

# **THE RISE OF FOSSIL FUEL AUTHORITARIANISM IN AUSTRALIA**

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The past decade has been marked by an unprecedented politicisation of fossil fuel extraction in Australia. Successive Australian governments have built their mandate upon fossil-fuelled ambitions to be a global ‘energy superpower’ (Rosewarne 2016), constructing fossil fuel accumulation strategies that are now deeply engrained in Australia’s political institutions. Facing this situation, activists have sought to stymie capital’s state-sponsored access to Australian fossil fuel reserves: actions have included First Nations peoples’ resistance to coal and gas extraction, the co-ordinated exercise of consumer power via primary and secondary boycotts, and strikes. Unsurprisingly, state actors have attempted to quash these emerging challenges. Indeed, it is possible to identify an increasingly authoritarian character in recent measures to ‘crack down’ on opponents to fossil fuels. Australian governments – working in conjunction with fractions of capital committed to fossil fuel projects – are seeking to silence civil dissent by, for example, criminalising an ever-growing number of activities of civil society groups, outlawing the consideration of environmental concerns in planning processes, and disciplining investigative journalists via punitive policing and legal techniques.

This article argues that the Australian state is taking recourse to authoritarian practices in order to manage crises of capitalist socio-ecological governance. It shows that, while the ‘authoritarian fix’ (Bruff 2012: 114) serves to prolong fossil fuel accumulation strategies, it results in a simultaneous deepening of the political crisis of legitimacy for neoliberal socio-ecological governance. This analysis is developed by using both ecological Marxism and the concept of authoritarian

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neoliberalism to understand the relationship between the Australian state and fossil fuel capital, using Adani's Carmichael mine as a case study.

The argument is developed in two stages. The first engages eco-Marxist theory to map the relationship between the Australian state and fossil fuel capital, both in general terms and in the specific case of Adani's Carmichael mine. This allows us to identify the parts of the state form where authoritarian governance of the fossil fuel industry is emerging, and upon which environmental struggles are focussing their dissent. The second stage considers the shape of the 'fossil fuel authoritarianism' characterising Australian governance. It notes that the declining quality of natural resources, alongside intensifying protest activity, has increased costs for fossil fuel capitals like Adani, feeding into a crisis of underproduction which the state is mobilising to resolve. Because the elements of the state that support fossil fuel capital have become objects of increasing social contestation, state actors have increasingly resorted to authoritarian practices to reproduce fossil fuel accumulation strategies.

The article examines how these authoritarian practices have been carried out – and resisted – in four key spheres:

- The subversion of Native Title processes in the relationship between Adani and traditional owners;
- The erosion of environmental regulatory and planning processes as key sites of democratic input into environmental governance;
- Interventions to silence community opposition by restricting dissent to and information about fossil fuel projects;
- The re-direction of fiscal support for Adani through techniques of secrecy and obfuscation.

Left political parties appear systemically bound to offer only slightly differentiated policy platforms, failing to cohere around a strategy for a just transition away from fossil fuels. Yet in this void, progressive voices are finding space to call for radical alternatives, some of which may hold the promise of genuine democratisation of environmental and economic governance. The concluding parts of this article explore these more progressive possibilities.

## **Authoritarian neoliberalism, ecological Marxism, and the climate crisis in Australia**

Since the emergence of neoliberalism, political economists have reflected on its authoritarian dimension as in the dual notion of the ‘free economy and the strong state’ (Gamble 1988). More recently, some political economists have posited the rise of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’, involving ‘the state’s reconfiguration into a less open and democratic entity’ in order to manage capitalist crises in a context where dominant neoliberal governing strategies have lost their legitimacy (Bruff 2014: 116; Tansel 2017). ‘Authoritarianism’ here refers to the ‘active practice of disrupting or sabotaging accountability’, following contemporary political science analyses of authoritarianism (Glasius 2018: 521).

Why, in the face of intense opposition, has the Australian state taken recourse to authoritarian practices to safeguard fossil fuel capital from active dissent? Unlike the countries studied in the existing authoritarian neoliberalism literature, Australia’s economy escaped the calamitous effects of the post-2007 economic crisis that engendered a collapse of legitimacy for other neoliberal governments (Bruff 2014). Australia’s economic position following the crisis was seen as evidence of the success, rather than failure, of state economic management.

The same cannot be said of Australia’s scorecard on environmental governance. Decades of neoliberal environmental policy have presided over plummeting biodiversity, the degradation of some of Australia’s most cherished natural wonders, and most recently to federal climate policy being described as ‘embarrassing’ at the COP26 international climate summit in Glasgow (Morton 2021). In Europe, authoritarian neoliberalism has sought to quash popular opposition to reforms that privilege capital in general at the expense of labour in general. In Australia, on the other hand, I argue that the most prominent examples of authoritarian statism *seek especially to discipline opposition to state support of fossil fuel capital*, at the expense of nature and its life-giving capacities.

Ecological Marxist writing can help understand the specific nature of the crises spurring authoritarian neoliberal governance in Australia and the role of the state in managing these crises. James O’Connor’s (1991) theory of the ‘second contradiction of capitalism’ provides a framework for understanding the tendency of capital to engender economic crisis by degrading its own ‘conditions of production’ – those things such as

accessible nature, labour and large-scale infrastructure that are crucial inputs to production but that capital cannot produce independently. Due to its tendency to degrade nature and the resulting social opposition, fossil fuel capital in Australia faces rising costs that are culminating in a crisis of underproduction, which the state is called upon to resolve by extending economic and extra-economic support to the industry.

