

Oil Ethics

Sheena Wilson

ETHICAL OIL: THE CASE FOR CANADA'S OIL SANDS

Ezra Levant

McClelland & Stewart

<http://www.mcclelland.com>

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Ezra Levant's *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands* is an example of the current neoliberal perspective that pervades mainstream media and argues in support of oil sands development in Alberta. Levant is a Canadian journalist, political commentator, and lawyer. Various complaints have been brought against him—most notably the human rights complaint for publishing the Danish cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in 2006. Again, in September 2010, Sun Media published a retraction about the “false statements” Levant made when he “offered his opinion of how Mr. [George] Soros...survived the Nazis.” In November 2011, an Ontario Supreme Court judgment ordered Levant to pay \$25,000 in damages for failing to check facts and defaming another lawyer, concluding that with a larger political aim of denormalizing and discrediting Human Rights Commissions generally, Levant did not follow responsible journalistic practices.

Levant's argument in *Ethical Oil* is a sophisticated rendition of reality that reframes the debates around the oil sands. In order to deflect attention away from multiple environmental issues, Levant refocuses the spotlight on Canada's status as a liberal democracy with a positive human rights record. He argues that until a “miracle fuel” to replace oil has been invented, Canada remains the optimal source of oil since “the question is whether we should use oil from the oil sands or oil from the other places in the world that pump it”—that is, from places in which oil is politically as well as environmentally dirty. Concern for human rights is a just cause, if it were not merely a strategy to deflect citizen concerns about the environment. In an interview, Levant explained that when he was unsuccessful “arguing in a right-wing, conservative, property rights, climate skeptic way” about the oil sands, he realized that those opposing him were “do-gooders.” In an effort to win a debate with this audience, he decided to “write a liberal defense for the oil sands.” The outcome is *Ethical Oil*.

Levant's audience shifts throughout the book between an American readership, a conservative Canadian readership, and a “fair trade coffee-drinking, Prius-driving, Green Party-voting recycler who dabbles in vegetarianism.” Ultimately, *Ethical Oil* targets readers from across the political spectrum with arguments meant to justify and perpetuate our oil-consuming lifestyles and to convince us to give up environmental concerns by claiming it is more ethical, humanitarian, liberal, and democratic to buy Canadian oil than oil from other regions.

However, Levant's book never defines the parameters of ethical oil or the new Canadian democratic, humanitarian, “unconventional” morality yardstick “that weighs values entirely differently.” Instead, he determines oil sands ethics over and against what they are not through his selective representation of data and information. Levant calls Canada a “Boy Scout” nation with an excellent human rights record. For instance, according to him, Canada does not use torture. Among the many

criticisms that Levant lobes against Saudi Arabia is a critique of Saudi Arabia's “merciless ‘justice,’” in which even “children as young as thirteen have been sentence to more than one thousand lashes.” Levant, however, fails to mention his own opposition to support for Omar Khadr, a Canadian citizen born in Toronto and arrested at age 15 in Afghanistan. Identified by the United Nations and others as a child soldier, Khadr has been detained for almost a decade and tortured in Guantanamo. In 2010, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously judged that his human rights were being violated, and yet Khadr remains the only detainee from a western nation not transferred home. In Levant's latest book, *The Enemy Within: Terror, Lies and the Whitewashing of Omar Khadr* (2012), he argues that Canada should “block Khadr's return”—in spite of his 2010 plea bargain and a high-level diplomatic note signed by Hillary Clinton which promised that Canada would “favourably consider” Khadr's repatriation as early as October 2011.

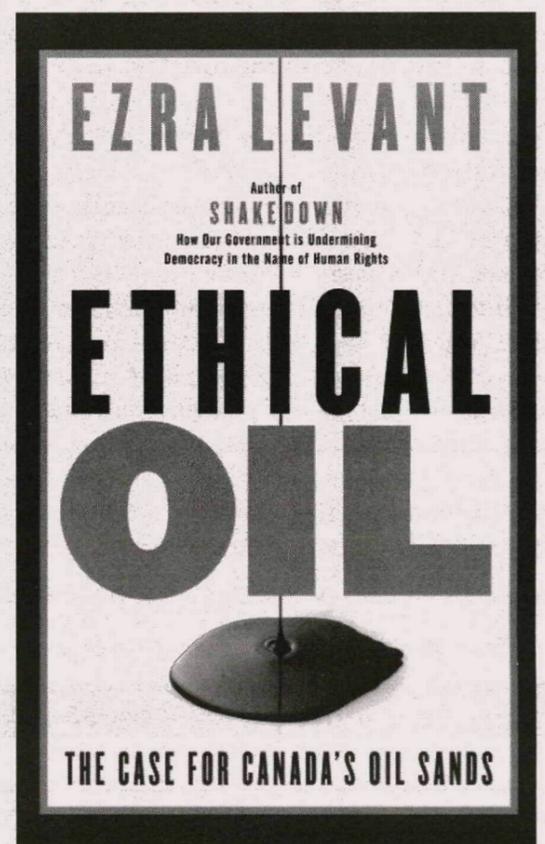
Levant also undermines Aboriginal human rights concerns and women's rights issues linked to the oil sands through an economic argument in which he claims that the oil sands provide jobs to these demographic groups and raise their standard of living. This line of argumentation aims to obliterate claims from multiple Aboriginal communities that oil sands development is violating their treaty rights and destroying their traditional ways of life by encroaching on treaty lands and creating pollution that leads to the degradation of the environment.

