Forging the Climate Movement: Environmental Activism and the Keystone XL Pipeline

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On a frigid winter day in Washington, DC earlier this year, forty-eight people walked to the White House fence across from Lafayette Park, fastened themselves to the bars, and patiently waited for the U.S. Park Police to arrest them (Figure 1). The group included well-known environmentalists, social justice activists, Nebraska ranchers, millenials, and even a few celebrities. They had gathered in an act of civil disobedience against the proposed Keystone XL, a pipeline that would carry oil derived from tar sands (bitumen) in Alberta 1,500 miles to refineries on the Texas Gulf Coast. Since the pipeline would cross the Canada-U.S. border, the State Department and President Barack Obama had the ultimate power to accept or deny the permit by the pipeline builder, TransCanada. But the activists represented those who opposed a pipeline. They were also a snapshot—in this case, quite literally—of key individuals and groups comprising America's climate movement.

Among them were some well-known figures in the environmental movement. Bill McKibben, arguably America's most popular and respected environmental writer and a prominent climate activist, was among them. He as well as some of the other activists attached their wrists to the fence with flex cuffs that read "Lead on climate" and "Reject the KXL Pipeline." On one side of McKibben, was Michael Brune, Executive Director of the Sierra Club. Just days earlier, Brune had convinced the board of the venerable environmental group to

Figure 1: Participants in the February 13, 2013 Anti-Keystone XL sit-in at the White House.

officially sanction a civil disobedience action.[1] His stance, and that of the Sierra Club, was in many ways surprising, since the organization had expressed unease with earlier direct actions by McKibben and his allies.[2] Julian Bond was on the other side of the McKibben. Bond was a leading civil rights activist in the 1960s and a co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a group that helped lead freedom rides, sit-ins, and co-organize the March on Washington in 1963. Also among them was Rev. Lennox Yearwood, founder and head of the Hip Hop Caucus, and a seasoned climate campaigner and social justice activist. McKibben, Brune, and Rev. Yearwood, and the groups they represented—350.org, the Sierra Club, and the Hip Hop Caucus—had also organized this sit-in as well as a much larger demonstration to be held on the National Mall a few days later.

[1] "Sierra Club to Engage in Civil Disobedience for the First Time in the Organization's History to Stop Tar Sands," Sierra Club, January 22, 2013, http://content.sierraclub.org/press-releases/2013/01/sierra-club-engage-civil-disobedience-first-time-organizations-history-.

[2] Mike Tidwell interview (August 22, 2013)

There were others with them at the White House fence. The veteran environmental lawyer and liberal stalwart Robert Kennedy, Jr. was there with his nineteen-year-old son. James Hansen, one of the world's leading climatologists and director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, was also there. Hansen had been arrested at other climate actions in D.C. and at a mountaintop-removal coal mine in West Virginia. Among these better-known environmentalists, scientists, and activists were ordinary citizens, such as Randy Thompson, Abbi Kleinschmidt, and Sue Luebbe. The three were from Nebraska, and had spent much of the past four years fighting attempts by TransCanada to build the Keystone XL across their land. There were also a few celebrities like Daryl Hannah, co-star of the 1980s romantic comedy *Splash!*, who was last seen on screen having her eye plucked out by Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill, Vol. 2*. In due course, the Park Police arrested everyone in the group, cuffed them, and drove them in paddy wagons to a processing station in Anacostia. A few hours later, they were released.

The February 13th sit-in was only the most recent of numerous actions by the climate movement related to the Keystone XL. In August-September 2011, 1,253 people were arrested in front of the White House in a series of daily sit-ins to highlight the potential environmental damage of the pipeline and the need to address climate change. A few months later, 12,000 people assembled in a demonstration in Lafayette Park against the pipeline and then encircled the White House. Shortly after that protest, President Obama decided to delay judgment on the pipeline permit until the State Department could do a more thorough environmental assessment of the potential environmental and social consequences of the pipeline.

Given that pipelines are constructed in the United States all the time, why did the Keystone XL generate such controversy? In the past, oil pipelines had aroused heated opposition, most notably with the Trans-Alaska pipeline in the 1970s. In that case, the pipeline became a test case of the recently-passed National Environmental Policy Act (1970). While the pipeline was eventually

built, critics of the pipeline forced Alyeska to build the pipeline above ground in some stretches to prevent melting permafrost while also ensuring the pipeline was raised sufficiently high to allow animal migration beneath it.[3] The original Keystone pipeline, approved by the State Department in 2008 and built in 2009-10, barely registered as a problem for most environmentalists. Indeed, few environmentalists or people in the U.S. even knew about the Keystone XL pipeline until the summer of 2011. But by then, the political and scientific climate had changed—and indeed, perhaps even the actual climate had changed—leading some to scrutinize a pipeline that was, by nearly, all accounts virtually guaranteed a rubber-stamp approval by the State Department.

When approving the permit for the original Keystone pipeline, the State Department acknowledged concerns about the greenhouse contribution of Canadian tar sands, but said any attempt to deal with carbon emissions must be addressesed through comprehensive climate change legislation, not on a project-by-project basis. By 2010, any hope of meaningful international or national action to lower carbon emission had evaporated. On the international level, the much-anticipated Copenhagen Climate Conference in December 2009 ended in failure without any binding agreement from nations to lower carbon emissions.[4] Similarly, in the United States, while the House of Representative passed a cumbersome cap-and-trade bill known as Waxman-Markey, support for it was weak in the Senate. By the summer of 2010, it was clear the bill would never muster the necessary sixty votes that any major piece of legislation now requires to remain filibuster proof. The bill died in committee without the Senate ever voting on it.[5]

This was a staggering defeat for mainstream environmental groups, who had invested hundreds of millions of dollars in convincing congressmen and senators to support a cap and trade

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[3] Peter A. Coates, *The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Controversy: Technology, Conservation, and the Frontier*. Cranbury, N.J.: Lehigh University Press, 1991.