Ecological Marxist writing on the ‘environment making state’ (Parenti 2015) sheds light on the particular aspects of the Australian state that reproduce fossil fuel accumulation strategies. The authoritarian changes implemented to protect the fossil fuel industry do not emanate from a monolithic state with final authority, but are uneven processes contested by different branches of the state and by civil society actors. Indeed, here ‘the state’ refers to a series of relationships between institutions, actors and practices that are connected to social and economic relations, and only ever relatively unified.

Eco-Marxist theory explains the forces driving the state to mobilise in support of fossil fuel capital and illuminates how this support is carried out. Yet it does not provide a complete framework for understanding the contested reproduction of current accumulation strategies. To see how insights from eco-Marxist scholarship can be used in tandem with authoritarian neoliberalism theory, it is useful to introduce a major case study where these elements intertwine.

### **Adani’s Carmichael mine**

The Carmichael coal project was constructed by the Indian-owned Adani Australia<sup>1</sup> (henceforth, ‘Adani’). It spans from the Adani Abbot Point Terminal port on North Queensland’s Whitsunday coast, through Central Western Queensland via a 189-kilometre rail link, to the site of the mine in the Northern Galilee Basin. The mine is expected to be the ‘icebreaker’ that defines the tax and regulatory terms of engagement for mining projects in the wider Galilee basin. Nine mega-mines have been slated for the region, but only Adani’s Carmichael mine has secured infrastructure

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<sup>1</sup> On 5<sup>th</sup> November 2020, Adani announced it would rename its Australian mining division ‘Bravus’. The better-known name ‘Adani’ is used in this article as is accurate for the period of analysis. The name change can be seen as part of a strategy to obfuscate information about the project, as discussed later.

and approvals to start construction. The proposed mines for the region could produce up to 330 million tonnes of coal a year – when burned, the carbon emissions produced would make the Galilee Basin the 7<sup>th</sup>-largest global emitter, if it were considered a country.

Yet, the grand development ambitions for the Galilee Basin are facing significant challenges, with the abandonment of plans for several major mines and regional rail infrastructure. Numerous studies have suggested that, given dire market conditions for coal exports, many of the proposed Galilee basin mine projects are highly likely to become ‘stranded assets’ if they are built (Lucas 2016). In this context, many Australians view the imminent energy transition as a done deal, as a growing group of businesses advocates for accumulation strategies supporting renewable energy capital over fossil fuels (Murphy 2020).

As if to defy this prognosis, state actors have taken recourse to an ‘authoritarian fix’ (Bruff 2012) to secure the short-term economic viability of Australia’s institutionally-embedded fossil fuel accumulation strategies. State support has made Adani’s Carmichael mine impervious to increasingly negative market signals for fossil fuels. However, when considered in light of O’Connor’s theory, this reliance on state support is also a vulnerability. Activism surrounding the Carmichael mine has targeted key lifelines of state support, contributing to significant delays and a reduction of the project’s initial phase by more than 80% in terms of output (Morton 2019). Indeed, the relationship of authoritarian governance and the dissent it seeks to manage is dialectical, as the state tends to become ‘an increasingly direct target of a range of popular struggles, demands and discontent’ in the process, necessitating further authoritarian interventions to maintain hegemony (Bruff 2016: 108). By interrogating this tension, we may begin to assess the prospects for building a more democratic, participatory ecological politics, both through the state and outside it, in community organisations and workplaces.

### **The conatal origins of Australian fossil fuel capital and the settler colonial state: an ecological-Marxist perspective**

The historical development of Australian fossil fuel capital, alongside the subjugation of Indigenous people, are imbricated in the development of *world* capitalism through colonisation. An eco-Marxist analysis of the

relationship between capitalist value and nature helps to explain the drivers of Australia's past and present socio-ecological crises.

The invasion of 'Australia' facilitated the appropriation of cheap, uncapitalised nature required for the expansion of British industrial production. According to an 1850 editorial in the *Economist*, 'the colonies are of less importance to us [Britain] as consuming our manufacture than as supplying us with raw produce, and affording a large field where our surplus population may both provide for themselves and minister to the wants of people at home' (cited in Goodwin 1974: 31). This reflects the understanding of eco-Marxists like Moore (2011: 30) who explains that 'capital's great need is for low-cost energy, food, and raw materials', as these increase labour productivity without increasing capitalisation by enabling a larger amount of natural resources to attach to a given unit of capital. For instance, coal was exported from Australia to India promptly after the first reserves were mined in the colony because of the particular productivity bonus associated with using energy-dense fossil fuels in commodity production (Huleatt 1981). In this way, colonisation has stemmed the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, serving as a 'spatial fix' for capital (Harvey 2001).

Capitalism relies for its reproduction on the continual appropriation of the unpaid work of 'women, nature, and colonies' (Mies 1986). After refusing to acknowledge Aboriginal sovereignty over the land and declaring it '*terra nullius*', the British entrusted to the Governor the responsibility of distributing the 'Crown lands' to facilitate accumulation by dispossession on a grand scale, often forged through the violent massacre of traditional owners and supported by border police forces who protected settler economic operations (Echo Hawk 2010). By the time of the 'retreat from Empire', the fortunes of the Australian settler state were already entwined with the supply of cheap food and energy to fuel British industrial expansion. Thus, the emergent imperatives of capital accumulation bled beyond British national boundaries, incorporating Australia into a global socio-ecological metabolism through colonial violence. This is the conatal origin of Australian fossil fuel capital and the settler state.

