

From Oil Culture Wars to Appliance Wars and Back: Fossil Fuels, Identity, and the Politics of Combustion On and Off Social Media Today

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Writing for the Guardian in January 2023, environmental reporter Oliver Milman described what he saw as a new front in the ongoing culture wars in the United States: gas stoves. In the brief article, Milman offered a summary of the series of events that culminated in this “strange culture war.”¹ First, an agency commissioner with US Consumer Product Safety Commission identified gas stoves as a “hidden hazard” and suggested that actions to ban the appliances may be taken—observations that notably came on the heels of reports and peer-reviewed research concluding gas stoves can cause asthma in children.² A flurry of activity on social media followed as Republican

politicians and other right-wing media figures and outlets sought to offer their hot takes on these prospects. Republican Congressman Matt Gaetz, for instance, took to Twitter (now X) to voice his discontent by posting a video of a flaming gas burner along with the caption: “You’ll have to pry it from my COLD DEAD HANDS! #FoodieRevolt” (Fig. 1).³ As did Florida governor Ron DeSantis, who, with the caption “Don’t tread on Florida, and don’t mess with gas stoves!,” posted variations of the Gadsden flag featuring a gas stove instead of a snake (Fig. 2).⁴ In drawing attention to how policy speculation, cultural politics, and social media virality converged in this episode, one of



Figures 1 and 2: Tweets from Matt Gaetz and Ron DeSantis

Milman's opening sentences captures the spirit of the conflict at its centre. "It's a snarky sort of battle that tells us a lot about how the next phase of the effort to tackle the climate crisis may play out," he wrote.

Milman is right to draw attention to how this episode offers a glimpse of a new political and cultural topography on which prospects for addressing climate change in general and energy transition in particular are mapped today. But for those who have been paying close attention to the shape and form of resistance to climate policy and demands for just energy transition in recent years, these "appliance wars"⁵ are far from strange—they're the default setting. In this article, I turn to the appliance wars as a new frontier in what I've been calling the oil culture wars. These wars refer to the cultural and representational battles over oil that occur in tandem with the broader culture wars today. They have produced the default setting Milman views as exceptional.⁶ I approach these appliance wars as tied to the oil culture wars to reveal cultural and political barriers to energy transition in the present. I then offer some preliminary conclusions on the ways in which social media aids in fortifying these barriers and what this means for the horizon of possibility for just transition when the right to burn is cast as an inalienable right.

The appliance wars are one battle in a longer history of cultural resistance to energy transition, where pushes for energy transition from both top-down policy measures and bottom-up or grassroots activist demands by energy and environmental justice movements are construed as a singular target. Policy level interventions, such as planning pushes towards fifteen-minute cities—urban spaces designed or redesigned in a way that allows for the majority of daily needs to be accessible by a fifteen walk, bike ride, or public transit trip—or mandated phasing out of vehicles powered by internal combustion engines, represent changes at the intersections of design, behaviour, and infrastructure. That is to say,

they intervene within the scope of everyday life. Change in these domains is on the horizon. And this change, even if it maintains the status quo in many ways, has provoked the kinds of reactionary dissent seen in the opening paragraphs of this article, particularly among those in existing right-wing media circles and milieus.

Electric vehicles are arguably the poster children for the emergent so-called green, net-zero economy. What's truly green or what's net-zero remains up for discussion. Regardless, widespread net-zero goals have been adopted. In the Canadian context, the current Trudeau government announced its plans to phase out gas-powered vehicles by 2035. This vision was made concrete in June of 2021 when Transport Canada published a news release providing details of the government's "mandatory target for all new light-duty cars and passenger trucks sales to be zero-emission by 2035, accelerating Canada's previous goal of 100 percent sales by 2040."⁷ A press release titled, "Building a green economy: Government of Canada to require 100% of car and passenger truck sales be zero-emission by 2035 in Canada," articulated the rationale behind this initiative. "Supporting a strong and unified North American automotive sector to transition towards zero-emission vehicles contributes to Canada's climate change goals," the release reads, "and positions Canadian and American workers alike to benefit economically from this global shift."⁸

Reactions to this future from the allies of Canada's fossil economy have been mixed. The Fort McMurray-based pro-oil group Oil Sands Strong (rebranded recently as Oil and Gas World/Oil Sands Strong), for instance, posted then and continues to post memes on Facebook expressing a kind of righteous resistance to the tyranny of Canada's attempts to build a green economy in any form. Along with posting an image to Facebook of a car plugged into a charging station and an x over it embellished with the text "I Don't Want to Be Forced To Rent, Buy or Drive an Electric Car", Oil

Sands Strong asked its 304,000 followers: “What do you want?”⁹ Over 500 commentators chimed in to voice their hot takes (Fig. 3).