[4] John M. Broder, "Many Goals Remain Unmet in 5 Nations' Climate Deal," *New York Times*, January 18, 2009.

[5] Carl Hulse and David M. Herszenhorn, "Democrats Call Off Climate Bill Effort," *New York Times*, July 22, 2010.

bill and had nothing to show for it. Having long since abandoned attempts to build a grassroots movement to support such action, the groups hoped their focus within D.C. could muster enough votes to get such a complicated piece of legislation passed. Amid this debacle, and the failure in Copenhagen, there was no clear path forward on addressing climate change. President Obama theoretically had the power to direct the Environmental Protection Agency to limit carbon emissions from stationary sources, most notably coal-fired power plants, but given the potential backlash from voters worried about higher energy prices, the President seemed unwilling to act.

A few months after the failure of cap and trade, NASA climatologist James Hansen wrote a short paper for his blog at Columbia University deeply critical of tar sands extraction and how the Keystone XL pipeline could facilitate expansion of such oil development in Alberta. "If emissions from coal are phased out over the next few decades," he wrote, "and if unconventional fossil fuels are left in the ground, it is conceivable to stabilize climate…However, if the tar sands are thrown into the mix it is essentially game over."[6] The last lines of that paragraph—if tar sands are extracted it's "game over for the climate"—was noticed by many in the environmental community, especially Bill McKibben. For the past five years, McKibben had sought ways to mobilize Americans and build a mass-movement to address climate change. He had co-founded an environmental group with a group of Middlebury College students to address climate change, 350.org, and had some success in organizing international actions on the issue of global warming. After some investigation, McKibben realized it was ultimately President's Obama's decision to grant the pipeline permit—no need to go through the deeply polarized Congress. As McKibben would say, it was the President's decision alone, and through a focus on the Keystone XL, hoped to see whether President Obama was serious

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[6] James Hansen, "Silence is Deadly," 3 June 2011, http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2011/20110603_SilenceIsDeadly.pdf. See Elizabeth McGowan, *InsideClimate News*, August 29, 2011, http://insideclimatenews.org/news/20110826/james-hansen-nasa-climate-change-scientist-keystone-xl-oil-sands-pipeline-protests-mckibben-white-house?page=show.

about addressing climate change and to try to reignite the climate movement in the wake of defeat at Copenhagen and in the U.S. Congress.

Extreme weather in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world seemed to confirm Hansen's concern about unchecked climate change. During the summer of 2011, Texas and Oklahoma were in the midst of the worst drought in their states' histories.[7] Massive flooding in the Upper Midwest and Mississippi River basin caused billions of dollars of damage.[8] While the connection between climate change and tornado frequency and severity is still debated, such destruction by intense storms led some, especially in the climate movement, to see such tornadoes as yet more evidence of unchecked climate change.[9]

In response to this, and motivated by yet more extreme weather and dire reports from scientists and other groups, the climate movement launched the sit-ins at the White House and other actions in the summer of 2011. Such actions continue to this day. Also, in the past year, McKibben and his allies in the climate movement have launched a fossil-fuel divestment campaign on university campuses across the country. Until a few years ago, many environmentalists thought they could tackle climate change through conventional domestic politics and international agreements. But the failure of national legislation and international agreements, as well as relentless weather-related disasters such as Superstorm Sandy, convinced some environmentalists, social justice activists, and others of the necessity of more radical steps. Beginning in earnest during 2011, they sought to assemble a climate movement coalition. In the process, the Keystone XL took on immense

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[7] Alyson Kenward, "Global Warming Amplifying Texas Drought, Wildfires, Scientists Say," *Climate Central*, September 7, 2011, http://www.climatecentral.org/news/record-breaking-texas-drought-and-heat/.

[8] Andrew Freedman, "Historical Context of the Mississippi River Floods," *Climate Central*, May 17, 2011, http://www.climatecentral.org/blogs/putting-the-mississippi-river-floods-of-2011-into-context.

[9] Bill McKibben made this connection clear in an op-ed for the *Washington Post*. See "A Link Between Climate Change and Joplin Tornadoes? Never!" *Washington Post*, 23 May 2011. For an assessment of the potential climate change-tornado link, see Andrew Freedman, "Another Day, Another Deadly Tornado Strikes the US," Climate Central, 23 May 2011, http://www.climatecentral.org/blogs/another-day-another-deadly-tornado-strikes-the-us.

significance as these activists sought to raise the threat of climate change on the national agenda, to galvanize the nascent climate movement, and to create, in the words of one activist, the climate movement's Birmingham.[10] This paper will examine the forging of the American climate movement and what its emergence means for environmentalism and the prospect of addressing climate change.

The Climate Movement and Environmentalism

This paper is informed by recent literature on the history of environmentalism, and to a lesser degree, work by critical geographers on climate change politics and environmental governance. During the past few years, environmental historians have produced a number of monographs that have examined the growth of environmentalism during the postwar period, its prominence in the 1970s, and its more troubled fate in recent decades. Most relevant for this project, is Adam Rome's *The Genius of Earth Day*, and I will address his methodology and conclusions in some detail.

