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Will Fracking Bring the Soldiers Home?

KATHRYN RUSSELL

Advocates of high volume, slick water horizontal hydraulic fracturing, popularly known as fracking, often champion the catchphrase: “Drill a well, bring a soldier home!” This can be found on placards held by pro-frackers at demonstrations and on billboards across the United States. You can buy T-shirts and bumper stickers on eBay that picture a gun-toting soldier with the same slogan. After all, natural gas is supposedly “Clean, Abundant, American!” But fracking will not accomplish what they expect. Only a genuine peace would do that. Furthermore, the image of fracking as green, inevitable, and necessary is fictitious. Fracking is itself a form of ecological warfare. It is the epitome of violence against nature, which includes all of us.

This essay examines the tangle of relationships among peace, climate, and energy that fuels the conundrum of endless war. The struggle over fracking presents an ideal vantage point for a peace studies critique because fracking increases social conflict, it is embedded in militarist culture, and it causes war-like collateral damage. When the oil and gas industry arrives, people compare their experience to an invasion. Housing for the labor force is reminiscent of military barracks and the commercial sex trade increases. These problems stem in great part from the inherent violence and social injustice found in the history and culture of capitalism, its exploitation of nature, and its empire-building drive for land and energy resources.

First, the essay will explain what fracking is and then show why it has given rise to global resistance movements. A feminist perspective on the history of fuel extraction will also be used in this essay to reveal the troubling masculinist violence it entails. Furthermore, although fracking is touted as a way of mitigating climate change, there is good reason to believe that it will actually increase global warming. If that is true, then the gas and oil it produces should be left in the ground—despite its abundance—to facilitate the transition to a more peaceful and sustainable future. Assertions that fracking causes economic growth and energy independence must be questioned because communities are subjugated to the needs of the occupying corporation/army. Fracking fosters, thus, a form of dependent development common in the history of conquest.

The state of New York, where I live, is a key battleground in the fracking war. Only the determined resistance of a strong, grassroots movement has held off the oil and gas industry's assault on our resources and way of life. Many local towns are preventing industry incursion through the ability to zone land use. According to our State Attorney General, the movement is better organized than the National Rifle Association! Many New York landowners who are eager to lease to the industry feel their individual right to develop their property has been violated by the State's moratorium: "We have been denied all economic benefit to our property. The futures of our children, our communities and everything with the great thing that we have here with natural gas is going to be taken away." Who is the culprit here? Extremists! Environmentalists! Even feminists and socialists!

One blogger proclaimed,

If we had energy independence, these guys, our soldiers, could have just been back here at home the whole time—making babies, coaching Little League, baking bread, cutting hair, teaching school, growing corn, selling hardware, putting up windmills, or whatever. But they're not. They're on the front lines—putting their lives on the line, to maintain our addiction to foreign oil.

Who could be against babies, baseball, and bread? Who could be against bringing the soldiers back? The espoused paradigm of social thought presupposed here pictures that all is fine back home, and if we just acquire more energy domestically, we can get on with it. It is appalling to see how so many pro-frackers tie the need for (cheap) energy to war. In the early 1990s, at the beginning of U.S. military intervention in Iraq, that link was not admitted. Those of us who cried "No blood for oil!" were seen as one-sided extremists. Our polemical exposure of the sentiment "What is our oil doing under their sand?" was seen as humorously cynical but not telling. Several historical factors seem to have caused some realignment in popular consciousness. One began in the 1970s with the Arab oil embargo, which forced people in the United States to realize where the resource they took for granted actually came from. The call for domestic fuels became an important feature of the political scene. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also crystallized a popular awareness that acquisition and control of resources are a central driver of military action. But citizens seem to feel powerless or unwilling to stop the wars, and global conflicts over resources seem to many to be inevitable.

Slick water, high-volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing (HVHF) enables energy companies to access huge amounts of natural gas (methane), employ economies of scale, and limit the number of land leases or environmental permits they need. High volumes of fracking fluid are stored on multi-well pads. Wells are drilled vertically a mile or two into shale rock, but then turned horizontally to bore thousands of feet laterally, often in several directions

like spokes from a wheel. The fracking fluid, which is sent down by pumps under extremely high pressure, contains water, sand, and chemicals. Silica sand holds the pores of rock open so gas or oil can flow to the surface. The chemicals reduce friction, making the water “slick” so it can travel further. They also include solvents, acids, gelling agents, scale inhibitors, and biocides. Industry insists on their use so as to protect equipment and maintain the productivity of the gas or oil formation, and companies keep many of them as “trade secrets.”