While Oil Sands Strong continues to circulate memes critical of the mandate for electric vehicles, the Calgary-based pro-oil group Canada Action has leaned into positive messaging surrounding

signals differing industry allegiances on the one hand and divergent strategies for fighting in the oil culture wars on the other hand.

Some of the criticisms of the mandate to make all new personal vehicle sales by 2035 electric deserve a semblance of empathy, even if the extractive mining politics that continue are troubling. Given



Figure 3. Facebook Meme from Oil Sands Strong Posted on December 3, 2023

the EV push since Canada’s mining industry is well-poised to provide the raw materials for them and the green transition more generally—so-called critical minerals.¹⁰ The federal government agrees, as is spelled out in its Critical Minerals Strategy titled “From Exploration to Recycling: Powering the Green and Digital Economy for Canada and the World,” which outlines policy aims regarding the development of critical mineral resources at home and abroad.¹¹ This discrepancy among pro-oil groups with regard to critical minerals ultimately

the long history of nonbinding commitments to ambitious (or even not-so-ambitious) climate goals, the motive-force behind this mandate is underwritten by aspirations towards a net-zero economy that likely won’t match up with reality, particularly in the Canadian context. There remain, for instance, technical limitations on battery capacity that are made all the worse in winter conditions and, relatedly, a lack of charging station infrastructure that makes long-distance travel inconvenient if not impossible. Both of these

limitations overlook the realities of everyday life outside the metropolises and deepen the real and perceived rifts between urban and rural lifeways, which groups like Oil Sands Strong tap into to fuel online engagement.

Given how fossil fuels so pervasively shape the contours of everyday life in what's come to be called—however problematically and inaccurately—the Global North, that the proposed elimination from or, more modestly, reduction of fossil fuels in our energy mix prompts an array of reactions from anxiety to anger is arguably unsurprising. The role of fossil fuels in social reproduction since becoming dominant in the energy mix, in other words, is difficult to overstate. By social reproduction, I mean those processes necessary for the continuance and reproduction of life—work notably often unaccounted for in the capitalist political-economic order. In *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*, cultural geographer Matt Huber influentially details how fossil fuels, and oil in particular, have played an outsized role fuelling social reproduction in neoliberal North America.¹² Private property is the constitutive juridical relation of capitalism and the single-family home is arguably the materialization of neoliberal North America's political economy, which Huber describes as the real subsumption of home.¹³ In this context, household appliances such as gas stoves have always been politicized objects, whether or not they have been immediately registered as such.

Feminist theoretical and political movements have long insisted that the domestic sphere is a political-economic site of struggle. The domestic sphere is also, as Huber so presciently shows us, a site of mediated energetic politics. Media theorist Nicole Starosielski examines this confluence in a chapter on the “thermostat wars” from *Media Hot and Cold*.¹⁴ These struggles over temperature in the home mediated through increasingly atomized thermostat control over single rooms instead of entire houses were ultimately gendered ones.

Women, the normative narrative suggests, prefer warmer temperatures whereas men prefer colder ones; these gendered divergences in bodily comfort were tapped into by manufacturers to rationalize more granular control over temperature in this way. What do these thermostat wars have to do with the appliance wars as a front in the oil culture wars? While Starosielski's focus is on the cultural politics of temperature, these politics are energetic. During the 1970s energy crisis in the US, Starosielski recounts, turning down the thermostat in Winter was associated with “a masculine, national pride.”¹⁵ In 1973, for instance, then-President Richard Nixon “urged homeowners ... to turn their thermostats down four degrees”.¹⁶ Starosielski's account reveals not only the gendered aspects of temperature control but also the political nature of cultural-energetic relations, whether those mediated through the thermostat dial or the flames of a gas stove. The gas stove, competing with EVs in the oil culture wars for the honour of privileged object of attention, is not such a strange object of political contention, as Milman's commentary on the appliance wars might suggest. Unlike Nixon's masculinized conservation ethic, in our burning present, it is instead an insistence and intensification of fossil fuel combustion, rather than its conservation, that has come to signify masculine power and certain strands of nationalism in Canada and the US.