Among these books is Frank Zelko's *Make it a Green Peace!*, which studies the formation and first decade of the international environmental group, Greenpeace.[11] Known for its confrontational tactics and flair for theatrical protests, Greenpeace launched a series of campaigns during the 1970s, first to protest nuclear testing in the North Pacific, then against industrial whaling, and finally in opposition to harp seal clubbing in Newfoundland. More than most environmental groups of the era, Greenpeace reflected roots in the counterculture as well as the U.S. peace movement, anti-Vietnam War movement, and the Quaker religious tradition of bearing witness to injustice. Zelko's work is particularly germane to the more recent climate movement because it explores Greenpeace's creative use of media, a tactic of great importance, as I will show, to climate groups such as 350.org.

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[10] Rev. Lennox Yearwood interview, (August 15, 2013).

[11] Frank Zelko, *Make It a Green Peace!: The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Like Zelko, Adam Rome is also concerned with the formation of an environmental group, but it his case, it is the entire 1970s-era environmental movement rather than a particular environmental organization. In *The Genius of Earth Day*, he explains why Earth Day 1970—which with an estimated 20 million participants is still the largest demonstration in American history—was so successful. He describes an odd coalition that formed at the time to deal with pollution, the loss of open space, overpopulation, and other perceived environmental ills. He identifies five key groups comprising the environmental coalition: liberals, scientists, middle-class women, conservationists, and the young.[12] *Liberals* included scholars and commentators such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and John Kenneth Galbraith who saw pollution and diminishing green space as indicative of Americans failure to provide for the public good amid growing private wealth. Earth Day co-organizers Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wisc.) and Representative Pete McCloskey (R-Calif.) also advocated for the productive role the federal government could play in ensuring all Americans had a clean environment. (Also, the fact that Rep. McCloskey was a Republican is a reminder of a time when the phrase "liberal Republican" was not an oxymoron.) A number of activist *scientists* at the time, such as Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, and Barry Commoner employed their knowledge of science and skills as communicators to alert Americans of the threats to the environment and human health. By 1970 Carson had been dead for six years, but her ideas lived on among those Americans who agreed with the concerns she raised in *Silent Spring* and her critique of a domineering approach to the natural world.

Other groups made important contributions to the environmental cause. *Middle-class women,* especially white women in the suburbs, comprised a significant share of the on-the-ground Earth Day events and the leadership of many grassroots organizations. At the time, women were seen as

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[12] Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2013, 9-56.

keepers of the domestic sphere, and the threats toxic chemicals in particular seemed to pose to their homes and families rallied them to action. As residents of "the mast rapidly changing environment in the nation," the suburbs, these women became involved in reforms movements to protect their homes and their neighborhoods.[13] During the 1960s and 1970s, *conservationists* in long-established groups such as the Sierra Club and Audubon Society became more forceful and radical in their actions. This was especially true for the Sierra Club, who under the leadership of David Brower led successful fights against proposed dams in Echo Park in Colorado and near the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

The final group Rome identifies, the *youth*, exhibited one of the central tensions of the era's environmental movement—one that is relevant for the climate movement today. Unlike the other groups in the environmental coalition, the youth tended to voice the most radical critiques of the environmental crisis and the reasons for it. Those youth in the environmental cause included those involved with or sympathetic to the New Left. With their focus on social justice issues and anti-Vietnam War politics, the New Left largely saw environmental concerns as an inconsequential, bourgeois distraction from more serious issues affecting the country. Yet some of those in the New Left did support the environmental cause, most notably the staff organizing Earth Day. For them, the environmental crisis was indicative of the destructive nature of industrial capitalism; to deal with the crisis entailed tackling the roots of the problem in the economic system, not offering Band-Aid reforms. Far more prevalent in the environmental movement were elements of the counterculture, who were more inwardly focused than overtly political. Seeing American society as awash in materialism and commercialism, they tended to withdraw from society, such as in rural communes, or create alternative food networks, like food co-ops, than take part it overt political change—although as Zelko shows in the case of Greenpeace, this was not always the case.

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[13] Rome, 34.

Rome offers an in-depth analysis of the groups working together, uneasily sometimes, to address the perceived environmental problems of the 1960s and the 1970s. Their efforts led to some of the most profound environmental reforms in American history. Most notably, there were the radical changes to and expansion of the "environmental management state": the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of National Environmental Policy Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Safe Water Drinking Act, and Endangered Species Act. Yet beyond these formal legislative achievements there was the general greening of society, shown by the proliferation of university environmental studies programs; environmental reporters, newspapers, magazines, and publishers; and establishment of community ecology centers.[14]

What has changed since the early 1970s and how have these changes helped or constrained the development of a climate movement in the United States? First, and most importantly, is the demise of bipartisan environmentalism at the federal level. In the 1970s, the major environmental legislation passed by large, sometimes even unanimous, majorities, in Congress and many were signed into law by Republican President Richard Nixon.[15] In our current deeply polarized political climate, where sixty votes are needed in the Senate to pass any major legislation, the hurdles to achieving any sort of carbon-reduction bill are formidable. Second, and connected to the first, is the growth of the conservative movement and even more conservative factions of the Republican caucus such as the Tea Party. Conservatives are deeply suspicious of any legislation that might be perceived as raising taxes or enlarging the role of government. The Tea Party takes such positions

[14] Rome, 209-258. Michael Bess sees these sorts of developments as evidence of the development of "light-green societies" in industrial democracies such as the United States, Canada, France, and Europe more generally. Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[15] J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000.

even further, not to mention all the Tea Party members elected to Congress in 2010 were deeply skeptical of the science of human-caused climate change or denied the reality of global warming.[16]