Fracking fluid, however, does not stay under ground. A significant portion of it comes back to the surface with the oil or gas. It becomes produced water or flowback waste and contains not only the fracking chemicals, but also heavy metals, volatile organic compounds, and the normally occurring radioactive material that had been in the shale layer. Well sites are heavily industrialized and can be enormous. For example, one of the largest, developed by EnCana in British Columbia, Canada, contains sixteen wells on one pad, 417 million gallons of water, 78,400 tons of sand, 8 million gallons of fracking chemicals, 10,000-foot laterals, and 40,000 psi horsepower pumps. EnCana and Chesapeake Energy have accumulated landmasses larger than 24,000 square miles.

The argument that HVHF will be good for the climate stems from the fact that methane generates less carbon dioxide than coal or oil when it is burned. The United States has seen the lowest levels of carbon dioxide emission since the 1990s, a trend attributed in part to natural gas use. Environmentalists, however, insist that these advantages may not last. The strong consensus of climate scientists is that we have a brief critical window of time to mitigate climate disaster. The problem is that methane often leaks from wellheads during production and is frequently flared off. Pipelines transporting it leak too. It is alarming that the levels of methane in the atmosphere have steadily increased since 2007, exactly when the fracking boom developed. Since methane is 20 to 70 times more powerful than carbon dioxide, is abundant in the atmosphere, and has a shorter half-life, we cannot afford to risk releasing more methane into the atmosphere now. Doing so will only prevent a possibility of mitigation in the next few crucial years.

Furthermore, anti-fracking activists point out that the climate benefits of natural gas disappear if we look at the process of hydrofracking from cradle to grave. Shale gas promoters ignore this holistic picture, focusing only on the brief period of time it takes to inject fluid, sand, and chemicals at high pressure into a well. Environmentalists include compressor stations, storage facilities, water impoundments, chemical and sand acquisition, transport by trucks and railroad cars, the network of roads and the traffic systems, as well as an invisible but massive network of underground pipelines. Indigenous communities, farmers, and municipalities are worried about pollution to water, air, and soil causing harm to humans and animals. Irreplaceable and increasingly scarce

ground water is overused, and air pollution has caused increases in asthma and other respiratory diseases. These sorts of damages to public health and the environment make a strong case for the view that fracking is a gangplank rather than a green energy bridge.

Moreover, it is not only rock that is being “fractured.” News media draw pitched battle lines between pro-frackers and anti-frackers. In the illusion of “balance,” the construction of two sides in conflict, especially in a militarized society, is to be expected. Communities and families are divided; passion runs high and tempers flare. In agricultural areas where they rely on irrigation, serious conflict has developed over water use. In Texas and Colorado, the need for water has pitted ranchers and farmers against the fracking industry in competition for an increasingly scarce resource. Social tension over fracking has exploded all over the world. Clashes between economic development and environmental conservation are harsh, but cannot be reconciled within our current political, economic, and cultural paradigm. In such a context, skills in nonviolent communication are desperately needed. Community reconciliation will be difficult.

Taking guidance from the anti-fracking movement’s holistic orientation, the scope of my analysis will now be enlarged to include a feminist critique of the role of gender in the history of fossil fuel extraction. An analogy will be drawn between fracking and warfare, which, of course, includes rape, pillage, plunder, and death. The phrase “drill a well, bring a soldier home” plays on implicit gendered concepts of drilling, masculine labor, patriotism, and home. Accounts of the environment and the relations between humans and nature are no less bound up in gendered frameworks.

With the rise of capitalism, labor and natural resources were no longer held in common. They became sources of wealth for individual gain, as the means of acquiring energy and putting it to work became privately owned. Fierce competition developed over resources, labor, and profitable marketing. In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Carolyn Merchant recounts how natural philosophy from the seventeenth century until today can be seen as a cultural adaptation to the ideological requirements of patriarchal capitalism, which required a paradigm shift from an organic philosophy to mechanism. Early European holistic views held contradictory gendered images in dramatic tension. Nature was indeed female, but she could be a nurturing mother or a threatening witch. Either way, she was not to be fooled with; she had to be respected. Peasants and Native Americans alike protested that getting coal from deep in her body was like raping one’s mother.

