both fulfill particular functions within the global capitalist system and their (authoritarian) political regimes, including their differences, are an expression of their extractivist political economy. Gas and oil from Russia has been fueling the German economy, the driving force of the EU, which in turn has become an essential part of the global market as a whole.

This well-known and well-documented dependence is not least a thorn in the side of the USA, because Nord Stream 2, the 1,234-km natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany running through the Baltic Sea, financed by Gazprom and several European energy companies, was not only intended to deepen it, but also meant to expand the [formation of a large Eurasian alliance](#), which Washington has been trying to prevent ever since. The war of aggression against Ukraine postponed or even canceled the inauguration of Nord Stream 2, but the problem still stands.

On its part, Saudi Arabia makes possible the existence of the petro-dollar system. All transactions for oil are denominated in dollars, which are then recycled through Wall Street banks. This constant demand for dollars allows the US government to run high deficits and print more money without fear of default or spiraling inflation.

The mindset of extractivism

Now let us return to extractivism, which has been so central to the global political economy since the 16th century.

“Greening” the capitalist economy will not make a difference - except for opening up some avenues for capital accumulation in conditions of low rates of profitability. As long as the drive for profit and growth remains central to the system, extractivism will prevail. Not just as a source of raw materials to feed the system, but also as a mindset according to which nature, landscape, people, and practically everything can and should be mined. Aren't crypto-currencies the latest and most blatant instantiation of this drive?

Extracting, mining, digging: they are all keywords that define the Spanish submission of the Americas in the 16th century and the western expansion that took place in the United States in the 19th century. Both are key moments in solidifying colonialist Western modernity that in turn made possible the global world as we know it. Both entail a frontier mentality: territories that are conquered and that subsequently need to be guarded in order to preserve one's interests and strategic positions. The deep roots of the “realist” position in international relations theory are planted in this extractivist and expansionist soil.

The war of aggression against Ukraine brought back on the agenda both extractivism and realism. The speed with which this ‘agenda reset’ happened convinced me that it has less to do with the urgency of the moment (the intolerable loss of life of Ukrainian citizens), but with an ingrained reaction of the capitalist system to use any crisis to its advantage.

Naomi Klein aptly noted: “Within hours of the invasion, every planet-torching project that the climate justice movement had managed to block over the past decade was being frantically rushed back onto the table by right-wing politicians and industry-friendly pundits: every canceled oil pipeline, every nixed gas export terminal, every protected fracking field, every Arctic drilling dream. Since Putin's war machine is funded with petrodollars, the solution we are told, is to drill, frack, and

ship more of our own.”

Defeating Russia’s extractivism with more extractivism?

This is how neo-extractivism comes into play. What is new about it is that it seems to respond to some ethical and moral duties: punish the Russian state for its aggression against Ukraine. However, this response relies on more oil being pumped out by e.g. Saudi Arabia, a regime not exactly famous for its democratic nature and love of peace. To keep in check the skyrocketing prices of oil after the US banned the import of oil from Russia, the US government strong-armed the Saudis and the Iraqis to extract more oil and through it into the global markets. The underlying calculus: Russia’s extractivism can only be defeated by more extractivism in other crucial nodes of the global economy.

Most dramatically, the EU got caught into its own contradictions, which the war only further magnified. Until recently, the EU was, at least rhetorically, one of the most progressive actors in drawing attention to and taking concrete steps against climate breakdown. Now these plans are shelved. Those who hoped that EU’s dependency on Russian gas and oil will be resolved in the direction of renewables and “greener” sources were severely disappointed.

Germany announced that it would explore importing LNG, both more expensive and more polluting. Investments in gas and oil infrastructure are off the shelves again and in serious consideration. Nuclear power, [officially greenwashed](#) shortly before the war, has its heyday again. Even Germany might revoke its decision to phase out nuclear energy, make a U-turn, and start investing again. While this comeback takes place despite threats of a nuclear war, risks are being downplayed along the lines of “Don’t worry, nuclear is fine if you do not live near a uranium mine or a nuclear power plant.” As I write this, the price for uranium is at a historical high, registering a spike since February 2022. In this context it seems safe to predict an uranium-rush that will intensify extractivism.

Coal, too, is back. Already the consumption of coal was at record highs in 2021 as demand for energy after the pandemic soared. The UK announced plans to open a coal pit months before the war in Ukraine started. When it did, it offered countries like Poland the pretext to intensify mining and thus defy the European Commission that pressured the country into closing for years. Romania announced that it will enhance extraction in its remaining coal mines. At the same time the country also sped up the plans to explore its gas reserves in the offshore of the Black Sea.

The oil and gas from Russia that is now boycotted in the US and Europe (though the pipe crossing Ukraine is still working at full capacity) is not going to disappear. These commodities will be rerouted to China, India and other places of the Global South that are energy-hungry. To compensate for the lower prices on these markets and for the effects of the economic sanctions, Russia will have to extract and sell more. The situation is similar with its rare metals.

Whose energy sovereignty?

The age of neo-extractivism that the current war in Ukraine accelerated rather than designed will also be accompanied by a growing sense of realism in international relations. According to the realist doctrine – to put it briefly – states have their own existential interests and they are entitled to pursue them at any cost as long as they have power to do so (military, economic, geopolitical, etc.).

The prevalence of realism was already visible in the early stages of the pandemic in 2020 when more powerful states (like the US globally, or Germany in the EU) were able to monopolize scarce resources at the expense of other countries which were sometimes more affected by the pandemic. This state of affairs will only continue to grow. It is already clear that more and more countries talk about energy sovereignty and enhanced security capabilities. But pursuing one’s state immediate

interest is inimical to a global concentrated effort that is needed in order to tackle climate catastrophe. Energy sufficiency will trump these concerns for the foreseeable future.

Realism is a doctrine of power. The more power a country has, the more it is able to protect and promote its interests. Historically, the typical way to do this has been through military power. The war in Ukraine has led to a dramatic demand from states to buy more weapons. Germany, again, is a case in point. NATO's plans to reinforce its eastern frontier entail the purchase and deployment of ever more sophisticated military mechanisms. The US army, at the heart of NATO, is already responsible for more carbon emissions than 140 countries and is the [single most polluting institution in the world](#).

Irrespective of the outcome of the war in Ukraine chances are that the capitalist world will experience a new Cold War, this time truly involving the entire planet. During the previous one, the CO₂ emissions in the atmosphere reached record-high levels and led to our current predicament in which 3C temperature rise by the end of this century appear already as a distinct possibility with horrendous social and environmental consequences. It is hard to believe that a new Cold War will do anything to reverse this trend. Instead it will accelerate it. As such, it will be a hot Cold War - if we do not do everything we can to correct all the undesirable developments described above.

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P.S.

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