Third, as many environmental justice activists have argued, and the most recent scholarship on early environmentalism largely confirms, the environmental movement in the 1970s was largely white, suburban, and middle class. Over the past quarter century, environmental justice activists have pressured mainstream environmental groups to address issues of concern to people of color in urban areas as well as hire minorities into leadership positions in such organizations. During the same time, communities have formed local environmental justice advocacy groups throughout the country. Environmental groups have struggled to diversify their staffs and membership while seriously addressing the legitimate concerns of people of color who want the aid of such groups in dealing with decades of neglect and toxic pollution. Yet since the environmental justice movement has not created organizations at the national level, they still need the clout of mainstream environmental groups to bring resources and attention to bear on the issues of concern to them.[17]

Fourth, while the environmental movement has had difficulty reaching people of color, it has also had trouble forging alliances with people and organizations in rural resource-dependent communities. For many rural whites, environmentalism has seemed an elite movement supported by those in cities who value rural lands as their playgrounds.[18] Over the past two decades, many

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[16] John M. Broder, "Climate Change Doubt is a Tea Party Article of Faith," *New York Times*, October 20, 2010 and "GOP Deeply Divided Over Climate Change," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, November 1, 2013, http://www.people-press.org/2013/11/01/gop-deeply-divided-over-climate-change/.

[17] Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990; Eileen Maura McGurty, "'From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement," *Environmental History* (1997): 301–23; Ryan Holifield, Michael Porter, and Gordon Walker, *Spaces of Environmental Justice,* Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; Joseph E Taylor III and Matthew Klingle, "Environmentalism's Elitist Tinge has Roots in the Movement's History," *Grist*, March 9, 2006, http://grist.org/article/klingle/; Jeremy Bryson, "Brownfields Gentrification: Redevelopment Planning and Environmental Justice in Spokane, Washington." *Environmental Justice* 5, no. 1 (February 2012): 26–31.

[18] Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 171–185. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995.

environmental controversies have erupted along this urban-rural axis. Collectively, these divisions between environmentalists and people of color and rural whites have hampered efforts to develop coalitions to tackle pressing environmental issues, most notably climate change.

Finally, one of the major changes between the 1970s and today is the manner in which Americans try to address environmental problems. In a nutshell, while the environmentalists of the 1970s saw political mobilization and legislative action as essential to meaningful change, now many Americans would see environmental action as consisting of switching to CFL light bulbs, buying a Prius, and purchasing local, organic food. Numerous scholars have critiqued this individual approach to environmental problems. The environmental historian Ted Steinberg sees this as an example green liberalism (or more accurately, green neoliberalism) where environmental problems are best addressed by individuals making choices in the marketplace.[19] Political scientist Michael Maniates concurs, seeing the ubiquitous "Ten Things You can Do to Save the Earth" posters and such as examples of the individualization of environmental concerns.[20] The environmental writer Jennifer Price sees this as part of the "I Problem" that focuses on the "importance of individual acts." She adds "In a society in which we readily identify ourselves and our values by what we consume to be virtuous, well, we consume to be virtuous Greenies."[21] Green consumption becomes just another way Americans fashion their identity in what is, in the end, a materialistic, consumer-oriented culture.

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[19] Ted Steinberg, "Can Capitalism Save the Planet? On the Origins of Green Liberalism." *Radical History Review* no. 107 (2010).

[20] Michael Maniates, "Individualization: Ride a Bike, Plant a Tree, Save the World?" In *Confronting Consumption*, edited by Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca, 43–66. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.

[21] Jennifer Price, "Stop Saving the Planet!--and Other Tips via Rachel Carson for Twenty-First-Century Environmentalists." In *Rachel Carson's Silent Spring: Encounters and Legacies*, edited by Lawrence Culver, Christof Mauch, and Katie Ritson, 11–30. Munich, Germany: Rachel Carson Center, 2012, 17, 19.

In the remainder of this paper, I want to examine the development of the climate movement amid these challenges that have developed since the 1970s. To do so, I have adopted Adam Rome's methodology and identify groups comprising the grassroots climate movement coalition: millenials, prairie progressives, social justice activists, disaffected liberals and environmentalists, activist scientists, and indigenous groups. At this stage in my research, this examination of the various people and groups are still somewhat schematic. Also, I have only begun to study the last two groups, so a more in-depth analysis of those groups will have to wait.

Millenials, 350.org, and Social Media

Certainly the most prominent new group that has emerged as part of the climate movement in the United States is 350.org, which was founded by environmental writer Bill McKibben and seven students from Middlebury College in 2008 (Figure 2). Over the past five years, the groups has organized—or more accurately, facilitated—numerous actions, some global in scope, including the sit-ins against the Keystone XL pipeline, and more recently, the fossil-fuel divestment campaign on college campuses. One environmental historian has called 350.org "the most successful environmental communication campaign of our time." [22] They owe their achievements in large part to their creative use of social media—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr—as well as more traditional Internet tools such as web sites and mass emails. Yet like many other millenials in the climate movement, none of the founding members in 350.org have any formal training in social media, or traditional media for that matter, and how to employ it for use in social movements. The group has tested, distributed, and refined their use of social media for twenty-first century activism. For the millenials at the helm of 350.org, the tools of social media—often derided as frivolous toys

[22] "Jamie Henn Takes Us Inside 350.org," podcast, Jon Christensen blog, http://christensenlab.net/jamie-henn-takes-us-inside-350-org/.

Figure 3: Founding organizers of 350.org. All were students at Middlebury College

for self-expression and narcissistic ramblings—have become the means to foster community and deeper involvement in climate activism.