As climate change deepens and its consequences become more perceptible to those once shielded from its immediate effects an air of desperation has come to permeate the right-wing political zeitgeist. That air of desperation has the odour of exhaust. Back in 2018, political theorist Cara New Daggett alerted us to this scent by turning her attention to the kinds of emergent authoritarian movements that produce this odour. Daggett describes this tendency as “fossil fascism,” which is marked by “climate denial and fossil fuel boosterism.” Climate denial and fossil fuel boosterism are skeleton keys of sorts that unlock the chest containing “new authoritarian movements ... with gender

anxiety slithering alongside climate anxiety, and misogynist violence sometimes exploding as fossil violence.”¹⁷ Later in 2021, Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective would elaborate a more political-economically attuned version of the concept.¹⁸ Here the politics of combustion emerge as an affective expression resulting from the synthesis of fascist tendencies of the present. In their respective formulations of fossil fascism, Daggett and Malm and the Zetkin Collective identify characteristics like authoritarian desire and politically wielded authoritarian power, hypermasculinity mediated by resource extraction, and a nationalism informed by all of these dimensions. The old and new right are turning to combustion as an operative mode of political expression in the burning present through

Sands Strong often contain provocative visual forms that echo the tone and tenor of figures like Gaetz or DeSantis. In one post from the group, for instance, a picture of a medium-duty truck on the side of a road expelling a cloud of exhaust in a winter landscape with the text “Alberta” superimposed on top of it is using the fossil fuel powered generator on its bed to charge an electric car with “Ottawa” superimposed in a similar way (Fig. 4). Along with criticizing the efficiency of electric vehicles in winter conditions, a higher-level reading suggests that Ottawa plays the role of a synecdoche of the federal government and Oil Sands Strong’s circulation of these meme is ultimately a criticism of the federal government’s transition policy aims and aspirations, which