### **Fossil fuel accumulation strategies and the ‘environment-making state’**

Today, the Australian state conducts a wide range of activities to support capital accumulation through fossil fuel extraction. The political and fiscal ‘success’ or legitimacy of a capitalist state is a function of how well it manages the process of economic development, which must be forged through collaboration between state and private actors (Harvey 2010: 197). State actors commonly seek to advance ‘accumulation strategies’, or growth models, that will achieve ‘differential accumulation’, i.e. above-average competitiveness and profits, in order to attract and retain global investment (Jessop 2016: 58).

State support for the differential accumulation of mining projects includes diesel fuel subsidies, free water allocations, government-funded rehabilitation of retired mine sites, and specially-negotiated tax concessions such as ‘royalty holidays’. Estimates suggest this support costs governments \$29 billion per year nationally (Coady *et al.* 2019).

This drives a regime of capital accumulation based on the appropriation of unpaid units of work/energy represented in the solar irradiation that has been condensed through the compression of living matter over billions of years to form fossil fuel deposits. In Moore’s (2011) terms, the Australian extractive development strategy relies on unlocking ‘frontiers of appropriation’ like the Galilee Basin coal deposits. The attachment of large amounts of unpaid work (*i.e.* nature) to each unit of capital is key to the differential accumulation achieved by the Australian fossil fuel industry.

Yet, fossil fuel accumulation relies on natural resource inputs, which capital cannot produce. Nature (‘land’) is a ‘fictitious commodity’ (Polanyi 1944: 72). To produce it as a commodity available to capital requires state intervention. Before fossil fuel extraction can be planned, the state must make nature ‘legible’ by ‘encasing it within the techno-managerial apparatus of administration, science, and governance’ (Parenti, 2015). State departments conduct a significant portion of exploratory work for mining in Australia, consisting of interpreting and mapping of regional geology, and translating this data into opportunities for extractive industry.

The Australian state also provides land for extractive operations through the coercive *Native Title Act* of 1993, which reserves the ability of the state ‘to divest land rights unilaterally, without consent or recompense’ (Strelein 2005: 260). Mining companies regularly use the implied threat of

extinguishment to secure a nominally voluntary Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) by creating divisions in Aboriginal communities between those wanting to protect sacred places and culture, and those pursuing economic windfalls and employment opportunities.

In order for fossil fuel capital to flow through sites of extraction, electricity production, and distribution, states must 'open space with roads, railways, and ports, which are based on the scientific knowledge, good credit, and direct investment of public agencies' (Parenti 2015). Australian governments have agreed to provide infrastructure under favourable terms in order to secure mining investment in the Galilee basin. The Queensland government spent nearly \$2 billion establishing and developing the Abbot Point Special Development area to 'open up' the Galilee basin to coal mining as a new frontier of accumulation (Campbell 2015).

One of the lynchpins holding Adani's Carmichael mine project together is the fusion of Indian and Australian development strategies (Rosewarne 2016). A key pillar of India's energy security strategy is Adani's vertically-integrated supply chain involving coal extraction; transportation by rail and sea freight; power generation; marketing and distribution of electricity to Indian consumers; and even other energy-intensive industrial ventures such as steel production. This plan rests on a guaranteed supply of low-ash high calorific value coal – enter the Carmichael mine. Adani is not concerned with whether the Carmichael mine makes a profit or not. Instead, Adani's CEO suggests that the mine is a 'strategic fit' for the company's vertically-integrated supply chain (McKenna 2015). As a territory governed by state architectures that routinely support fossil fuel capital, Australia is certainly a strategic choice for Adani.

The differential accumulation achieved by fossil fuel capital in Australia has relied upon attaching greater amounts of unpaid work/energy to each unit of capital. However, the ongoing degradation of the means of life in this process has spurred a crisis born of the second contradiction of capitalism (O'Connor 1991) now facing fossil fuel capital. Analysing this crisis requires consideration of both processes of accumulation and legitimation – the twin requirements that O'Connor identifies as essential for maintaining economic and social order in capitalism.

### **Legitimising destruction: ‘jobs vs. the environment’**

To be perceived as legitimate, accumulation strategies need to be convincingly articulated as in the ‘national interest’, and in the interests of a reasonable number of other capitals (Jessop 2016). Hegemonic projects such as Adani’s Carmichael mine must be legitimised in prevailing discourses to justify state support.

A key strand of the discourse justifying state support for fossil fuels is the ‘jobs vs. environment’ narrative, which highlights an alleged antagonism between environmental protection and economic development. Fossil fuel lobby groups have been some of its key proponents. But it is also promoted by networks of politicians, such as the Monash Forum of Coalition backbenchers, formed in 2018, which managed to secure state support for new fossil fuel extraction and coal-fired power generation projects after helping to install Scott Morrison as Liberal party leader and then Prime Minister. Support has come not only in financial form, but in extra-economic measures including restrictions on protest designed to insulate fossil fuel industries from democratic resistance.

