

Research project description

Relevance and motivation

Canada is one of the world's largest oil producers/exporters and it has the largest commercially exploitable tar sands reserves in the province of Alberta. Tar sands extraction and crude oil pipeline expansion across Canada have become highly contested issues in recent years because of their negative socio-environmental impacts, such as deforestation, air and water pollution, and land rights violations. Among these, the emission of greenhouse gases from tar sands operations is particularly problematic because Canada is among the world's largest carbon polluters per capita. Despite Canada's strategy to reduce its carbon emissions to net-zero by 2050 and achieve climate neutrality, tar sands activities are the fastest-growing source of emissions in the country. This situation raises several questions about the limitations and contradictions of Canada's climate policy.

Tar sands activities have met resistance from Indigenous-led movements, comprised of environmental organizations, citizens, and Indigenous peoples, particularly First Nations. They argue that Indigenous land rights have been systematically ignored by the oil industry and the Canadian state (including the federal, provincial, and municipal governments) when planning tar sands projects. First Nations, particularly in the province of British Columbia, have never ceded their land rights to the Canadian state and therefore still have decision-making authority over their lands. Critics also point out that oil corporations, large financial institutions, and government elites with high carbon footprints benefit the most from tar sands use, while First Nations who have contributed less to climate change, are disproportionately impacted by tar sands operations. Climate justice, Indigenous self-determination, and land sovereignty issues then lie at the core of social opposition to tar sands operations as demonstrated by several disputes over fossil fuel pipelines.

A notable example is the struggle over the controversial government-owned Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project (TMX) in Alberta and British Columbia (BC). While the federal government, the Alberta government, and the oil industry claim this project will create jobs, promote economic growth and protect the environment, anti-pipeline movements argue the TMX violates Indigenous land rights, increases carbon emissions, and obstruct a just energy transition. Through blockades, court challenges, and street demonstrations, these movements seek to stop the TMX.

Research aims and contribution to the scientific literature

The aim of this research project is to explore how the material and sociopolitical spaces for tar sands extraction, distribution, and consumption across Canada are produced, contested, and transformed. Linking political ecology of oil and energy geographies perspectives provides a useful analytical framework for studying how tar sands spaces are (re)shaped by competing discourses, identities, knowledge systems, values, and worldviews. While previous research in these fields has examined tar sands conflicts among First Nations, oil corporations, and the Canadian state, little attention has been paid to how these power dynamics are central to the configuration of tar sands spaces. This research contributes to debates on tar sands struggles by arguing that these spaces are structured around: 1) First Nations land dispossession; 2) the disruption of their conceptions of the land, and 3) the geographically and socially uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of tar sands operations. Drawing on the case of the TMX conflict, this research explores how the Canadian state and the oil industry legitimize tar sands activities by claiming ownership over

First Nations lands and framing the TMX as a project of national interest that contribute to economic development and sustainability. Special attention here is given to how Canada's net-zero policy considers tar sands operations as sustainable despite its high carbon footprint and the use of unproved carbon and storage technologies (CCS). Equally relevant, this research emphasizes how Indigenous-led movements shape tar sand spaces by physically obstructing tar sands transportation through blockades and influencing energy decision-making processes through court cases and street mobilization. The TMX case elucidates here the possibilities and limitations of First Nations-led movements to dismantle the power structures embedded in tar sand spaces.

Achievements

This research project employs qualitative methods, including document analysis, critical discourse analysis, participant observation, and interviews. Through document analysis, materials about tar sands conflicts have been systematically collected, reviewed, analyzed, and interpreted, including court records, legislation, policy reports, newspaper articles, peer-reviewed papers, public hearing transcripts, websites, among others. Document analysis has been relevant for examining the contested perspectives, values, knowledges, and discourses that co-constitute tar sands spaces. In addition to this method, critical discourse analysis has been carried out to interpret and explain how imaginaries of tar sands development mobilized by the Canadian state and the oil industry strongly influence decisions about where to extract tar sands and build pipelines, where to deliver crude oil, and who benefits and loses from tar sands operations. Critical discourse then has been useful to understand these hegemonic imaginaries as a key underlying component of tar sands spaces. Simultaneously, it has offered insights into the narratives used by grassroots movements to fight the inequalities and injustices associated with crude oil pipelines. Here, participant observation and interviews in British Columbia and online (given the COVID-19 restrictions on international travel and public gatherings) have been conducted to engage with anti-pipeline movements and grasp their motivations for opposing the construction and expansion of hydrocarbon infrastructures. Combining these methods has allowed me to gather information to present at academic conferences and write and publish papers.

Next steps

Fieldwork in the cities of Calgary, Edmonton, and Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, is planned from 01. May to 09. May of 2023. This research stay is necessary for the successful completion of my doctoral studies for the following reasons. First, conducting expert interviews, archival research, and critical discourse analysis is key to collecting data for writing and publishing my third and last paper, which focuses on how Canada's net-zero policy for the tar sands sector produces climate injustice. Using the above-mentioned methods will provide an in-depth analysis of how contested perspectives on Canada's net-zero strategy shape uneven tar sands spaces. While the Canadian state frames tar sands projects like the TMX as "sustainable" to justify tar sands expansion on Indigenous lands and obstruct climate action, anti-pipeline movements highlight the inequalities and injustices arising from the net-zero policy. Second, it is important to study how anti-tar sands protests in Alberta unfold as the province's economy heavily relies on tar sands extraction and public support for this economic activity is higher than in BC. To this end, energy policy experts in universities, think tanks, and other institutions in Calgary and Edmonton could provide detailed insights into the limitations and contradictions of Canada's net-zero plan. And third, visiting Alberta's tar sands reserves in Fort McMurray is relevant to gain first-hand experience on the research object I am studying.