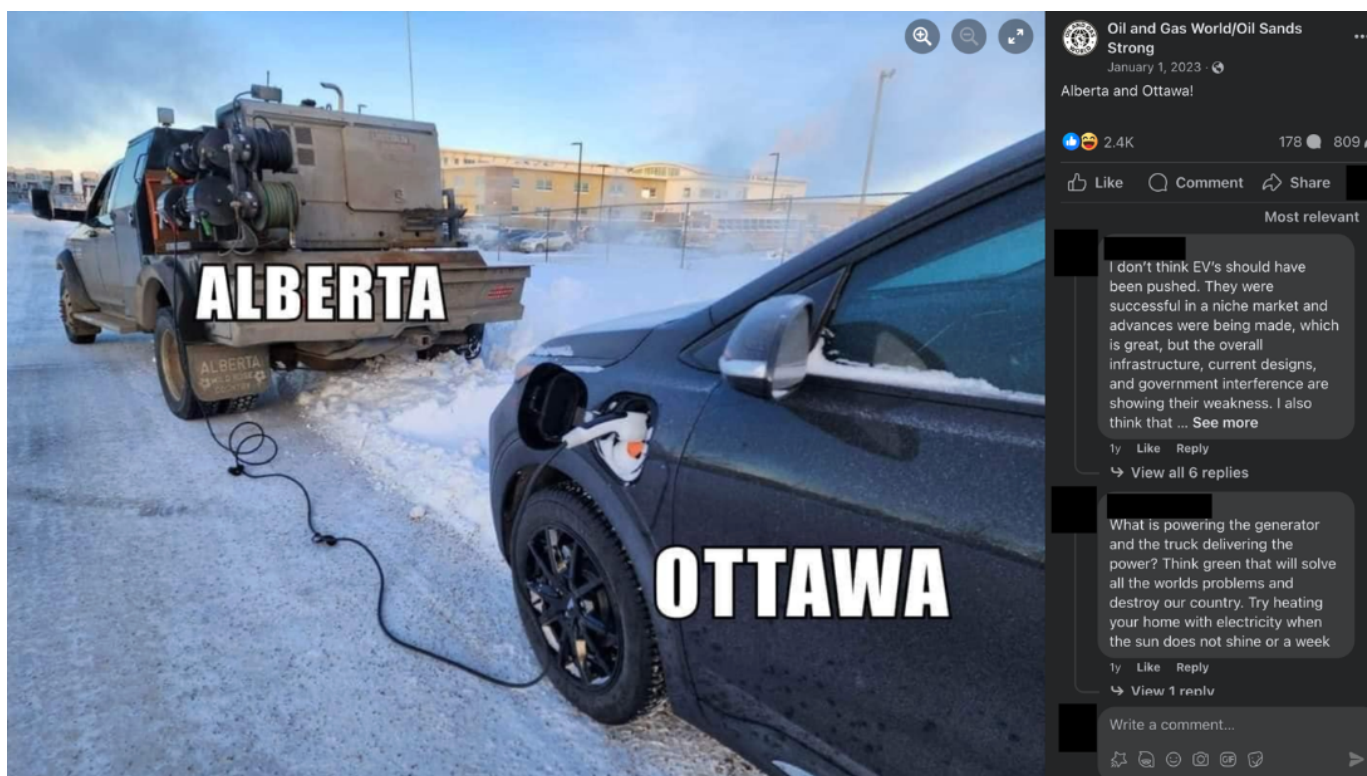


Figure 4. Meme posted by Oil Sands Strong to Facebook on January 1, 2023

meme warfare and trolling tactics mobilized both online and off as both Gaetz’ and DeSantis’ contributions on Twitter to the appliance wars show.

Memes like those produced and circulated by Oil

the meme also suggests is fuelled by Alberta. More recently, appliances have become meme fodder for Oil Sands Strong as the group sets up its brigade in the appliance wars. In 2023, heat pumps outsold furnaces, leading Heatmap News

to declare: “Heat pumps are winning the appliance wars.”¹⁹ But for Oil Sands Strong, the war is far from over. During a particularly harsh cold snap in Western Canada, Oil Sands Strong took the opportunity to criticize the effectiveness of heat pumps, a low-energy heater that transfers rather than generates heat. “A heat pump is a glorified reversed air conditioner,” the meme reads. “Is it strong enough to keep your home warm in the middle of a prairie winter” (Fig. 5)? From electric vehicles to heat pumps, the efficacy and power of non-combustible technologies in frigid Canadian environments are grounds through which transition is challenged in a snarky, trolling tone and tenor.



Figure 5. Meme posted by Oil Sands Strong to Facebook on November 30, 2023

While such trolling behaviour, which I have elsewhere called “petro-trolling,” was birthed online by pro-oil groups like Oil Sands Strong, the same spirit informs combustive action off the screen and on the ground.²⁰ The boundary line between online and offline life has always been a porous one; today, this boundary line is as weak as ever. Trolling in general has followed this transition from online spaces to offline ones. In Trolling Ourselves

to Death, communications theorist Jason Hannan traces this transition through the figure of the troll and the eponymous act’s origins on Usenet and 4chan where users were protected by—even fuelled by—anonymity or pseudonymity up to its more contemporary IRL manifestations where anonymity is no longer a determinant condition with examples such as the January 06, 2021 storming of the US. Well into the twenty-first century, trolling’s violent roots are showing, often with dire consequences.²¹ Hannan’s title, it’s worth stressing, isn’t hyperbolic. In the case of petro-trolling, rolling coal is an IRL counterpart to which Daggett also turns to in her analysis of petro-masculinity and fossil fascism.²² Rolling coal describes a phenomenon where diesel powered trucks are retrofitted to increase the flow of fuel to the engine, so the engine is overloaded and exhaust is expelled before complete combustion, which can be controlled by the driver. The act itself often involves targeting people like cyclists or other cars—especially Priuses—with the resulting plumes of black smoke. Robert at TrucksAuthority.com spells out how to enable this capability, which ranges from engine modification to the removal of catalytic converters.²³ In 2021, rolling coal made headlines in the US and beyond when a Texas teenager ended up hitting six cyclists when attempting to roll coal.²⁴