Campaigns emphasising the potential economic cost of climate action were particularly prominent in the lead up to the 2019 federal election. Industry-funded minerals lobby groups organised pro-coal ‘go Galilee’ rallies and erected misleading billboards about the threat to Queensland jobs to encourage major parties to adopt fossil fuel-friendly policies. Meanwhile, one of the key owners of mining rights in the Galilee basin, Clive Palmer, launched a campaign bid worth \$60 million in advertising alone, which, while unsuccessful electorally, was a major factor in the success of pro-coal candidates.

The ‘jobs vs. environment’ narrative is also supported by a fraction of labour that considers itself coal-dependent, primarily represented through the structural input of the mining division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) to the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Leading-up to the 2019 election, the CFMMEU made its endorsement of ALP candidates in marginal Queensland seats contingent on their support for the Adani Carmichael mine. The failure of the ALP in coal-dependent seats spurred internal disquiet, including the alleged formation of a group of ministers trying to steer the party towards coal-friendly policies, dubbed the ‘Otis Group’. After securing explicit support for the Adani mine from federal ALP leader Anthony Albanese, the mining

division of the CFMMEU repeated its power-brokering approach with state ALP candidates in the lead-up to the Queensland state election.

Australian fossil fuel capital accumulation strategies have marginalised some other capitals. Renewable energy capital has suffered as the Monash Forum has blocked renewable energy targets in order to hamstring competitors to fossil fuels, for example. Meanwhile, communities based on Great Barrier Reef tourism – which historically has employed more people than the entire coal industry in Queensland – have sounded the alarm at the environmental and climate impacts of fossil fuels, which directly jeopardise the industry (The Australia Institute 2016). It is important to note that the state could secure capital accumulation by supporting other capitals instead of fossil fuels. The form of the state is not pre-determined by its functions. Rather, it is always subject to negotiation and contestation. The vacillations of the Queensland state government on questions of support for the Carmichael mine reflect increasing pressure from growing sections of the community, civil society and businesses that consider state support of fossil fuels to be against their interests. The remainder of this article will examine how the state has navigated its relationship with fossil fuel capital in the context of this shift.

### **The ‘second contradiction of capitalism’ and the rise of fossil fuel authoritarianism**

O’Connor’s (1991) theory of capitalism’s ‘second contradiction’ can illuminate the economic crisis tendencies facing the fossil fuel industry in Australia, which form the impetus for authoritarian interventions by state actors. As fossil fuel capital depletes Australia’s most favourable resource fields, production costs rise as capital flows turn to less advantageous coal reserves. Adani’s Carmichael mine, for instance, will be further from export facilities than almost all other Queensland mines, requiring the haulage of coal along 189 kilometres of rail to coastal ports. Galilee Basin coal reserves are covered by an average of 74 metres of overburden – the mining industry term for earth that lies above an area that is propitious to economic development. This means Galilee coal is between three and ten times deeper than presently developed seams such as those of the Bowen basin. In this context, securing favourable regulation and support from the state represents one of the few reliable ways that fossil fuel capital can improve the value proposition of investments.

From another angle, 'anti-development activism' has been singled out by the Federal government as a 'continuing challenge for resources development' (Department of Industry and Science 2015). In Queensland, for instance, environmental activists have leveraged consumer boycotts and campaigns targeting brand reputation to persuade a suite of major Australian and overseas banks to rule out funding Galilee coal projects like Adani's Carmichael mine (Lucas 2016). Community pressure has at the same time restricted the state's ability to provide funding to Adani, as detailed in later sections of this article. These developments have the combined effect of raising the cost of finance for fossil fuel capital and thus threatening differential accumulation in the industry. Furthermore, community opposition has 'used the courts with devastating effect', forcing Adani into lengthy and expensive legal battles (McCarthy 2020). This politicisation of key state processes governing access to nature massively increases project start costs and heightens the already-significant risk of an underproduction crisis. It increases the need for government subsidisation to ensure the completion of half-constructed projects and the valorisation of invested capital.

The evolving global energy market presents another challenge to fossil fuel capital. Demand and prices for Australian fossil fuels such as thermal coal are steadily decreasing as many countries seek to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The severity of this threat comes from the fact that when 'capitalists purchase fixed capital, they are *obliged to use it* until its value (however calculated) is fully retrieved' (Harvey 1982: 220). Fossil fuel companies have included in their asset calculations vast unused fossil fuel reserves over which they have extraction rights, as well as mines and energy generation infrastructure that is predicted to be obsolete well before originally anticipated (Lucas 2016). Whether or not these assets become 'stranded', and therefore whether shareholders' stakes must be devalued, depends in large part on the level of state support that can be secured to bail out failing enterprises or render marginal projects profitable. This explains why the fossil fuel industry has doubled its donations to the major Australian political parties in the past four years, with Adani rising from obscurity to the position of second-largest political donor within two years. At the same time, voters, a growing number of activists, and Indigenous landowners are applying pressure on Australian governments at all levels to decrease, if not cease entirely, their support of an industry perceived to be destructive. Pressures emanating from the second contradiction of capitalism have wedged the Australian state between an immovable object

and an intensifying force. On the one hand, the fossil fuel industry lobbies for support to avoid capital devaluation. On the other, the environment movement focusses growing community dissent on state facilitation of a polluting regime of abstract social nature.

