

# NO PIPELINE TO UTOPIA:

## IDEOLOGY, DISAVOWAL, AND THE POLITICS OF THE TRANS MOUNTAIN EXPANSION

**ISAAC THORNLEY, PHD IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES**

*Isaac Thornley (he/him) is a third-year PhD Candidate in Environmental Studies, a Teaching Assistant, and a freelance communications professional. He is interested in producing research, advocacy, and educational content that supports movements for social and environmental justice in Canada and beyond. He works as a Research Assistant on Prof. Dayna Nadine Scott's SSHRC-funded project, "Infrastructure beyond Extractivism: Material Approaches to Restoring Indigenous Jurisdiction." Here, he works with a team of research assistants on a collaborative report that analyzes the future of Ontario's electric vehicle battery supply chain and the implications for Indigenous jurisdiction, extractive development, and environmental/climate justice.*

**Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.**

I have been a graduate student in environmental studies at the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change at York U since 2018, completing my Master's in 2020, and currently in year three of my PhD program. "Environmental studies" is an inherently interdisciplinary field, because "environment" can be defined and understood in so many ways and at different scales of time and place. I would describe my field as environmental politics, drawing inspiration from environmental and energy humanities approaches, critical political ecology, and critical theory (especially psychoanalytic Marxist theories of ideology).

Before graduate school, I worked as a communications coordinator in the nonprofit sector in Toronto. I continue to work as a freelance communications specialist, graphic designer, and web developer. Most recently, I have been working as the acting communications coordinator of Social Planning Toronto. In general, my professional experience outside academia has revolved around writing, design, and website content management for organizations that advocate for affordable housing, transit, infrastructure, social justice

and equity, and more social services for families and communities in need.

Relating my professional and academic experiences, I would say that I am interested in both the limits and opportunities of using digital media to advance emancipatory political goals, and support social movements and organizations.

**Tell us about your dissertation work and how it relates to the study of Canada.**

My dissertation project is about how consent (or "social license") for the Trans Mountain Expansion (TMX) project has been produced and resisted — the appeals, justifications, fantasies, and forms of disavowal that circulate in the public discourses surrounding the project, but also the forms of resistance undertaken by Indigenous land defenders and communities, social and environmental movements, and other actors (such as certain labour unions, environmental non-governmental organizations, etc.).

I am approaching the TMX as both (1) a symptom of broader political-economic conditions generating socio-ecological harms and conflicts, and (2) a fetish, i.e., a symbol that stands in or substitutes for a range of long-standing and emergent forms of

socio-ecological conflicts. The TMX is a real, material force that stands to introduce new harms and risks to specific communities, lands, and waters; it is also discursively significant, a flashpoint of environmental conflict in Canada, a piece of physical infrastructure saturated with conflicting meanings and values.

In the context of Canadian pipeline politics, the TMX is remarkable because the federal government purchased and currently owns the project. The cost of the project has ballooned to over \$30 billion, making it arguably the single largest one-off subsidy to the fossil fuel industry in Canadian history. As economist Robyn Allan has argued, the TMX is essentially a massive subsidy for oil shippers provided primarily by Canadian taxpayers. The TMX also highlights many of the political and socio-ecological conflicts that constitute Canada (settler colonialism, fossil capitalism, an economy that has historically been predicated on the extraction and export of staple commodities, etc.).

### **What inspired you to do this work?**

I was broadly drawn to graduate school to understand climate change politics in light of a psychoanalytic theoretical approach. The slogan of what Mark Fisher called “capitalist realism” – that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism – has been my main political-intellectual inspiration. Pipeline conflicts have been probably the most visible form of environmental conflict in North America in the 2010s and 2020s. Understanding how and why specific social actors are pushing for a collective commitment to more fossil fuel infrastructure and extraction at a point where the ecological crisis is immanently unfolding seemed like the best possible way to critically analyze the capitalist realism of the climate predicament.

### **What are key takeaways you want others to come away with?**

- 1.** Canadian pipeline conflicts occur at the intersection of deeper socio-ecological conflicts that have a much longer history in Canada and North America (settler colonialism, fossil capitalism, and the constitution of Canada as a staple-exporting and resource-extracting nation).
- 2.** While energy transition and decarbonization are necessary, they can also be used to promote and justify other forms of ecological degradation and social injustice. The TMX has been promoted, in part, on the basis of generating revenues for clean energy futures and promoting reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. We should be attentive to how energy transition and decarbonization might also be implemented to promote other kinds of neo-colonial and extractive practices (e.g., critical mineral development that violates the consent of Indigenous peoples).
- 3.** Similar to other past pipeline and infrastructure projects, the TMX has been consistently justified as a form of “critical infrastructure” in the “national interest.” This provided the federal government with a justification to purchase the project before selling it back to the private sector. It is necessary to challenge the following assumptions: (1) that fossil fuel development is part of the “national interest,” (2) that pipelines are “critical infrastructure,” and (3) that the kind of neoliberal nationalization undertaken by the federal government in relation to TMX is the best way to use public spending to develop infrastructure that will contribute universally to the wellbeing and “interest” of people throughout Canada. In short, there are better – more ecologically sustainable and more socially just – ways to spend \$30 billion on “critical infrastructure” in the “national interest” (e.g., affordable housing, public transit, regional transit, renewable energy infrastructure, etc.).

**Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.**

The TMX is a massive project that has (rightfully) commanded significant critical research already. In addition, there is a tremendous number of potential sources to consider in researching the TMX (both primary and secondary), including regulatory filings, legal decisions, policy documents, government announcements, politicians' speeches and public discourse, journalistic writing, academic research, the statements of land defenders and organizers, Indigenous-led risk assessments, etc. With so much available to read, analyze, and include in my own research, it can be overwhelming and difficult to know what to include and exclude (especially given my own resource and time constraints).

**What do you enjoy the most about the work you do?**

There is a tremendous amount of privilege in being permitted the time (and some funding) to attempt to understand some of the high-stakes issues unfolding around me. I like being able to study aspects of the social world that feel important, meaningful, and complicated. Perhaps most of all, I like being able to take a side and feel that even if I fail to speak to an issue in all of its nuance and detail, at least I am doing my best to honestly represent my own understanding and position at a given moment in time. Being able to deliberately and autonomously undertake a research program to understand a set of issues that feel pressing and contemporary is an opportunity that every single person should be able to enjoy and struggle through, if they so choose.

**What advice, lessons, or tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?**

A professor who I admire greatly once told myself and a group of graduate students that when developing research questions for a proposed project, it is important to include genuine research questions, i.e., questions to which you presently lack an answer and have a genuine curiosity to attempt to find out an answer.

I would also say to fellow graduate students: stop switching your topic! People lose a lot of time switching their topic. Pick something, commit to it, and struggle through it. And don't put too much pressure on yourself to make your dissertation your magnum opus or the research project that will realize the perfect synthesis of theory and praxis. The dissertation is the first step toward long-form academic research not the endpoint; ideally you will have many more years ahead of you to undertake research with more funding and institutional support. Do a project that is meaningful but also feasible.

**What are the next steps in your research?**

I am mid-way through my dissertation writing and I plan to be successfully defended by Summer 2024. I am currently planning my postdoctoral research program, which will focus on the future of electric vehicle battery production in Ontario, the political conflicts surrounding critical mineral extractivism, and alternative visions of mining and mobility.