Beyond these more individuated acts of combustive petro-trolling, the two interlinked convoys that travelled across Canada in 2019 and 2022 provide a glimpse of combustive politics to come. The first of these convoys was organized in 2019 by a small oilsands-adjacent business owner who was involved in the racist, far-right Yellow Vests Canada movement. Initially called the Yellow Vest Convoy for Canada then revised to United We Roll! Convoy For Canada, the convoy travelled from Red Deer, Alberta to Ottawa in protest of new environmental regulations that would ban large oil tankers on the West Coast (Bills C-48 and C-69) and to call on Canada to withdraw from a UN migration pact. Increasing the flow of Canadian oil on the world market and fortifying borders were foundational concerns for Yellow Vests Canada,

which are both attempts at controlling who and what gets to go where and when and how. Raising \$142,873 on GoFundMe, which represents its level of popularity, the convoy also received a formal welcome from Conservative establishment politicians in Ottawa when it arrived. Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen described this event as “white and masculine backlash animated by climate change denial and hyper-extractivism ... diagnostic of a politics that has taken hold across the continent”—a politics I describe as those of combustion.²⁵

Fast forward to 2022, and a second act continued this backlash and its politics of combustion—this time under the veil of the pandemic. Named the “Freedom Convoy”, this convoy instantiation saw multiple contingents travel from across the country to arrive in Ottawa and occupy it for several weeks. The movement also blocked several Canada/US border blockades in BC, Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. It also raised \$25 million across crowdfunding platforms and through e-transfers. The convoy’s official rationale was that of resisting pandemic restrictions and mandates, especially those that required the vaccination of truckers crossing the US/Canada border, yet figures from the former United We Roll! Convoy were involved in its planning and execution, and its fossil-fueled bases were never far from view, including when organizer and fundraiser Tamara Lich donned a hoodie from Canada Action declaring “I ❤️🍁 Oil” during her bail hearing. Of course, regardless of political inclination, convoys themselves are combusive by nature, but signifiers such as Lich’s wardrobe show how fossil fuels and their combustion permeate the means and ends of the Freedom Convoy.

Three weeks into the event, the federal government invoked the Emergencies Act, giving police elevated powers. The act’s invocation also triggered a mandated inquiry into its appropriate use, followed by public hearings that began in October 2022 and lasted 36 days. These hearings generated a unique archive of legally bound testimony from

police, politicians, convoy organizers, residents of Ottawa, and more. Testimony from downtown residents during the mandated inquiry into the use of the Emergencies Act revealed how vehicles were weaponized as instruments of protest that affected residents, who cited fumes and noise from horns as impacting their health.²⁶ Later testimony from one of the organizers in charge of media and communications on behalf of the convoy discussed the “Daily Humour and Meme Warfare” section of a daily intel report from , which contained a meme “The Hoonker” who, among other tactics of vehicle-forward disruption, “Uses meme warfare in real life”.²⁷ The oil culture wars turned appliance wars are another manifestation of this use of meme warfare in real life, to which there will be many more instances of in coming years.

What, then, is the future of just transition? As combustion becomes so deeply tied personal and political identity through conscious and unconscious mechanisms, threat to such identities is the primary affect around which just transition pursuits and initiatives are challenged by the old and new right. Certainly, for the old and new right, save for those aligning more closely with the mining industry than the fossil fuel one like Canada Action, transition is to be resisted on all fronts. For those of us committed to a just transition, not all transitions are welcome, either. The winners of the net-zero transition on offer by the current federal government, for instance, will likely be the agents of extractive capital—that same faction of capital who benefitted from the prolonged age of oil—as fossil fuel extraction continues while demand for the critical minerals necessary for scaled up electrification and EV manufacturing increases. Battling over electric vehicles, heat pumps, and gas stoves in an oil culture war turned appliance war and back is an endless loop whose winners are politicians on Twitter (now X) and petro-trolls.

The losers who will feel the impacts of this decidedly unjust transition on the one hand and percolating fossil fascism on the other, it seems, will be everybody else.