O'Connor's theory of the 'second contradiction of capitalism' holds that 'crisis-induced changes in production conditions' lead to restructuring of relations governing capital's access to nature, often into forms that are *more social* i.e. that rely on greater facilitation by the state. The exact form that this 'socialisation' of production takes, and whether it creates positive or negative socio-ecological outcomes, is contingent on political struggle. I argue that in Australia this socialisation has taken the form of fossil fuel authoritarianism – a development that is nonetheless contested and unstable. To further explore these aspects we need to apply the authoritarian neoliberalism research framework to develop a historically-specific analysis of authoritarian interventions by the Australian state.

### **Native title as discipline: Wangan & Jagalingou resistance**

One of the most important sites of fossil fuel authoritarianism and community resistance has been the dealings of Adani and the Queensland government with the Wangan and Jagalingou people, who are the traditional owners of the land on which the Carmichael mine project is being constructed. As discussed earlier, the Native Title system has routinely been used in a disciplinary fashion to coerce Aboriginal people into giving formal consent for mining developments on their land. The case of Adani is unique because a key group of traditional owners, represented by the Wangan and Jagalingou Traditional Owners Family Council, have sustained persistent opposition to the development. Their resistance has revealed the authoritarian mechanisms used to sideline the interests of Aboriginal communities through the *Native Title Act*.

Adani and state actors have systematically disregarded Wangan and Jagalingou (W&J) opposition by subverting land use agreement processes that are nominally consent oriented. Adani's first two attempts to secure an ILUA with the W&J Traditional Owners in 2012 and 2014 were voted down at authorisation meetings, while two other meetings held by the traditional owners without Adani confirmed community intentions to reject any proposal that involved compensating them in exchange for the extinguishment of their native title rights (Lyons 2019: 758). After calling

in the support of the Coordinator-General, Adani held another meeting in April 2016 and obtained an ILUA. Investigations later revealed that Adani provided buses that brought many of the 343 attendees to this meeting, 200 of which were not descendants of the families party to the native title claim and thus ineligible to vote, and reportedly paid attendees 'sitting fees' of \$2,500 each (Carey 2019). Adani and the Queensland government appear to have driven division and employed stacking techniques to sideline the will of Indigenous groups and secure an ILUA.

The Queensland government has resorted to moving the site of decision making outside the purview of elected representatives in order to ensure favourable conditions for Adani. In 2016, the executive branch of the state government deemed the Carmichael mine 'critical infrastructure', giving the Coordinator-General special powers to expedite the remaining planning approvals needed for the commencement of the mine's operation, and to forgo community input in decision making about the project (Lyons 2019). The role of Coordinator-General is an unelected public service position with wide-reaching powers regarding large-scale economic projects. Bestowing critical infrastructure status is a rare act, which, together with the 'Galilee Basin Development Strategy', laid the groundwork for compulsory land acquisition.

The executive branch of the state also overruled the judiciary to protect Adani against First Nations resistance. A rushed amendment to the *Native Title Act* allowed ILUAs that might have been invalidated by the Federal Court's *McGlade* decision – including Adani's – to stand. Lyons (2019) describes how state actors deliberately obfuscated the amendment and restricted opportunities for community consultation about the changes. The tendencies to merge the judiciary and the executive, while simultaneously disempowering parliament to limit economic democracy, were identified by Poulantzas (1978: 222–5) as key processes of authoritarian statism.

It is important to note that fossil fuel authoritarianism is a continuation of the ongoing expropriation of Aboriginal land since colonisation. The increased reliance on state arbitration and intervention to protect mining developments represents a recourse to authoritarian practices where Aboriginal people have challenged corrupt models of 'consent-seeking'. Authoritarian silencing of Indigenous struggle in the dispute over Adani's ILUA came to a head in 2019 when the Queensland government extinguished native title over a large swathe of the W&J lands without

public announcement, using its statutory discretionary powers. The imperatives of Australia's fossil fuel accumulation strategy are producing an authoritarian sidelining of the rights of Traditional Owners.

The struggle of Aboriginal activists facing these injustices has been ongoing, achieving some important victories and igniting a broader movement against Adani. Traditional owners have won a battle to occupy a ceremonial camp on part of Adani's pastoral lease, against efforts by Adani and the Queensland government (W&J Family Council 2020). Meanwhile, challenges to Adani's ILUA have bought critical time for grassroots organising to build networks opposing the project. By highlighting the state's heavy-handed intervention, First Nations resistance has also discredited 'free market' accounts of neoliberalism that 'have a habit of essentialising states as inherently socially protective' (Bruff and Tansel 2018: 3). It has, thus, trained public attention on the state's constituent role in producing capitalist fossil fuel extraction, making this also a 'transparently social' part of the state more evidently open to contestation (O'Connor 1991). Despite a historical pattern of misunderstandings by white environmental activists, First Nations activists and environmental campaigners are forging broad networks of mutual support (Pickerill 2018; Mason 2020). While authoritarian statism may appear a show of strength, it also exposes the state's role in securing the conditions of production for capital, and can paradoxically subject the state to greater pressure from civil society and social movements.

### **Eroding environmental safeguards**

The Australian state has sought to erode environmental regulation in a number of ways to minimise the barriers it poses to fossil fuel projects. Authoritarian neoliberal logics of regulatory reform involving the 'self-disempowerment' of democratic forums (Bruff 2014) have foreclosed democratic engagement in environmental governance.

