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Fracking our Future: the Corrosive Influence of Extreme Energy

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by Frack Off

Following in the wake of shale gas and coal-bed methane (CBM) extraction is the spectre of underground coal gasification (UCG). But if we adopt these wholesale we could close off any hope of stepping back from the climate change brink, says campaign group Frack Off

The earthquakes caused by the first attempt to frack a shale gas well in the UK, almost two years ago, were a wake up call that has implications far beyond the damage caused to Cuadrilla's well-bore. When your plan for getting gas is fracturing rock two miles under the Lancashire countryside, you know the cheap and easy energy is long gone.

The signs have been there for many years, from oil rigs pushing out into deeper and deeper water to the vast tar sands mining operations in Alberta, getting energy is taking increasing amounts of effort. People have been slow to connect the dots but now with the exploitation of unconventional gas threatening to spread thousands of wells, pipelines and other industrial infrastructure across the country, the issue of this relentless rise in energy extraction effort is finally beginning to get the attention that it deserves.

Like yeast growing in a vat, the fundamental question has always been whether industrial society will be poisoned by it's own waste (alcohol in the case of yeast) before it runs out of resources (sugar). While significant attention has been paid to the relentless build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, worrying about running out fossil fuels has been very much a fringe activity.

The answer to this question has now become somewhat clearer, though it is much more nuanced than most people would expect. Rather than destruction by environmental crisis ("climate change") or economic crisis ("peak oil") we face an intricately linked combination of the two ("extreme energy"). This is not to deny the importance of either climate change or peak oil, but they not only have the same cause but are happening in the context of each other, so neither can be viewed in isolation.

Unsustainable energy

As our society's unsustainable consumption of energy depletes easier to extract resources, it is driving the exploitation of evermore extreme and damaging energy sources. From

fracking to the push to build a string of new biomass power stations which will devour the world's remaining forests and the plans for a wave of new, more dangerous, nuclear power stations, energy extraction is becoming much more destructive.

In the past the dominant environmental impact of exploiting fossil fuels was the impact of the carbon emissions associated with burning them but as the effort required for energy extraction has grown, so have the environmental consequences of the extraction processes themselves. The poster child for this effect are the Athabasca tar sands in Alberta, but across the globe, from the Arctic Ocean to the rainforests of Borneo, energy extraction is driving increasing environmental destruction.

A common propaganda tool is to portray such concerns as a stark choice between economic growth and environmental preservation, but in reality extreme energy is as damaging to people's economic well-being as it is to the environment.

As extraction effort grows, a greater fraction of economic activity must be allocated to the energy sector. In a market economy the mechanism by which this is achieved is, of course, rising energy prices, which will have the effect of diverting resources away from other activities.

In the last decade the fraction of the global economy devoted to energy extraction has almost tripled, to over 10 percent of GDP. If the use of more extreme extraction methods increases then an even greater proportion of the worlds resources must be sacrificed to these efforts.

This path leads to a world where energy extraction dominates the economy, and the majority of the population lives in its shadow. Look at the Niger Delta to see what such a world looks like.

The greatest threat

In the UK unconventional gas is by far the greatest threat. Despite the North Sea in terminal decline and increasing pressure on imports there is an insidious push to increase our dependence on gas. Fracking is seen as the way to achieve this but even if is feasible, it would require drilling of tens of thousands of wells and the devastation of the huge swathes of countryside. This will result in toxic and radioactive water contamination, air pollution, severe health effects in human and animals and increased greenhouse gas emissions all for a very short term hit of extremely expensive gas.

Following in the wake of shale gas and coal-bed methane (CBM) is the even more dire spectre of underground coal gasification (UCG) which involves partially burning coal underground and bringing the resulting gases to the surface. UCG has an even worse record of environmental contamination and could potentially emit enough carbon to raise global temperatures by up to 10 degrees Celsius.

A wholesale adoption of fracking and associated methods would close off perhaps our last chance to step back from the brink. Extreme energy requires a dedication to energy production to the exclusion of all else, which would radically alter the structure of our society.

Increasingly, more expensive energy infrastructure must be built, which will divert huge amounts resources away from worthwhile activities. It will quickly become the case that the

largest single consumer of the energy produced will be energy extraction processes themselves. We will end up on a treadmill running faster and faster just to stand still as everything falls apart around us.

The decision we face is between prioritising abstract notions of profit and growth or the real well-being of communities and ecosystems. The two can no longer pretend to coexist.

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