DAILY HUMOUR AND MEME WARFARE

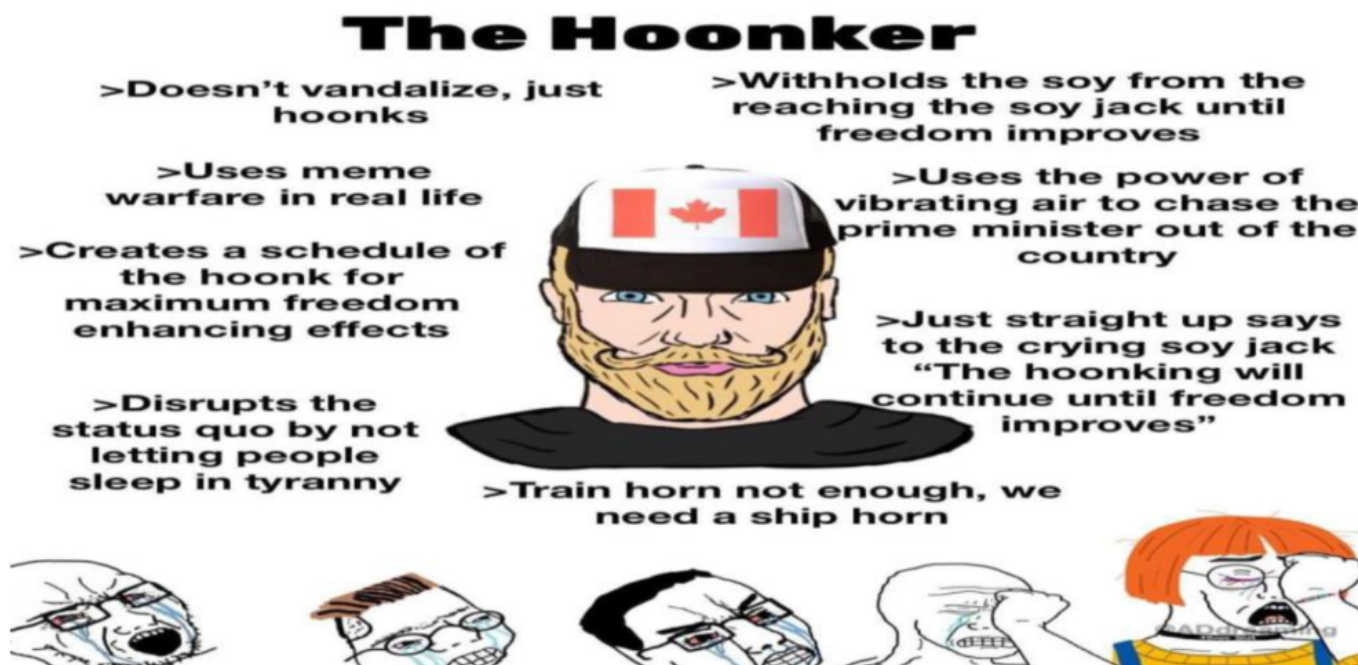


Figure 6. A detail from a daily event bulletin circulated online and on the ground during the occupation of Ottawa

The politics of combustion expressed online and off rely on trolling and meme warfare to counter the threat of transition—the kinds of snarkiness Milman turned our attention towards in his account of the appliance wars. But this element of humour involved shouldn't be taken for granted as innocuous or fringe. In my view after over a decade of study, the oil culture wars should be taken seriously as evidence of a growing, increasingly hostile contingent of right-wing fossil fuel boosters, but not necessarily participated in directly. Debate, for instance, is neither productive nor effective. The oil culture wars turned appliance wars offer lessons in parsing out both universal and particular grievances and challenges surrounding technological, environmental, social, infrastructural transition. These transitions are likely to reinforce or deepen existing inequalities across intersectional categories. My contention is that such lessons embolden us to take stronger

positions in working to build a truly equitable and desirable vision for our shared energy and environmental future, and for implementing it accordingly. Building and implementing are, by definition, active processes, in contrast to the reactive modes of engagement exemplified in the oil culture wars, which we must strive to move beyond to achieve the kind of energy transition that benefits the many rather than the few.

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