The group began at Middlebury College in Vermont out of the frustrations of Bill McKibben, then known solely as an environmental writer, who was a scholar in residence. Distraught over the lack of any meaningful progress to tackle global warming, he became increasingly convinced that progress would require a mass social movement to pressure politicians to act.[23] In a later section, I will examine McKibben's role in the climate movement, but for now I want to note his role in assembling activist students at Middlebury to become move involved on the issue of climate change. Not only did McKibben value their commitment, he assumed—rightly, as it

[23] Bill McKibben, "Introduction," in *Ignition: What You Can Do to Fight Global Warming and Spark a Movement*, edited by Jonathan Isham and Sissel Waage, 3–8. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2007.

turned out—that they had the skills to set-up a web site and send out email blasts. In 2006, McKibben and small number of students began strategizing ways to bring attention the issue. Their first event was a walk across the state of Vermont. It was in many ways, a modest affair and it only attracted a couple of thousand participants. Yet at the final rally in the capital of Montpelier, the students and McKibben convinced the entire Vermont delegation to sign a document endorsing significant carbon reductions. Emboldened by their success, they proposed a new action, Step it Up, in the spring of 2007 to highlight the science of climate change and urge politicians to act. Eventually, over 1,400 groups participated in all fifty states. Buoyed by their success, they formed the group 350.org and created a Global Day of Action in 2009, which involved actions in 183 countries.[24]

With these early actions, 350.org illustrated the tactics that would become its organizing trademarks: deft use of social media, distributed organizing, fostering community, and employing digital tools to build on the ground "non-virtual" events. The setting where 350.org formed helped foster this approach. As one of the nation's most elite liberal arts colleges, Middlebury attracts an affluent, well-educated student body, and one that in the early years of the 2000s, was also conversant with the emerging social media technologies. It would be among the first higher-education institutions to gain access to Facebook as it expanded beyond the Ivy League, and students from 350.org were quick to see it as a potential tool for movement organizing. With its renowned language program, the founders of 350.org were able to recruit people associated with the program to translate its web site into multiple languages. The issue of language also partially explains 350.org's unusual name. The 350 in the group's name is in reference to 350ppm the "safe limit" identified by some climatologists, namely James Hansen, as the maximum safe level of CO_2 in the

[24] May Boeve interview, (August 9, 2012) and Andy Revkin, "Campaign Against Emissions Picks Number," *New York Times*, October 24, 2009.

atmosphere to prevent dramatic climate change. But since 350 is a number, it can remain unchanged as other material on the organization's web site was translated into other languages, including Arabic and Chinese.[25]

The group also integrated communication into its strategy in a different way than most other environmental groups, which tended to silo its communication team and come to them for suggestions on messaging for a campaign only after others in the group had developed a strategy. For 350.org, communication is completely integrated into the strategizing of a campaign and even the identification of topics to address. When organizing a campaign, they ask Is this a good story? Will it motivate people to come out and participate? "Dong communication in the advocacy realm is more like being a director of a film or a play," says 350.org communication director Jamie Henn.[26] The group seeks to put on public spectacles and create stories.[27] Such organizing and use of images should seem familiar to those knowledgeable with the history environmentalism. Earth Day was the epitome of distributed organizing. The "organizers" of Earth Day, such as they were, merely fostered the event and encouraged groups around the country to develop their own gatherings based on the needs and concerns of people in their communities.[28] Images, both photographic and on film, have been central to environmental reform over the past century. Historian Finis Dunaway shows how films such as Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937) were used to drum up support for New Deal conservation programs.[29] And in the 1970s, Greenpeace

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[25] James Hansen et al., "Target Atmospheric CO2: Where Should Humanity Aim?" The Open Atmospheric Science Journal 2, no. 1 (November 05, 2008): 217–231 and Bill McKibben interview (July 23, 2012).

[26] "Jamie Henn Takes Us Inside 350.org."

[27] Jamie Henn interview, (August 23, 2013).

[28] Rome, *Genius of Earth Day*.

[29] Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 33-86. See also Finis Dunaway, "Gas Masks, Pogo, and the Ecological Indian: Earth Day and the Visual Politics of American Environmentalism." *American Quarterly* 60 (2008): 67–99.

filmed its members placing themselves in Zodiac rafts between industrial whalers and the whales themselves.[30]

Images are important to 350.org in two ways. First, employing the tools of web 2.0 they have participants in the actions they organize submit their own photos on the 350.org web site. They have also appropriated online photo sharing sites such as Flickr to create sets of image demonstrating the diversity of people joining an action. Second, they try to orchestrate demonstrations, or "performances" in Henn's terminology, in the non-virtual world to generate yet more images, or better yet, videos. The goal of all of these images is to foster a sense of community among participants and build solidarity among participants. At all 350.org events, the organization employs videographers to film the actions. While these videographers typically are not members of 350.org, the communication team at 350.org works closely with the videographers to identify key people and features to film and to discuss the tone of the videos. The resulting shoots are not raw, unedited clips of actions, but rather, carefully composed and skillfully edited films with soundtracks meant to create evocative records of the events. These films, in turn, are then distributed through YouTube, posted on Facebook, linked to on Twitter, and embedded on web sites.[31]

Prairie Progressives: Jane Kleeb, Rural Landowners, and BOLD Nebraska

Before climatologist James Hansen, Bill McKibben, and 350.org picked the Keystone XL pipeline as a major focus for the climate movement, a smaller coalition in Nebraska including progressives, environmentalists, landowners, and ranchers opposed the pipeline. Until 2011, their

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[30] Zelko, *Make it a Green Peace!*

[31] For examples, see "Tar Sands Action: Phase One," YouTube video, 3:17, posted by "StopKeystoneXL," September 7, 2011 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dj6gN8u5flM. See also "A Victory in the Fight Against Keystone XL," YouTube video, 3:16, posted by "StopKeystoneXL," November 10, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7e4Cfc-KRGA.

struggle occurred largely out of the national media spotlight. In many ways, the story of the pipeline opposition in Canada is of rural Americans fighting to protect their land and water from a perceived unscrupulous, and foreign, corporation seeking to build a potentially dangerous pipeline across their property. Framed in this way, the conflict in Nebraska, has little to nothing to do with climate change. Yet as the struggle progressed, and especially as the opposition in Nebraska allied with groups outside the stage, some of the state's landowners and ranchers began to see their fight as part of much larger struggle to address climate change and curtail tar sands extraction.

