

# Canadian Resistance to the Northern Gateway Oil Pipeline

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The global commodities boom of the first decade of the twenty-first century has focussed attention back to extractivism as a development path. While this debate has specific local characteristics—for example, ‘re-primarization’ in some Latin American countries, ‘land grabbing’ in parts of Africa, and a quest for ‘energy superpower’ status in Canada—they can all be seen as part of a wider concern over, and resistance to, the global dynamics of extractivist capitalism.

This paper has two purposes. The first is to provide a theoretical framework in which extractivism can be understood globally and within which specific country and regional debates can be situated. The second is to analyse resistance to a specific form of extractivism—re oil pipeline construction—in Northern British Columbia and to illustrate how it can be understood within the context of the turn of many countries towards natural resource extraction as a model of national development. While resistance to extractivism has been the subject of much analysis in the Latin American context, less is available on resistance in the global north (in fact, the global south in the northern hemisphere) and less still on a comparative analysis. This paper seeks to fill this void and, in doing so, demonstrates the similarities in extractivist resistance in both north and south.

Canada, we argue, provides a good case study for exploring such similarities as it engages in ‘extractivist imperialism’ abroad at the same time as the natural resource development on the unceded territory of indigenous groups in Canada represents a form of neocolonialism. As an entry point into the analysis, we provide a brief overview of Canada’s extractivist push before turning to the general framework and the dynamics of resistance to the construction of pipelines to transport oil from the tarsands of Alberta to Asian markets.

## The Problem

For decades after the signing of the automobile pact between the US and Canada the engine of economic growth was automobile manufacturing in the

country's industrial heartland. But in a context of an economic downturn and a declining manufacturing sector Canada has turned back towards what has always been a major force of production in the country: the extractivist industry and manufacturing related to natural resource and staples production. With a growing demand in the world economy for fossil fuels and industrial minerals, as well as agro-food products, the current government has staked Canada's future on natural resource development, including the production for the exportation of Alberta tarsands oil. The tarsands have been at the centre of debate since the 1980s but it was not until the price of oil rose during the mid-2000s that it became economic to extract oil from the tarsands. Over the past decade, the extraction of oil from the tarsands has been ramped up, resulting in a number of megaprojects to build pipelines to take the tarsands oil to market—to the refineries of the Gulf Coast of the US via the Keystone pipeline the expansion of which is currently the focus of intense debate in the US and to markets in Asia via the proposed Enbridge pipeline from the tarsands in Northern Alberta to the port terminal of Kitimat in Northern British Columbia (NBC), another major pipeline that has also generated political opposition and resistance.

This provides the context for our analysis of the political dynamics of the resistance to Enbridge's 'Northern Gateway' project, particularly in regard to the indigenous communities on the route of the proposed gateway. Not only do these communities bear the brunt of the capitalist development process but they contain the major forces of resistance to it—to capitalism in its latest phase of development.

Apart from the unparalleled opportunities for Enbridge and other capitalist enterprises in the oil and gas sector to take advantage of arbitrage opportunities to make superprofits by bringing tarsands oil and natural gas to new markets in Asia, at issue in the Enbridge project is the federal government's strategy and plans for the country's economic development. As for Alberta, the provincial government naturally enough sees the Enbridge project as an opportunity for additional fiscal revenues and to solve its budgetary deficit situation. And British Columbia? It is not likely to make much from the pipeline, not even in terms of short-term construction jobs, and it would have to assume responsibility and account to British Columbians for the enormous risk and potential threat posed by the Enbridge project to the environment and the sustainability of key provincial industries such as the salmon fishery, as well as important watersheds and waterways and large tracts of land inhabited by First Nations groups and indigenous communities with territorial rights, if not sovereignty, over much of this land and these waterways.