Merchant tracks the shift from a set of moral values encouraging respect for the biosphere to a brute, utilitarian ideology of extraction at any cost, ultimately culminating in nature’s death. The image of nature as an embodied whole, full of intrinsically connected vital forces, was replaced with a view

of nature as a composite of dead, inert matter that could be utilized for human purposes without being morally culpable for harmful consequences. With the victory of mechanism, the mother in nature was killed and the witch tamed.

Thus, Merchant's analysis reveals the violent patriarchal heritage of the extractive industries, which unveils the practice of fracking as a climax of the centuries-long rape and enslavement of a nature cast as female. Fracking is symbolic of the mechanistic dream of controlling nature with penetrating technology. Through sheer strength and force, it aggressively captures the product created by tiny, fossilized life forms left in the shale 390–500 million years ago. As in wartime, advocates justify collateral damage as unfortunate but necessary, which once again makes fracking look like war.

Such heavy-handed forms of resource extraction are rife with phallic imagery and significance. Drills are hyper-masculine icons: they are long and large and push deep and far. Fracking, trucking, and pipelining are jobs for a “real man.” Young men looking for adventure, sex, training, and good money are an important part of the teams of men who travel far and wide to work in the industry. Many proudly flaunt their masculinity. Trucks—the larger, the better—are adorned with masculine symbols. Mud flaps bear silhouettes of hyper-sexualized women posing for the male gaze. Frequently, men hang ornaments that are plastic or rubber balls called “trucknutz” from the rear end of their trucks. These are suggestive of testicles—roughly the size of a bull's—and signify the driver's strong virility, although they are banned in some locales and have become a hot item in the free speech debate. “Hug a driller, not a tree” is a common bumper sticker. It expresses the scorn many workers feel toward environmentalists, but is also a thinly veiled sexual come on.

Such a masculinized culture and the voracious capitalist search for fossil fuel conscript soldiers both home and abroad. The ecological warfare that is fracking has many “front lines.” Not unlike soldiers, many drill operators or laborers in the gas and oil industry face dangerous and demanding conditions. They are in a significant sense like fodder for an industry fighting to increase its rate of profit and maintain its status as the most powerful business force in human history. Although some are complicit, eager participants who know and enjoy just what they are doing, social and historical forces construct their actions and experience, including their gendered patriotism. They are conscripted economically and culturally, even without their awareness, by a patriarchal, militarist tradition that requires them to make sacrifices and prove themselves by valiantly protecting their nation and family. This link allows us to notice that drillers are like “soldiers of fortune.” Sometimes they are called “jarheads” (slang for U.S. marines) because of their willingness to do whatever it takes, whatever the company wants, even if it includes covering up injuries or being silent about deaths and environmental damage.

They may occupy job categories like “roughnecks” or “roustabouts,” terms that originated from nineteenth-century carnivals and denoted men who were responsible for putting up and taking down the large, heavy tents. But it is no circus when fracking comes to town. It is a situation that cries out for labor and community coalitions and unionization.

Like soldiers, many drillers perform dangerous and physically demanding jobs. Fortunately, the U.S. Federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) are beginning to investigate worker health and safety. They have found that the fracking industry has a mortality rate seven times that of any other industry in the United States. This is especially due to the traffic accidents that happen when exhausted truckers are required to drive overly long hours. In other industries, such practices are violations of labor law or union contracts, but fracking is insufficiently regulated and not unionized. Workers are sometimes disabled and maimed by flying objects, and they suffer from exposure to poisonous, radioactive, and carcinogenic compounds. In a rush to produce as much as possible, corporations often do not train men properly. Workers have complained that some companies will hire “anyone with a pulse.” They call Halliburton the “Red Army.”

Life in a twenty-first-century fracking boomtown can be hard and oppressive. The labor force is highly stratified by age, ability, gender, and class. Trailers sometimes provided by the industry are grouped together to become notorious “man-camps.” The men (and women) flocking to boomtowns like Williston, North Dakota, whose population expanded by 10–15,000 almost overnight, live in their own vehicles or trailers lined up in Wal-Mart parking lots, tents, and sometimes shabby motels or boarding houses—any shelter they can scrounge up. They face exorbitant prices for food or necessities and inadequate, unsanitary conditions. Workers with the least income and lowest social status often have to sleep in shifts in cramped quarters, sharing dirty showers (if there are any) with several other men. For many, the nearest facilities can be miles away. Military barracks might actually be an improvement.