As mentioned previously, TransCanada constructed the original Keystone pipeline through eastern Nebraska with very little fanfare in 2009 and 2010. Indeed, that project was already well under way before farmers' advocacy groups, such as the Nebraska Farmer's Union, was even aware of it.[32] Nebraska is largely an agricultural state, with little in the way of fossil fuel extraction. When TransCanada proposed the Keystone XL pipeline in 2009, and more importantly, when it began sending land agents into rural Nebraska at that time was when controversy erupted. The Keystone XL pipeline received far greater scrutiny because it crossed two important and fragile ecological features in the state: the Ogallala Aquifer and Sandhills. The Ogallala Aquifer is the largest aquifer in the United States, underlying much of the Great Plains. For nearly a century, farmers and ranchers have depended on the aquifer for water, especially since the 1930s when the development of center-pivot irrigation allowed them to tap the aquifer more easily and use the water to nourish crops.[33] Beyond simply the economic value of water and land in these regions, the Ogallala Aquifer and Sandhills are considered treasures by many Nebraskans and are important touchstones for Nebraskan identity.

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[32] John Hansen and Graham Christensen, Nebraska Farmers Union, interview, (June 26, 2013).

[33] John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993, 122-160.

As TransCanada sent land agents in to rural Nebraska, many landowners signed easements allowing the company access to their property to construct segments of the pipeline. Yet others resisted. They were deeply concerned about the potential threat a pipeline leak would pose to their land and water, and as the pressure by TransCanada agents to gain access mounted, also by what landowners saw as heavy-handed tactics by the company.[34]

Many of these landowners might have succumbed to the pressure to TransCanada had they not been organized into a formidable grassroots political force by Jane Kleeb, the founder and head of a progressive organization BOLD Nebraska in Lincoln (Figure 3). Dubbed the "Keystone killer" by *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Kleeb has taken her nascent group and turned it into a tool for organizing rural Nebraskans, and in the process, forged alliances with conservative ranchers, urban progressives, regional and national environmentalists, and established farm advocacy groups.[35] Kleeb is not a native Nebraskan. She earned her BA in leadership studies and Women's studies from American University. In her adolescence, she struggled with an eating disorder, and after recovering from that, began volunteering with organizations working on behalf of women coping with similar issues. (She was later a consultant for the HBO documentary, *Thin*, about anorexia.) She credits this struggle with her growth as an activist.[36] In 2003 she became Executive Director of Young

[34] In nearly all my interviews, landowners commented about the relentless pressure, and even harassment, by TransCanada agents. Randy Thompson interview, (June 28, 2013) and Sue Luebbe interview (June 26, 2013).

[35] Jeff Goodell, "Jane Kleeb: The Keystone Killer," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, April 11, 2013, http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/lists/the-fossil-fuel-resistance-meet-the-new-green-heroes-20130411/jane-kleeb-the-keystone-killer-19691231.

[36] Jane Kleeb interview, (June 24, 2013).

Figure 3: Jane Kleeb, founder and director of BOLD Nebraska with her three daughters.

Democrats of America, and while in that position, met a young Democrat from Nebraska, Scott Kleeb, a native Nebraskan and investor in alternative energy with a PhD in history from Yale University.[37] In 2006 and 2008, Scott Kleeb ran unsuccessful campaigns for the U.S. Congress and then the U.S. Senate.

Jane Kleeb created BOLD Nebraska in 2010 to organize Nebraskans on progressive causes. At the time, Kleeb thought BOLD would focus mostly on health-care related issues. But as she heard more about the challenges landowners faced with TransCanada, and as she learned more about the potential environmental consequences of the pipeline, she quickly repurposed BOLD into a group for organizing rural landowners fighting the pipeline. As BOLD grew in prominence, landowners along the proposed Keystone XL route began to to seek out Kleeb and solicit her advice

[37] Scott Kleeb earned a PhD in History under the supervision of Western historian John Mack Faragher. Scott Kleeb, "The Atlantic West: Cowboys, Capitalists and the Making Of an American Myth," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2006.

on how to deal with TransCanada and to voice their concerns with their congressional representatives.[38]

As for strategy, Kleeb sought to find ways to put a human face on what to many could seem a complicated, uninteresting issue. She and her supporters ventured deep into central Nebraska, some of the most conservatives parts of the state, and held information sessions, workshops, and distributed information at public events such as rodeos. BOLD Nebraska quickly also decided to frame the issue in the media as what the organization and landowners were fighting for rather than simply fighting against, namely the pipeline. They self-consciously sought to craft the pipeline issue as story and conflict pitting hard-working ranchers and farmers who were stewards of the land seeking to protect the integrity of their property and water from an uncaring, foreign corporation. Kleeb reflected on the story they tried to tell:

> Storytelling for us is very important.…Ranchers, because they are so tied to the land and passing it down through generations. They didn't have to be trained on that, which was one of the most amazing things. They needed to feel confident that they could tell their story, and that their story was valuable. We did that through simple things, like making sure we gave reporters different landowners so we could build up the landowners' confidence in their ability to tell their story. Always about how can we tell the landowner's story because we felt that that was the most compelling way to beat this pipeline was with people's faces.[39]

While BOLD Nebraska and some of its allies also opposed the pipeline because of the carbon emissions from tar sands, they did not emphasize climate change in most of their events. Still, when at meetings with landowners, she would say, "Listen, we want to protect land and water and property rights. We are also concerned about climate change." Partly she did this because she knew conservatives in Nebraska would bring the global warming issue issue up later. Conservatives would

[38] Kleeb interview.

