

The Urgency of Protest

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This paper makes a case for academicians to promote, support, and participate in non-violent direct action in our roles as teachers and scholars given the unfolding climate catastrophe and the extent to which academic institutions are complicit in the systems driving ecological breakdown. Drawing from recent experiences resisting fossil fuel infrastructure in Appalachia and the literature on social movements, I argue that specialists in marginalized economies and societies in the Appalachian and Carpathian Mountains are primed to critique dominant narratives about economic growth and state nationalism, to embrace the reputation of mountains as ungovernable, and to leverage international networks for the sake of mass disobedience and mutual aid.

Keywords: *climate and ecological emergency; direct action; higher education*

1. Introduction

Greetings from Appalachia. I am speaking with you today from Virginia where I live in the unceded territory of Tutelo and Monacan indigenous peoples. I want to thank all the organizers of the Appalachian/Carpathian International Mountain conference, including Theresa Burriss, Georgeta Moarcas, and Cristian Pralea. I'm grateful for the opportunity to think with you all today about the themes of Land, Labor, and Protest.

When I accepted an invitation to speak, I was delighted at the prospect of being with you in person. It was spring 2022, and I was feeling triumphant in our fight against the Mountain Valley Pipeline, or MVP, a 300-mile-long fracked methane gas pipeline. I was confident that any day might bring news of its cancellation.

I had been actively resisting the Mountain Valley Pipeline since 2018. Because local people didn't want it. Because it would destroy land and degrade water and fragment healthy ecosystems. Because it would exacerbate the climate and ecological emergency.

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In January and February 2022, MVP suffered losses in the courts that I believed to be its death blow. When it came time to book my plane ticket to join you, however, everything had changed. In August, leaders of the Democratic Party, in exchange for West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin's vote for a bill that will accelerate the deployment of renewable energy, promised to include his wish list in future legislation. And his wish list included the completion of the Mountain Valley Pipeline. We in Appalachia had basically won this David vs. Goliath fight. And then the better of two terrible political parties turned against us.

As much as I wanted to be there with you, my heart just would not let me leave this place. I ask for your understanding and forgiveness. Because I also know how critically important it is to do the work that you all are doing, building relationships of mutual aid and solidarity across social justice struggles even when it means surmounting barriers erected by distance and national borders, or when it means navigating obstacles posed by differing languages and institutional norms. I am grateful to you for sowing and nurturing these relationships that I believe are critical to facing the challenges ahead of us.

The very good news in our pipeline fight is that on September 27, 2022, a coalition of grassroots organizations succeeded in forcing the US Senate to separate Senator Manchin's wish list from what is often called "must pass" legislation to keep the government open. Our fight is not over. We know that the pipeline companies and the politicians whom they bribed will not give up easily. But for now, we celebrate.

That's a lengthy introduction and apology, but I hope it helps convey my own sense of urgency as a means to set up my remarks to you today regarding "The Urgency of Protest." This particular pipeline fight is but one node in a series of intersecting and escalating crises that range from the rise of fascism and state oppression, a surge in white supremacist organizing, the failures of capitalism and neoliberalism, the climate and ecological emergency, and political destabilization. These crises are inextricably linked. No one person can take them all on simultaneously.

2. This moment in time

My own personal calling in the last four years has been to advocate for climate justice, a natural outgrowth from my deep familiarity with the injustices of the fossil fuel regime in central Appalachia. Increasingly, the pigeons are coming home to roost. Catastrophic flooding--like that experienced in Kentucky, USA, in 2022 and in Vrancea County, Romania, in 2021--is but one type of fossil-fueled disaster

becoming more frequent, more extreme, and disproportionately burdensome for those least able to cope.

As research shows, holding global temperatures to less than a 1.5 °C increase over preindustrial levels may “require governments and companies not only to cease...development of new fields and mines, but also to prematurely decommission a significant portion of those already developed” (Kelly Trout et al. 2022, 1). Yet our governments continue to bend to fossil fuel interests, with the United States being one of the most egregious offenders.

Hence the urgency of protest. It is precisely because the interlocking crises are overwhelming that we scholars may be tempted to narrow our focus into our areas of scholarly expertise or other domains that seem more closely within our control.

I’m a cultural studies scholar, for heaven’s sakes. My training is in close reading and archival research. I cannot, however, look away from the fact that academic institutions like my own are complicit in the systems driving ecological breakdown and human suffering at every geographic scale. My job affords me meaningful work and pays my bills. I benefit from academia. I feel bound to hold higher education accountable for its role in present and future disasters.

Protest is not as an exercise in futility, something we must do or support solely on principle. As scholars, we honor knowledge production. Not just that of climatologists but also that of social movements scholars and practitioners who document that protest works. We may feel ourselves prompted to act on that knowledge by participating in and/or supporting civil resistance.