Moreover, an analogy can be drawn between communities around the U.S. military bases across the globe and what happens in towns when fracking arrives. Local residents often report that their experience is like an “invasion.” Small, bucolic-farming communities can rapidly change into towns dominated by the oil and gas companies. A form of dependent development occurs where the industry rules the politics, culture, and economy of a community, like a U.S. military base does in towns around the world. All the attendant social disruptions found around bases flourish. Drug and alcohol abuse skyrockets; clubs offering “dancers” proliferate. The sexual division of labor rigidifies. Misogyny increases, not a surprising development, since social science has demonstrated that large groups of men in aggressive

activities like team sports and soldiering tend to reinforce each other's hyper-masculinity.

Communities must often grapple with negative economic consequences, such as the increase in prices for housing and everyday commodities as well as a lessening of property values or even not being able to sell their home. The promised economic windfall fails to materialize. Those who do benefit are usually large landowners and families whose previous social status or business ownership gives them an advantage. Some landowners regret signing leases and are surprised at how much their home life is disrupted and how small their royalty checks are. Heavy equipment passes by constantly and drill pads or compressors are located so close to houses that loud noise and bright lights prevent them from sleeping and having a normal family life. There is no relief—fracking takes place “24–7.” Although companies often promise they will come and go in a few months, wells can be fracked eighteen times and remain active for years. One family in southwest Pennsylvania likened their experience to a “takeover”; they felt they had become “corporate caretakers.”

In communities invaded by the extractive industry, the transportation system and social services are often overwhelmed. Schools, hospitals, and clinics are understaffed and stretched too thin. Traffic increases because hundreds of heavy trucks per day carry water, sand, and chemicals to the drilling pads and highly toxic, radioactive fracking waste away. Roads and bridges not built for such heavy use are badly damaged. Extreme forms of energy extraction are causing primarily peaceful agricultural communities, undeveloped areas, Native American territories, and previously protected state and federal lands to be heavily industrialized. Explosions and fires that are inevitable in work with combustible materials can create war-like conditions that have to be repaired. Fields and forests are torn up; trees are cut down, soil is scraped away, wetlands are polluted, and wildlife habitat is fragmented.

By linking hydrofracking to warfare, an incongruity in the notion that drilling a well will bring the soldiers home has been illuminated. Considering the ways the roots of a militarized society, ecological crises, and a capitalist form of life are entangled further reveals this incoherence. Advocates claim that fracking will bring jobs and energy independence. They fail to recognize that energy companies are owned and controlled by transnational global capital with no allegiance to the U.S. population. Any expansion of domestic shale gas and oil production is part of a global development pattern. Products are slated for sale at the highest price possible; a mad scramble for lucrative investment, production, marketing, and distribution is unfolding: it is another “rush to the bottom.” Nor will fracking bring jobs and solve local economic problems. It is part of the “boom and bust” cycle so common to the history of fossil fuel extraction. Corporations seek the lowest production costs, a technically proficient labor force, cheap labor for low-skilled jobs,

and the most attractive sites of production with the least legal and environmental restrictions. Since the mid-twentieth century, war has been primarily about securing access to energy resources and dominating energy production, distribution, and sale.

Anti-fracking activists are motivated by moral and political convictions as well as a strong love for their communities and the land. People across the globe are taking the stand that civil disobedience and forms of direct action are necessary to overturn the power of the fossil fuel industry and transform our social and energy paradigm. For example, thousands of New Yorkers have pledged to engage in nonviolent protest if New York permits fracking. We are also commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of the first treaty between the Haudenosaunee (formerly called the Iroquois Confederacy) and European settlers, as recorded by the native people in the Two Row Wampum Belt. That agreement, violated by white settlers and governments to this day, committed both parties to friendship, peace between peoples, and living in parallel “as long as the grass is green, as long as the waters flow downhill, and as long as the sun rises in the East and sets in the West.”

Peace studies, feminists, environmentalists, and labor and community activists together can articulate the sense that fracking is morally wrong. A philosophy of nonviolence can show how fracking is a form of ecological violence because militarism, fossil fuel extraction, and climate disruption are inextricably linked.

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