Ethical Oil is a sophisticated rendition of reality that reframes the debates around the oil sands.

Levant acknowledges that environmental “measurements aren't a bad way to start” our assessment of the oil sands industry. But he focuses instead on “[w]hat else should we measure, and how?,” declaring this to be “the most important question to ask, for obvious reasons.” However, it is not obvious or easy to identify why a concern for human rights (such as it is in his book) ranks higher on a scale of important world issues than climate change. These complex issues cannot easily be compared or measured. And ultimately, protection from climate change can be argued to be a human right—an argument that Levant evades.

Levant's lines of argumentation undo themselves when tested against one another. The circularity of his arguments means that he can state that Canadian oil is ethical because of the nation's track record in human rights while also arguing the advantages of the privatization of the industry with minimal government intervention. However, his strategy fails on two levels. First, the Canadian government and corporations operating in Canada are not synonymous. Canada's national human rights record cannot stand in as a defense of the practices of non-governmental agencies, namely multi-national corporations. Second, Levant also identifies the growing investment interest in the oil sands coming from oil companies owned by international governments, namely China, which he critiques at length in other parts of the book as a human-rights-abusing environmental catastrophe.

Beyond the weak argumentation in *Ethical Oil*, Levant establishes the parameters of the debate and the definitions of ethics by building on post-9/11 discourses of “fascist theocracy,” “al-Qaeda's murderers,” and residual Cold War-era tropes about



the dangers of socialism and communism. Levant attacks the human rights record of both oil-producing and consuming nations, declaring that “[o]f course Iran doesn't just get away with blatant, brutal, and widespread human rights violations because it has oil... It gets away with its brutalities because one of its biggest customers is China. A serious human rights abuser in its own right.” However, the argument against China as an unethical consumer undoes itself later in the book when readers note that Levant—without acknowledging concern for the ethics of a Canada-China partnership—seems to threaten American readers and reassure conservative Canadian readers that if a ban on oil sands oil were ever put into place by the U.S., it would become very profitable to build a pipeline to the Pacific West Coast, where tankers would be waiting to carry Canadian oil all over Asia. Levant also focuses on how oil-competitor nations are using oil money to build military power. He thus expands his argument to suggest that supporting oil from foreign countries is akin to subsidizing their military power and siding with the enemy in an “us versus them” dynamic.

In terms of science and technology, Levant narates the oil sands as scientific innovation and progress in promotion of a conservative political agenda that he defines as “liberal democracy.” Speaking about the hotly contested issue of government regulation, or lack thereof, he references the reclamation projects in Northern Alberta as “probably the most studied environmental phenomenon in Canada.” Levant provides no indication of the conclusions of these studies, including those highly critical of reclamation—such as the work of internationally acclaimed scientist Dr. David Schindler and his team of researchers. Instead, Levant advocates for the ethical merit of corporate responsibility, using the international human rights record of companies now operating in the oil sands as a strategy to push attention away from the ongoing debate around insufficient government regulation of environmental standards in the oil sands.

Levant dismisses environmental scientists and groups critical of the oil sands as anti-technology and anti-advancement: “Suncor has found a new and better technology...and all the Pembina Institute

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[a Canadian environmental think tank] can do is grumble about it?" He accuses scientists who have generated findings that reflect negatively on the oil sands to have manipulated their data. Referring to a report published by the National Resources Defense Council, the Boreal Songbird Initiative, and the Pembina Institute, Levant claims the authors produced their science using a "healthy dose...of extrapolation magic."

Levant reframes the arguments around the oil sands in ways that he can weave a winning argument by avoiding the most complicated energy issues that we have yet to face in the twenty-first century—namely the finite nature of oil and ongoing climate change. He is a self-professed climate-change skeptic who perpetuates arguments created by the oil industry to cast doubt on international scientific analyses that confirm that human impact causes global warming. The manufacture of this false debate is documented

in studies like "Smoke, Mirrors & Hot Air: How ExxonMobil Uses Big Tobacco's Tactics to Manufacture Uncertainty on Climate Science" (2007). Levant is experienced in the public relations rhetoric used by big business, having once acted as a lobbyist on behalf of the tobacco company Rothmans Inc.