As I side note, I want to say that I believe prefigurative social relations and mutual aid are necessary components of the way forward, in addition to civil resistance. Today, I will mostly set those tactics to the side in order to concentrate on protest.

3. What we are called to do

My primary assertions here are that

- 1) Protest, historically and today, secured and secures the dignity and security of each of us.
- 2) It is within the calling of *all* teachers and scholars that we promote, support, and/or participate in non-violent protest, and particularly within the calling of university scholars who hold relative job security.
- 3) Because we are specialists in the Appalachian and Carpathian Mountains, we are called in particular. We know marginalized economies and societies. We

are primed to critique dominant narratives about economic growth and state nationalism, to embrace the reputation of mountains as ungovernable, and to leverage international networks for the sake of mass disobedience and mutual aid.

4) What to do: what I'm calling for and not calling for.

3.1. Protest, historically and today, secured and secures the dignity and security of each of us

In the US, grassroots struggles against environmental racism and for climate justice are finding one another. Those grassroots struggles are focused on human well-being and social justice (and not merely the measurement of emissions). Because of that, the environmental justice movement is connected to the Movement for Black Lives and is primed for synergies with the recent surge in labor organizing and unionization drives.

Romania, too, has an impressive legacy of protest. In 2013, residents of Roșia Montană who refused to sell their homes initiated organizing against a Canadian gold mining corporation. Protests against a law that would have bypassed regulations protecting environment and heritage spread to dozens of cities. In 2017, the Government's attempt to decriminalize certain corruption offenses met massive resistance by tens of thousands of Romanians.²

But what does all of that have to do with us as scholars, you might ask? Our job is to think and write and teach.

3.2. It is within the calling of all teachers and scholars that we promote, support, and/or participate in non-violent protest, but particularly within the calling of university scholars with relative job security.

In a 2021 article, "From Publications to Public Actions," Gardner et al lament "limited engagement" with the climate movement by academics (3). The authors

² See for example: Claudia Ciobanu and Mihai Stoica, "Rosia Montana: Seeds of utopia in town almost lost to gold mining," *Al Jazeera*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2019/4/24/rosia-montana-seeds-of-utopia-in-town-almost-lost-to-gold-mining>. Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, "Speech acts of #REZIST movement," *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov*, Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies Vol. 11 (60) No. 2, 2018. Tara John, "Everything to Know About Romania's Anti-Corruption Protests," *Time*, Feb 6, 2017, <https://time.com/4660860/romania-protests-corruption-problem/>. Raluca Muresan and Minodora Sălcudean, "The involvement and the role of art in the #rezist civic actions in Romania," *Revista Transilvania* 9 (2019):88-96. Nicula, Alexandru-Sabin & Stoica, Mihnea & Bîrsănuț, Elena & Man, Titus, "Why do Romanians take to the streets? A spatial analysis of Romania's 2016-2017 protests," *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 19:2 (March 2020): 201-202.

argue that universities' efforts to address the climate and ecological crisis via education and research alone are "insufficient" due to "time lags" between education/research and their effects. But it's not just that education and research aren't speedy. Gardner et al note universities' "failure" to confront politics or "the forces invested in maintaining the status quo" (1-2). In other words, universities are part of the problem of the structural violence of the status quo, at least in the United States. Certainly, they frequently have incredibly poor practices with regard to land and labor, as I am sure each of us is intimately aware.

Universities as institutions are invested in the status quo in general and with regard to the fossil fuel industry in particular. In the US, this is true via both their endowments' financial investments and their courting of donors. Just a handful of US campuses, pushed by students and faculty over the last decade, have pledged to divest from fossil fuels. In 2019, Harvard and Yale students disrupted the annual football game between the two universities, occupying the field at half-time and demanding the colleges divest from investment in fossil fuels. In early 2022, students at Yale, Princeton, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford, and Vanderbilt filed legal complaints with their respective attorneys general offices alleging that investments in fossil fuels violate their fiduciary responsibilities under the Uniform Prudent Management of Institutional Funds Act. The most recent issue of *Scientific American* outlines how Stanford University's new Doerr School of Sustainability "will take energy industry donations," warping "research agendas."³

As these examples show, protest is just one tactic among many. Harvard students began agitating for divestment three years before the football field protest. Students are bringing legal cases in addition to crafting petitions and organizing disruptions. Stanford's recent choice to accept fossil fuel donations has prompted its faculty to pen opinion pieces and students to launch social media campaigns.

Not all resistance to fossil fuel dominance of our campuses is illegal or disruptive protest. But non-violent protest has to be an option on the table and we as academics have to be vocal about why that is.