The environmental regulatory processes that we have today are concretisations of past political contests between the state, capital and various civil society organisations, especially environmental organisations. These processes exist uncomfortably under neoliberalism. This is because they represent a form and product of economic democracy (however limited), and they carry the potential to obstruct the appropriation of nature and thus limit the rate of capital accumulation.

These protections have been used extensively by community and civil society groups fighting extractive projects in the Galilee Basin, forcing capital into lengthy delays and project re-designs, and generally contributing to the crisis of underproduction facing the sector.

Authoritarian neoliberalism in Australia is simultaneously a mode of governance and a socioecological regime. Environmental regulation - or so-called 'green tape' - now can *only* be reduced, and must be looked at 'from the perspective of business' (Morrison 2019). Prime Minister Scott Morrison moved his regulation-busting taskforce into the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to give it high priority and executive reach. The centralisation of political power in the executive branch of the state is recognised as a key tool in authoritarian regimes' strategic 'assaults on the norms and institutions of democratic societies' (McCarthy 2019: 303).

The state has tailored regulatory processes to support the Carmichael mine. CSIRO scientists were given just hours to analyse Adani's water plan under pressure from the Coordinator-General to reach a swift approval, even though Adani failed to provide critical information, without which the CSIRO admitted their analysis was essentially defunct. The state has also sought to remove aspects of environmental approval processes where objections would threaten approvals for fossil fuel projects. In Adani's case, changes made in 2016 to the *Water Act 2000* (Qld) gave Adani's Carmichael mine a special exemption from being subject to a standard second window for public objection to its water license application. This shows how Australian capitalism develops *through* the continual reinvention of the society-nature totality to facilitate new frontiers of appropriation such as the Galilee Basin, such that 'the endless accumulation of capital is [...] the endless commodification of nature' (Moore 2011). The weakening of environmental regulations and planning approvals is part of neoliberal legal and regulatory techniques that erode, in the name of 'economic necessity', the democratic institutional forms where social compromise has traditionally been negotiated (Bruff 2014). This has become a key method for state actors seeking to safeguard fossil fuel capital from dissent.

### **Dynamic struggle confronts rising authoritarianism**

Where state actors have used legal and regulatory measures to erode formal avenues of democratic participation in environmental governance,

dynamic and innovative protest activities have emerged to pressure the state and the fossil fuel industry. Various state actors have sought to criminalise or increase penalties for an increasing number of protest activities that previously were considered legal or incurred only a small fine, tending toward ‘the centralisation of state powers by the executive branch at the expense of democratic debate and participation’ (Bruff and Tansel 2018).

The current ALP state government in Queensland has significantly intensified policing of protest activities with little justification. In 2019, the Queensland government introduced anti-protest laws providing expanded police powers to strip search protestors without a warrant (Queensland Legislative Assembly 2019). Legislators alleged protestors were using dangerous booby traps, the only evidence of which was a single case that transpired 14 years prior. The *Summary Offences and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2019* was introduced by the state Labor government, while the Coalition opposition suggested harsher versions of the same measures. Only one MP voted against the legislation. The unanimity of both major parties on imposing harsh new laws on the basis of minimal evidence is a product of the crisis facing fossil fuel capital, which requires increasingly extreme forms of state protection precisely at the moment when the public is most opposed to these measures. Faced with a threat to the dominant accumulation strategy, the major parties have closed ranks, eroding electoral options of opposing extractive projects.

Facing a crackdown on formal means of expressing dissent, activists have developed new strategies to effect a vigilante democratisation of ecological governance. Indeed, authoritarian practices tend to engender creative forms of resistance (Bruff 2016), like those developed in the struggle against Adani’s Carmichael mine. The *Stop Adani* campaign and the NGO *Market Forces* ran large-scale campaigns that secured vows of non-involvement from all major Australian and international banks and 15 major insurers, forcing Adani Australia to seek financing from its parent company, already facing cash-flow issues. Campaigning by shareholders, staff and external environmental activists targeting engineering, construction and haulage firms forced Adani to shoulder an estimated \$200 million in extra costs to set up a new rail company for the project.

The executive branch of the Federal government has attempted to curtail these practices. Prime Minister Scott Morrison commented to a Queensland Resources Council lunch that he and the Attorney-General

were ‘working to identify mechanisms that can successfully outlaw these indulgent and selfish practices’ (Haydar 2019). At the same time, he asserted that people have been ‘testing the limits of the right to protest’ (*ibid.*). Morrison proposed a ban that would make it illegal to refuse to provide services to fossil fuel industry projects on the basis of ethical objections, restricting companies that may want to align their operations with the values of their customers. However, high-profile opposition from lawyers, academics and civil society actors led the government to abandon this proposal. The research framework of authoritarian neoliberalism ‘reveals that the way we live today is not inevitable because it is actively constructed by competing social forces’ (Bruff and Tansel 2018). In the same way that capital may marshal state institutions to secure authoritarian measures in its favour, civil society actors may sometimes mobilise existing institutions to obstruct authoritarian practices.

