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# Activism and the Fossil Fuel Industry by Andrew Cheon and Johannes Urpelainen

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**Activism and the Fossil Fuel Industry by  
ANDREW CHEON AND JOHANNES  
URPELAINEN**

Routledge, 2018 \$41.95 USD

Reviewed by **ALEXANDRA SIMPSON**

*Activism and the Fossil Fuel Industry* by Andrew Cheon and Johannes Urpelainen investigates the anti-fossil fuel movement in North America and its impact on global climate policy. The monograph is an important but challenging project given that the movement is still underway. The authors seek to better understand activist motivation, mobilization techniques and scope, and the overall and potential impact of the movement on policy, governments, industry, and modern social ecologies. Cheon and Urpelainen provide strong evidence that the movement is in a good place to influence climate change policy in the coming decades.

Cheon and Urpelainen regard activist motivation as key to understanding the movement's success and its decisions to target such a powerful enemy as the fossil fuel industry. Activist motivation is attributed to the belief in the ecological paradigm<sup>1</sup>—"a worldview that emphasizes the primacy of life and nature over economic growth" (9)—which makes the fossil fuel industry a clear enemy, as hydrocarbon use directly impedes access to a healthy environment for the pursuit of economic gain. Each small win the movement achieves is backed by the ecological paradigm. Therefore every pipeline or fracking project stopped reflects the core values of the movement. The

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<sup>1</sup> The ecological paradigm is first related to activism in *The Pipeline and the Paradigm* (2013) by Samuel Avery.

combination keeps spirits high, inspires more to join the cause, and connects local mobilization to global politics.

Chapter 2 succinctly lays out the immense social, political, and economic power the fossil fuel industry holds in modern life. The authors pull together leading research on the impact of fossil fuels and detail the industry's contribution to global climate change and environmental destruction. This discussion helps to identify the difficulties that lie ahead for the anti-fossil fuel movement, specifically its goal to stigmatize fossil fuels.

Cheon and Urpelainen make clear the complexity of the energy problem. While it is easy to blame the fossil fuel industry as a primary contributor to global warming, it is perhaps more difficult to account for how an increasing energy demand will be accommodated in the coming years. The International Energy Agency (IEA) predicts that world energy demand will increase by 37 percent between 2012 and 2040 (24). This not only presents global leaders with a major challenge as to how to meet this demand in the age of global climate change, but since most of the growth will occur in non-OECD countries such as China and India, such growth also presents a challenge to the anti-fossil fuel movement. The movement's focus on local and grassroots organizing has been a large part of its success. Such tactics, while responsible for the mass mobilization of activists in North America, also serve to limit the movement's impact globally.

*Activism and the Fossil Fuel Industry* describes three potential challenges to the movement: 1) it does not offer specific policy proposals; 2) its difficulty reaching a more conservative audience; and 3), its limited ability to address the global impacts of climate change and to inspire support

from activists around the world. Despite these potential roadblocks, the authors remain positive about the impact of the movement and believe critics have discounted its potential to influence climate policy in the coming years.

To develop a deeper understanding of the anti-fossil fuel movement as a whole, Cheon and Urpelainen analyse four campaigns (Divestment, Keystone XL Pipeline, Coal, and Anti-fracking) through an evaluation matrix that includes activist motives, mobilization potential, impact, and weaknesses. Their research uses writings and statements from activists, academic literature on social movements, journalistic accounts, interviews, and their own findings from participation in activist meetings and events. The combination of academic literature with Cheon and Urpelainen's focus on "activist subjective opinions and goals" is a very strong formula to develop a better understanding of a burgeoning people's movement. Such an analysis allows the authors to be both sympathetic to and critical of the anti-fossil fuel movement (65).

In the conclusion, Cheon and Urepalainen compare the four campaigns based on their weaknesses and strengths. While the outcomes of their research are mostly positive and recognize that activism is a necessary catalyst for change, the authors also state that "shutting down fossil fuel companies is . . . not a plausible solution" (214), because of the complexity of climate change and the rise of global energy demands in the near future. They suggest that solutions will need to be collaborative.

Perhaps a shortfall of the book is that it does not fully consider the incredible leadership of Indigenous activists in the anti-fossil fuel movement. This is an

important oversight for readers to be aware of, since Indigenous activists are often on the frontlines of anti-fossil fuel debates, and Indigenous communities in North America are disproportionately affected by irresponsible industry practices (e.g., Oker, Maclean, Preston, and Kulchyski and Warren). Though the book does not claim to take an explicitly anti-colonial perspective when contemplating the future of the anti-fossil fuel movement, and the various worldviews necessary for a post-fossil fuel world, the contributions of Indigenous activists are a necessary part of the conversation.

Cheon and Urepalainen's *Activism and the Fossil Fuel Industry* is a useful text for researchers and activists interested in understanding the potential impact of the anti-fossil fuel movement, and the challenges it will be confronted with in the coming years. It brings together social movement theory with actual case studies of anti-fossil fuel activism emerging out of the United States and growing in popularity across North America. The importance of such an analysis will be forthcoming as the effects of global climate change become more severe and the movement seeks to challenge the dominance of an extremely powerful enemy with equal intensity.

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