[39] Kleeb interview.

argue "[Kleeb] says she cares about ranchers and farmers but all BOLD Nebraska really cares about climate change which we know isn't even real. They're using you as a pawn."[40]

For other prominent anti-Keystone XL activists in Nebraska, climate change is more central to their involvement in the struggle. Most notable among them is Mary Pipher, a therapist and bestselling author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994). Although a well-known progressive voice in the state, she was not associated with environmental activism until the Keystone XL emerged as an issue. Since then she helped form a loose, informal group of anti-Keystone activists based in Lincoln and spoken publically against the pipeline, including in a *New York Times* op-ed.[41] In her most recent book, Pipher narrates a story of her own struggle with despair in the face of increasingly dire news about climate change and her quest to find a meaningful response to such an overwhelming threat. For her, climate change is the source of a deep spiritual trauma—not only for her but for others like her who are aware of the problem. Before starting her anti-Keystone group, she met with other women in Nebraska to discuss global warming and explore ways to productively deal with global warming through recycling, reducing consumption, and buying green energy. Their actions seem quintessential examples of green neoliberalism or what Jennifer Price calls the "I Problem."[42] Ultimately for Pipher, fighting the Keystone XL became an opportunity for personal growth and spiritual renewal—what she calls a "transcendent response." For her, personal enrichment and political struggle went hand-in-hand.[43]

Like Jane Kleeb, Pipher, who worked closely with BOLD Nebraska, thought it was essential for the anti-Keystone struggle in Nebraska to find a hero to represent their position. After some

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[40] Kleeb interview.

[41] Mary Pipher, "Lighting a Spark on the High Plains," *New York Times,* 17 April 2013.

[42] Steinberg, "Can Capitalism Save the Planet?" and Price, "Stop Saving the Planet!"

[43] Mary Pipher, *The Green Boat: Reviving Ourselves in Our Capsized Culture*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2013, 71-93.

discussion, they settled on Randy Thompson, an affable rancher, landowner, former college football player, and registered Republican (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Randy Thompson. Nebraska landowner and rancher who opposes the Keystone XL pipeline.

We wanted an "iconic hero we're fighting for. That's Randy."[44] Mary Pipher concurred, adding

> I mean, Randy Thompson is, of course, the iconic person who stood out. And we picked him as our symbol because he's very eloquent. And he's good looking. He's got a sense of humor. He's real likable. He's a real good spokesman for the state. You never want a person that looked like me and had my background to be the spokesperson because I don't look and act like most Nebraskans. Randy looks and acts like most Nebraskans…like all progressives going maybe we should have a person of color represent us. And finally we go come on. We want to win this fight. Let's get a white guy that looks like Mr. Nebraska to represent us.[45]

Kleeb and Pipher's choice is somewhat surprising since they are likely the two most prominent feminists in the state of Nebraska. Yet they chose an embodiment of white, heterosexual, Western masculinity. Many of the other most prominent landowners opposing the pipeline, including two

[44] Kleeb interview.

[45] Mary Pipher interview, (June 28, 2013).

others in a lawsuit Thompson is involved with against the State of Nebraska and its handling of the pipeline issue, are women, Sue Luebbe and Susan Dunavan.

As of fall 2013, BOLD Nebraska, with their national allies, have managed to delay the pipeline. Because of the opposition, and the urging of Nebraska Governor Dave Heinemann, TransCanada agreed to reroute the pipeline around the Sandhills and much, but not all, of the Ogallala Aquifer. Since the Governor and the state's congressional delegation feel that TransCanada has responded to the most serious critiques of the pipeline, they now support its construction, leaving BOLD Nebraska and its allies to focus more on pressuring President Obama and the State Department to deny the permit.

Social Justice Activists, Rev. Yearwood, and the Climate Movement's Birmingham

Through all their actions, BOLD Nebraska sought to put a human face on the consequences of the pipeline and climate change in general. Such a focus is also central for others in the climate movement coalition, such as social justice activists. These mostly African-American activists see the movement to address climate change as part of their larger efforts to reduce inequality, foster meaningful employment, and protect poor people and people of color from pollution and the most serious effects of climate change. Some of the social justice activists involved in the climate movement and the anti-Keystone struggle include Van Jones, a civil right advocate, alternative energy supporter, and former green energy czar in the Obama Administration.[46] The climate movement has also attracted veteran civil rights campaigners such as Julian Bond, the co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s. In this section, I will focus on one social justice activist, Reverend Lennox Yearwood, who has played a prominent role in the climate

[46] Eliza Strickland, "The New Face of Environmentalism." *East Bay Express*. November 02, 2005.

movement in general and the anti-Keystone XL struggle in particular (Figure 5). His story is part of the effort of

Figure 5: Rev. Lennox Yearwood, President of the Hip Hop Caucus.

social justice activists and more mainstream environmental groups to forge a coalition to address climate change, but also highlights the continuing challenges of creating a more diverse coalition that seriously contends with the desire of people of color for justice while coping with global warming.