State actors have repeatedly sought to criminalise the activities of groups opposing fossil fuel projects in order to preserve increasingly controversial regimes of capital accumulation. Of course, legislators on both sides of parliament acting in lock-step to increase police powers or disempower regulatory bodies has been a feature of many neoliberal regimes, such that formulating a new, authoritarian periodisation within neoliberalism may risk ‘obscuring a broader history of authoritarianism and its contradictions’ (Ryan 2019: 116). However, a renewed focus on contemporary forms of authoritarianism illuminates precisely these contradictions, reminding us that ‘an increasingly authoritarian state is simultaneously strengthened and weakened by this shift towards coercion’ as its authoritarian interventions spur social opposition (Bruff 2014). Authoritarian neoliberalism as a research agenda helps assess the prospects for challenging authoritarian practices and securing better living conditions for marginalised communities and natures. Incorporating an eco-Marxist perspective enables the adaptation of this understanding to historically-novel forms of opposition to Australian fossil fuel accumulation strategies.

### **Pushing state support underground**

As the fossil fuel industry loses its ‘social license to operate’ (Zhang *et al.* 2015), obfuscating state support for fossil fuels – and restricting dissent to it – have replaced more ‘normal’ consent-seeking governance in reproducing fossil fuel accumulation strategies. Large-scale surveys show

that Australians are increasingly worried about climate change and overwhelmingly prefer renewable energy sources and government programs that fund them rather than fossil fuels (Blau 2020; Lowy Institute 2020). Instead, neoliberal environmental policy has expanded Australia's reliance on fossil fuels. Research presented at the COP26 climate summit revealed Australia's per capita emissions from the use of coal were higher than those of any other country (Morton 2021).

Nowhere is the legitimacy of state support of fossil fuel projects more contested than in Queensland. The 'sunshine state' is the source of over half of Australia's coal exports, yet studies show climate change is the issue that most worries Queenslanders (Blau 2020). McCarthy's (2019) argument that 'populist and authoritarian politics and regimes often arise directly from tensions between rural and urban areas' plays out in rural Queensland electorates, where the interests of communities built around fossil fuel industries have successfully been pitched against those of an alleged 'greenie' urban elite.

The polarisation of the populace on the issue of fossil fuels came to a head in the lead up to the 2017 Queensland state election. Adani came close to securing a \$1 billion subsidised loan for its Carmichael mine project from the federal government, sparking community uproar on the basis that the mine did not meet the funding criterion of serving the 'national interest'. In a trial against Adani in the Queensland Land Court, Adani's claims that the Carmichael project would create 10,000 jobs in regional Queensland were ruled to be inflated seven times over actual likely jobs figures (Environmental Law Australia n.d.). High-profile campaigns and community pressure led the incumbent premier Anastasia Palaszczuk to make an election promise to veto the loan, along with any other public subsidies for the Carmichael project. The negotiation of state support for Adani's Carmichael mine illustrates that the provision of the conditions of production is an uneven, contested process.

In the absence of a clear social license for Adani's Carmichael project, the Queensland government has resorted to strategies of obfuscation and secrecy to continue supporting the mine. Normally, the social license to operate supports the 'legitimisation' of state programs (O'Connor 1973: 6) or the formation of 'hegemonic visions' that justify state support for economic projects (Jessop 2016). The state has abandoned attempts to legitimise the \$4.4 billion of tax exemptions and capital subsidies it will provide Adani over the first 30 years of the project's lifespan. Instead, it is

safeguarding this support through ‘administrative and legal efforts to limit the social and political space for contesting those ideas/policies’ (Bruff and Tansel 2018: 2). While these measures would meet most definitions of a subsidy, state actors have quietly re-structured support for Adani and denied that it constitutes a ‘subsidy’ (The Australia Institute 2020). For instance, following the 2017 election, the Queensland government immediately entered negotiations to allow Adani to pay no royalties on Carmichael coal for up to ten years, keeping these negotiations secret by the ironically-named ‘transparent policy framework’ drafted specifically for Adani. Concealing information to circumvent dissent has become a hallmark of Queensland’s governance of fossil fuel capital.

### **The seeds of democratic alternatives**

While Australia’s major political parties are in a deadlock, with neither party proposing significant change to current extractive accumulation strategies, progressive voices are building support for radical alternatives. The ALP at state and federal levels has not been able to mobilise around proposals for a just transition for workers, which could cut through fears about fossil fuel job losses by proposing a planned and orderly re-training and employment program as an alternative to the chaotic transition already occurring. But any just transition policy would require significant public investment, which has become political anathema in Australia, due not only to an entrenched discursive vilification of government debt, but to the forms of ‘embedded neoliberalism’ that enshrine the logic of privatisation and austerity-style cuts to public services in state institutions (Cahill 2014). This reflects what Bruff (2014) identifies as a paralysation of left-wing political parties, which are failing to propose genuine alternatives to an increasingly sclerotic and disliked ‘free-market’ capitalism.

While this bipartisan deadlock and the discursive manipulation discussed in the previous section of this article may appear to demonstrate the strength of the fossil fuel hegemonic bloc, it could alternatively be a sign of weakness. As argued by Bruff (2016), ‘the apparent strengthening of the state simultaneously entails its growing fragility, for it is becoming an increasingly direct target of a range of popular struggles, demands and discontent’ due to its recourse to coercive approaches that marginalise an ever-growing section of the community. Instead of a genuine engagement with concerns about the fossil fuel industry, we are witnessing ‘the

snowballing involvement of the state in economic contradictions [that] merely broadens the cracks in the power bloc' (Poulantzas 1978). These cracks serve as openings for progressive voices to make ambitious claims on the state. In the Australian Climate Strikes of September 2019, up to 300,000 protestors demanded not only the phasing out of fossil fuels, but also public funding for 'a just transition and job creation for all fossil fuel industry workers and communities' (ABC News 2019). This demand was developed in collaboration with trade unions, reflecting a renewed effort in the climate justice movement towards greater democratisation and linkages with labour and Indigenous activists.