In some cases, Levant uses *Ethical Oil* as a platform to regurgitate existing rhetoric. In others, he proposes new rhetorical strategies to promote oil interests that, since the book's publication, have been built upon by EthicalOil.org, a related website and media campaign. The ethical oil argument of both book and campaign provides a rhetorical management strategy to persuade citizens from across the political spectrum to support oil sands development in multiple ways, including donations to the Ethical Oil organization. While the government and some oil interest groups welcome the vocal support that Ethical Oil offers, none are publicly willing to adopt this

particular PR strategy because, as Rob Roach of the Canadian West Foundation points out, "it's usually more complex than sound bites and the superficial discussion." In *Ethical Oil*, Levant collapses the political spectrum through a spectacle of resistance that sustains the status quo. He provides consumers multiple justifications for oil sands development, given that this is key to maintaining our current North American lifestyle that relies on the unsustainable consumption of a finite resource.

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Signs of the End

Brent Bellamy

THINGS WE DIDN'T SEE COMING

Steven Amsterdam

Pantheon

<http://pantheon.knopfdoubleday.com>

208 pages; paper, \$15.00

Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* follows an unnamed protagonist through nine vignettes, each with its own setting, plot, tone, and signs of the apocalypse. The novel begins on New Year's Eve 1999, with the narrator and his parents preparing to leave the city and (his father hopes) avoid the impending Y2K disaster. While it is never explicit what disaster takes place, as the book progresses, it becomes clear that some form of environmental devastation has occurred—if not as a result of Y2K (a false alarm that still portends problems to come), then from some similar demand of infrastructure and economy that humans are eventually unable to manage. From an expedition on a horse bred to withstand the harsh rainy season to a struggle for survival with his sometimes partner Margo in the badlands during a drought, the circumstances of the narrator and those around him exist in a state of flux. Through each vignette, the narrator remains the only consistent feature of the novel, while other characters, places, and events fade in and out of significance. Organized in this way, the novel registers a tension between the narrator and his disparate and changing surroundings. Since the narrative context changes so drastically in each vignette, there is no sustaining system of meaning to provide him purpose or motivation other than individual survival.

Massive destruction followed by the redemption of the survivors remains the standard narrative structure of post-apocalyptic fiction. *Thing We Didn't See Coming* registers an interesting shift away from other post-apocalyptic narratives in that it is structured around persistence. In the novel, the crisis of each chapter has its own weight and resonance, its own moment of destruction and redemption, and signifies in its own small way that something has passed away, while what replaces it remains unclear. Interestingly, many of the motivating crises of the novel closely reflect the crises of our own moment—peak oil, environmental catastrophe, global epidemics. But we

do not see these things head on; the novel is focalized through the narrator, so we do not witness disaster unfolding from a god's-eye view as is so often the case in many apocalyptic forms. A good example of this is the flashy apocalyptic cinematography in Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009). While the apocalyptic novel does tend to limit this type of indulgence, even in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), we get a sense of the total devastation wreaked by the apocalyptic event. Because of this narrative closeness, Amsterdam's narrator is able to feel out one of the more typical elements of post-apocalyptic narratives—a clearing of space that opens up possibilities for a better future—by demonstrating in each chapter, albeit in different ways, that this desire for an easy or simple path after the apocalypse is an unwarranted expectation.

The novel encourages a critique of the narrator's focus on survival as his only possible path to the future.

When the narrator identifies an ideological block in others, he inscribes his own. While working for a government relocation agency, he muses that these people cannot think beyond the immediate crisis: "they're laughing about their dumb luck for surviving. But they have this newborn worry in their faces. They may not know it yet: It's permanent." Here, two forms of survival and persistence are distinguished. There is the naïve belief that the current crisis is the *only* crisis, whether it's a fire, a flood, or a drought; once one crisis is resolved, those facing it will be able to start over. For instance, the narrator indulges his critical nature when talking about Grief programs: "The thought is nice: *You'll have a clean slate, a world of opportunity, you'll never look back.* But nothing really heals because, if you lose everything once, running becomes part of you and you're always looking back." Reflecting on this way of seeing things, the protagonist sees through this first, short-sighted version of survival to a time when survival becomes, in his words, "permanent." Here he perhaps unwittingly gives a nuanced account of crises as events that are always replaced by newer crises, which informs a future that is punctuated only by disaster, or a state of disaster becoming permanent.

By generating different imaginings of the future,



the novel encourages a critique of the narrator's focus on survival as his only possible path to the future. During his relationship with Margo, who appears in three chapters, the two manage to strike up a sexual relationship with a successful politician, Juliet. Here, he describes Juliet's vision of the future:

Her goal, she says, is to connect the coasts and the north-south borders with great corridors of wild land—farms, forests, suburbs reclaimed by nature. One day there will be no more cities—their shells will be ghostly interruptions of the new nation, which will be composed of rural communities linked in all directions. *Even if we aren't here, the land will be: My money will keep it safe.* When the rain comes back—ever the optimist—this is where [Juliet's] utopia will be.

The narrator indirectly critiques Juliet's version of the future through his tone. He does not believe in her naïve fantasy of an easily utopic future. For him, this version of America remains an impossible dream; he does not believe that money will preserve an idyllic, green version of the nation. By taking a step back from the narrator, we learn how to read his own statements in the way he interprets Juliet's—he is critical of others' visions of the future as we should

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