

“Shut Down Canada”

From a Politics of Appeal to a Politics of Disruption

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The state seems distraught. Its corporate partners seem panicked. Wet’suwet’en land defenders, their resistance to extractives capital and invading police—and the solidarity actions in support of them, expanding and spreading—have reshaped political action and outlook across so-called Canada.

Under the broad banner of #ShutDownCanada, direct actions in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en—blockading rail lines, port entrances, ferry terminals—have moved from protest politics aimed at expressing dissent to political actions that actually bring economic activity to a halt—that show rather forcefully the power that non-elites have to stop economic power in its tracks (no pun intended).

In so doing, they are transforming politics in Canada and unsettling notions of activism, dissent, and protest.

The Shut Down Canada actions have moved politics from the familiar and conventional terrain of protest (a politics of appeal, making requests of powerholders) to a politics based on the self-identified needs and interests of the people themselves.

They have moved beyond a politics of appeal based on gestures to state benevolence or enlightenment to a politics of command that centres communities of the exploited and oppressed based on their own priorities, not those of the state and capital—colonial governments and extractives companies—or what powerful institutions are willing to grant.

Rather than asking governments or corporations not to pursue a path that is viewed as harmful, as conventional protests do, disruptions block that path, directly and literally.

Land defenders and allies, recognizing that corporate interests in profit-making are behind state invasions of Indigenous territories, have turned to economic disruptions that exact a real, material cost on capital—disruptions that impede or interrupt profit-making.

Targets are selected on the basis of economic or industrial significance and the potential costs to business of shutting them down. Logistical choke points, such as ports, rail lines, and border crossings, have thus made a great deal of tactical sense and been the prime targets for direct actions of economic disruption.

More than 200 people blocked West Broadway at Cambie Street—one of Vancouver’s busiest intersections and a major transfer point for the Canada Line—at rush hour on February 11.

Political sites, such as the provincial legislature in Victoria and specific politicians' constituency offices—notably the attorney general, who oversees provincial law enforcement, and the minister of environment and climate change—have also been targeted. Not on the basis of appeals to those politicians but on the basis of interrupting everyday politics as usual.

And the politicians and their corporate sponsors have registered this shift in politics; they have recognized rather quickly what it all means. And what it could mean if it continues to grow and multiply. Rather than appealing to their better sensibilities (which they lack in any event), the economic disruptions hit them directly where it hurts: the bank account.

Seeing Beyond Conventional Politics

Much of what is viewed as political activism or dissent has come to be viewed through a narrow social lens. This lens frames political action as legitimate or illegitimate. In my fourth-year class on community advocacy and human rights, I'm often surprised to find that many students initially view anything beyond symbolic protests as riots, without distinction.

Social scientists have too often echoed the limited presentations of "activism". In the foundational work *Gramsci Is Dead*, political sociologist Richard Day notes that sociologists and social-movement theorists have focused almost exclusively on appeals-based politics to the exclusion of direct action. In fact, Day suggests, sociologists have a hard time even recognizing direct actions in their studies, let alone understanding them.

The same can be said of politicians. And this, it seems, is a source of their fears. They want to push the wave of direct action into a familiar political bucket: the container of "legal" or "peaceful" or symbolic protest.

These attempts are shown in numerous calls by politicians to criminalize land defenders engaged in direct action, to label them as somehow violent or even terrorist, as Tory Leader Andrew Scheer suggested in Parliament in late February. Alberta premier Jason Kenney followed this with the instantly infamous Bill 1, which criminalizes a wide range of activities that could be perceived as economic disruption (including, potentially, labour strikes).

One of the downtown entrances to the Port of Vancouver was blockaded more than once in February by supporters of the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs, leading to a public appeal by a prominent nearby local business owner that backfired.

Businesses, too, are struggling to grapple with the new direct-action politics of #ShutDown-Canada. Witness the unfortunate public plea of Vancouver's Gourmet Warehouse founder Caren McSherry, who provoked much ire against her company with a rather misguided plea for protesters to return to a politics of appeal on a local radio show: "Just stop with these protests. Make noise on the sides. Don't inconvenience families." Meanwhile far-right vigilantes have taken it upon themselves to assail land defenders and tore down a blockade near Edmonton.

Despite their less familiar appearances, economic disruptions are by no means new tactics. They are the logic of strikes (stopping production and/or distribution) and, to a certain extent, boycotts (disrupting circulation of goods or services). This was acknowledged by the recent motion passed by the Vancouver and District Labour Council to ask labour unions, labour organizations—including the Canadian Labour Congress and B.C. Federation of Labour—and members to treat the blockades like picket lines during a strike. Blockades, too, have been part of the histories of environmental politics. Remember the blockades against clear-cut logging in British Columbia.

The challenge for the solidarity movements will be fending off the attempts to contain them, as they are already grappling with the threats of injunctions and arrests and a heightened turn toward criminalization.

Anti-Colonial Political Futures?

It cannot be overstated that these direct actions have been inspired by and led by Indigenous people, including, and perhaps especially, Indigenous youth. And they have made clear that they are not protesters, they are protectors. Unlike conventional social movements that are often idealistic, based on concern for an issue that might be external to participants, the solidarity actions are rooted in communities and their material conditions—the very conditions of Canada’s ongoing colonial imposition, from Wet’suwet’en to Six Nations to Tyendinaga to Kahnawake.

A 1993 protest on the B.C. legislature lawn targeted the clear-cutting of old-growth forests around Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island.

Significantly, the diverse actions of disruption have been decentralized and autonomous. New coalitions have formed, such as the Wet’suwet’en Solidarity-Coast Salish Territories in so-called Vancouver. These have brought together some long-time organizers but have also mobilized many people with no political-group affiliations and many people new to political action. These coalitions act on the basis of solidarity with and respect for Wet’suwet’en land defenders and act accordingly.

Notably, the solidarity actions have called into question the state’s appeals to rule of law as the guideline for political legitimacy (at least as hoped for by governments and businesses) and turned instead to the recognition of Wet’suwet’en law, which the governments and extractives companies are seen to ignore or sideline.

Issues of Indigenous sovereignty, land rights, and title have come to the forefront of political action and have taken central importance for non-Indigenous allies in ways that politics in Canada have not experienced. It remains to be seen how things develop, but in moments the very legitimacy of government institutions, laws, and policies have been called into question, their foundations challenged. This could prove transformational for politics in the country and puts discussions of decolonization in Canada on a perhaps different footing than prior to the RCMP raids on the Wet’suwet’en.

It is potentially quite significant that for many people engaging in political action for the first time, or early in their activism, their frame of reference will not be symbolic politics geared toward attempts to shame or reform or make requests of power. They are not oriented to the habits or forms of conventional politics, protest as usually imagined. Instead, they are beginning from a starting point of direct action.

Their expectations and outlooks are not limited by the constraints of a politics whose horizon is what politicians or corporations find to be viable, permissible, reasonable, or even legal. Their politics are driven by what people suffering economic and political domination (colonialism, exploitation, marginalization, racism) actually need and want, and by the necessary means to achieve those. Not on terms set by those who they view as the source of domination in the first place.

So people troubled by the blockades may have to realize that these are only the opening act of a new political reality in Canada. Politics not as usual. Because after Shut Down Canada, making noise on the sides may no longer be an option.

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