Efforts to overcome the 'jobs vs. environment' dichotomy and build broader alliances around climate policy have resulted in development of various proposals for 'Green New Deal'-style programs tackling the triple crisis of climate, inequality and democracy. Not all are transformative. Many proposals emphasise the windfall on offer if Australia capitalises on its abundant renewable energy resources to become a 'superpower' in renewable energy exports and green manufacturing. But without engaging with issues of political process, they risk reproducing current authoritarian environmental governance in concert with renewable energy capital and other fractions of capital positioned as 'green'. While these plans project massive job creation *in the aggregate*, unregulated renewable energy industries would not necessarily deliver well-remunerated, permanent jobs in marginal electorates home to fossil fuel communities, making these programs unjust and unlikely to gain political support (Pearse and Bryant, forthcoming). Plans for 'just transitions' that overcome this shortfall consider 'the social and spatial embeddedness of labour in energy transitions' and propose more particularised jobs plans based on needs expressed by affected communities (*ibid.*). Importantly, under current Native Title law, we can expect continued sidelining of Aboriginal landowner interests. Capital's 'land grabbing' practices are likely to intensify with the expansion of surface land use for renewable energy generation in the 'end of the subterranean energy regime' (Huber and McCarthy 2017). More promising research agendas emphasise the need for democratic, participatory *processes and relationships* in constructing any program for political economic transformation (*e.g.* Heenan and Sturman 2020; Tattersall *et al.* 2020).

If programs based on principles of democracy, solidarity, and Indigenous sovereignty gain popular political backing, they may mobilise against and through the state to push back against institutionally-embedded

neoliberalism and experiment with more ecologically- and socially-sustainable modes production. In limiting the circulation of dissenting discourses, authoritarian practices are prolonging politically problematic accumulation strategies while simultaneously propelling their undermining by radical alternatives.

## Conclusion

This article has used eco-Marxism and authoritarian neoliberalism theory to analyse the processes by which fossil fuel authoritarianism has emerged, in dialectical relation to popular struggles against it, to prolong an extractive accumulation regime at the point of exhaustion. It has aimed to provide an understanding of the political economic terrain on which fossil fuel authoritarianism is being contested.

An eco-Marxist framework illuminates how the Australian state co-produces fossil fuel accumulation strategies, driven by a capitalist value relation that encourages the sacrifice of nature's life- and energy-giving capabilities at the altar of profit. As the second contradiction of capitalism engenders a crisis of capital underproduction, the scientific, regulatory, legal, political and fiscal support of the Australian state is increasingly necessary to secure the viability of the otherwise 'unbankable' Carmichael project. At the same time, a growing coalition of civil society actors is mobilising to pressure state actors to reduce or cease entirely their support of environmentally-destructive fossil fuel projects. As they find themselves 'unable to garner the consent, or even the reluctant acquiescence, necessary for more "normal" modes of governance' (Bruff 2012), state actors have resorted to authoritarian governance techniques on various fronts to reproduce extractive accumulation regimes.

The economic recovery plan implemented in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis has deepened the processes analysed in this article. The crisis-driven restructuring of the way the state provides production conditions has occasioned a renewed intensification of authoritarian statism at a moment when community resistance (such as large-scale protests) have been temporarily stymied. The 'emergency response' to COVID-19 has involved the allocation of four times more fiscal stimulus to the fossil fuel industry than to clean energy, with only limited opportunities for scrutiny by a massively scaled-back parliament. Significant budgetary decisions were made on the recommendations of the National COVID-19

Coordination Commission. This is an unelected and opaquely governed panel comprised mostly of fossil fuel executives, tasked with advising the government on how to rebuild the Australian economy in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis by processes that have been concealed from public scrutiny. The advice of the commission has been translated into policy supporting a vast, subsidised expansion of natural gas production.

Nonetheless, the pandemic appears to have opened the terrain for increasingly mainstream proposals and policy for a ‘green recovery’ that may undermine fossil fuel capital’s hegemony. In contrast to the Federal government’s approach, many state governments have already planned for a transition to satisfying domestic electricity needs by renewable energy generation. However, most state governments are trying to ‘have their cake and eat it too’, facilitating renewable energy development while approving expanded fossil fuel operations. We may see discursive appeals to domestic ‘energy security’ supporting fossil fuels falter, as the authoritarian measures they justify relate increasingly to *export-oriented* production like the development orchestrated in the Galilee Basin.

Critically, the ‘authoritarian fix’ is fragile. Dynamic social contestation is already forcing cracks in fossil fuel authoritarianism by pushing it to extremes where it marginalises not only civil society, but an ever-growing section of capital and state institutions. These cracks are widening under the inaction of the depoliticised parties and parliaments of the mainstream. As such, progressive voices are finding an opening to call for radical, sustainable alternatives, some of which may hold the promise of genuine economic democratisation and an end to fossil fuel authoritarianism.

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