For Gardner et al, the most important work that we academics can be doing is climate disobedience, whether of the law-breaking kind promoted by Extinction Rebellion or lawful but disruptive acts such as "projecting scientific papers in public

³ See coverage here: Emily Pontecorvo, "The campus divestment movement has a sophisticated new legal strategy," *Grist*, Feb 16, 2022, <https://grist.org/protest/the-campus-divestment-movement-has-a-sophisticated-new-legal-strategy/>. Naomi Oreskes, "Fossil-Fuel Money Will Undermine Stanford's New Sustainability School," *Scientific American*, October 1, 2022, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fossil-fuel-money-will-undermine-stanford-s-new-sustainability-school/>

places, the withdrawal of cooperation or labour, performance art, and walk-outs.” They call upon academics who are “unwilling or unable to engage in frontline activism” to “offer practical support (as well as public endorsement) to those who do” (3).

3.3. Specialists in the Appalachian and Carpathian Mountains

I want to stress that it is not *just* because we operate within the academy that we at this conference are called to address the academy’s role in the current crises. It is precisely because of our specific academic expertise that our active involvement and visibility is needed in civil resistance. We are hearing such calls to action within the field of Appalachian studies, with Gabriel Piser, for example, calling on us to pursue regional scholarship that is fundamentally critical, participatory, and interventionary (Piser 2016).

As specialists in the Appalachian and Carpathian Mountains, we know marginalized economies and societies. We are rural, rural-identified, or rural-affiliated people of conscience. We are scholars of regions deemed peripheral to power. We are alert to stigmatization of people as rural or peasant or undeveloped. We are invested in defending the right to security and dignity for all people, even for rural people who stand accused of conservatism and racism, sometimes justifiably so. We are committed to fair labor practices in all places, including rural places. We know that familiarity with the land is of vital importance for protecting and nurturing a healthy ecological base that can provide food and water. We have a foot in each world – a cosmopolitan, urban-centered world and a rural world that might sometimes prefer provincialism, but which is always globally interlinked. Our ability to see and amplify the connections between rural fossil fuel extraction and the accumulation of toxins in more densely populated areas is patently needed. Our willingness to build trust between population centers and rural land defenders is critical to mass disobedience efforts. We are poised to leverage international networks for the sake of mass disobedience and mutual aid.

Furthermore, we are primed to critique dominant narratives about economic growth and nationalism. Reputations of the mountains as ungovernable has always been a double-edged sword. Sentiments such as “Mountaineers are always free” can appeal as much to right-wing populism or libertarianism as they can left-wing populism or anarchism. But carefully crafted, the ambition to “become ungovernable” is a sound way forward for Appalachian and Carpathian scholars.

3.4. What to do: what I'm calling for and not calling for

We are all busy, often totally overwhelmed by our obligations. That's a feature of the system, not a bug. Our busy-ness favors the status quo. The global COVID-19 pandemic gave us a glimpse of what it might look like to pause long enough to redirect our attention and rearrange our priorities. It is vital that we hold on to what that feels like, to make space and time for community care.

To be clear, I know that we are not equally available or capable of this work, for a multitude of reasons. Moreover, I know that guilt is disabling. Please do not hear me as chiding anyone to do more work in ways that are draining.

What I hope for is to encourage us, collectively, to do more in ways that invigorate us and to encourage us to speak up to protect and support some portion of those who act out, who disrupt. Some will block pipeline construction by dancing. Some will stand between the vulnerable and police or immigration officers. Some will transport pregnant people across state lines to access abortion. Some will risk imprisonment for organizing protests.

Not everyone can or should risk arrest, but everyone must support those who risk arrest for the public good. We cannot protect them all, but our futures depend upon our efforts to expand opportunities for-- and reduce punishments for --resistance. To post bail. To write letters to prisoners. To fund lawyers. To serve as witnesses or legal observers.

4. Conclusion

I'm sure you're all familiar with climate doomerism, the sensation that there's so little hope that we will keep temperatures within 1.5 degrees Celsius that there's no point in trying. But we cannot afford to give up. I'm sure you also know that the difference between 2 degrees and 2.5 degrees is likely even more significant than the difference between 1.5 and 2. 2 degrees means a doubling to tripling of territory loss for insects, plants, and animals compared to 1.5 degrees, and hundreds of millions more humans in poverty (Lieberman 2021).

We have to pull together in the same direction from wherever we are, always with dedication to the most historically marginalized foremost, always recognizing that care for ourselves and others in the fight is more important than success. We have to show up for each other, the way Romanians are showing up for Ukrainians, the way Appalachians are showing up for Appalachians in the wake of the 2022 Eastern Kentucky flooding. Not just as charity but as part of exposing illegitimate power, finding one another for the long haul, and nurturing joy.

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