Rev. Yearwood comes from an activist and academic family. Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, he moved from college campus to college campus, but has always considered Louisiana his home. He earned a Master in Divinity from Howard University. Even in his twenties, Rev. Yearwood was a social justice activist, and he was recruited by Russell Simmons, founder of the successful hip-hop

recording label Def Jam, as Political and Grassroots Director for the Hip Hop Summit Action Network in 2003. The summit sought to use the allure of hip hop to reach African-American youth and channel their energies into political change. Buoyed by his work with Simmons' group, Rev. Yearwood then managed P. Diddy's Citizen Change organization, which created the "Vote or Die!" campaign in 2004, and then Jay Z's "Voice Your Choice" campaign in 2008. What united all these activities was Rev. Yearwood's concern with justice and his attempt to use music to reach youth. A concern with environmental issues and climate change in particular lay dormant until Hurricane Katrina stuck the Gulf Coast in 2005. Overwhelmed by the destruction and angered by the lack of an adequate federal response to the disaster, Rev. Yearwood created the Gulf Coast Renewal Campaign that same year to bring attention to the plight of Louisiana residents post-Katrina.[47] During the rest of the decade, he built connections with people and groups doing work on climate change, such as Mike Tidwell with the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, a regional climate change advocacy group.

In 2008, he founded the Hip Hop Caucus, and it is here where Rev. Yearwood has sought to most deeply unite a concern with social justice and the goals of the climate movement. Some of the main programs of the caucus include highlighting racial profiling, working to repeal Stand Your Ground laws, ending the death penalty, working for immigration reform, and fostering black male achievement. Yet among these concerns is a focus on advocating green jobs, much in line with what Van Jones has advocated over the past decade, and environmental justice issues affecting people of color in urban communities. Addressing climate change has also been a part of its mission since its founding, a role that has become more pronounced over the past few years, and the Hip Hop Caucus has taken a key role in opposing the Keystone XL pipeline.

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[47] Rev. Lennox Yearwood interview, (August 15, 2013).

When asked if such a major focus poses challenge for him since, in some ways, it is a departure from the more traditional social justice issues of the Hip Hop Caucus, he said he has to convince his staff of its importance "all the time."[48] Despite this wariness, albeit modest, from within his organization, he sees events such as the February 2013 sit-in at the White House and climate rally on the National Mall as vital to addressing climate change, and therefore, the goals of his organization. For Rev. Yearwood, as he witnessed different groups coalescing around fighting the pipeline—established environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, grassroots groups such as 350.org, Nebraska farmers and ranchers, and Canadian First Nations—as well as the fact that if President Obama approved the pipeline would be "game over for the climate" in James Hansen's words, he began to see the Keystone XL as something greater. He explained:

> for me and I think in our movement, this became in essence our Birmingham…[for the civil rights movement] Birmingham became the epitome. I think the pipeline became the Birmingham for the environmental movement. It became that symbol…If we can crush what's happening in Birmingham—in other words, the pipeline—then that will have a ripple effect on the other parts of the country and the world.[49]

Rev. Yearwood is not the only climate activist to make explicit references to the civil rights struggle and other American social movements seeking justice. Bill McKibben and 350.org have acknowledged that the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s were the chief models for anti-Keystone XL sit-ins and other actions. Some climate activists go even further seeing nineteenth-century-abolitionism as the best model for the climate movement. Climatologist James Hansen said the climate crisis "is analogous to the issue of slavery faced by Abraham Lincoln."[50] Former dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies Gus Speth said the climate movement must "capture the spirit of Frederick Douglas," the famous nineteenth-century abolitionist, who wrote "If

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[48] Yearwood interview.

[49] Yearwood interview.

[50] Hansen interview http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/dec/02/copenhagen-climate-change-james-hansen

there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground…Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and never will."[51] And Bill McKibben argues that the climate movement should draw on the revolutionary fervor of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.[52] Some scholars have concurred, such as the environmental historian Char Miller, who also sees Garrison's fight against slavery as a model for the climate movement. Miller admires the steadfastness of abolitionists such as Garrison, and applauds the similarly principled stand by the climate movement in demanding universities divest from fossil fuels.[53]

Former journalist and now full-time climate activist Wes Stephenson has outlined the comparison in the most detail in a recent article in *The Phoenix*, a now defunct Boston alternative weekly (Figure 6).[54] He notes the frequent references climate activists make to other struggles for justice—the civil rights, women's, and LGBT movements—but argues the most telling comparison is between the climate movement and abolitionism. What appeals to him, and apparently other climate leaders, is "the bracing moral clarity and uncompromising urgency of the abolitionist cause."[55] He also sees Henry David Thoreau as relevant to the climate movement, not for his writings about nature in *Walden*, but the pro-abolition sprit he exhibited in "Resistance to Civil Government" and "Slavery in Massachusetts." Stephenson admits to being at once stirred by the

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[51] Gus Speth, *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012, 187. See also "The Climate Change Abolitionists," http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/climate-change-abolitionists

[52] Wes Stephenson, "Bill McKibben: Love and Justice," *The Roost: The Blog at Thoreau Farm*, March 21, 2012, http://thoreaufarm.org/2012/03/bill-mckibben-love-and-justice/.

[53] Char Miller, "Divest Now? A Case for Our Immediate Emancipation from Fossil Fuels," *KCET: The Back Forty*, January 28, 2013, http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/golden-green/divest-now.html.

[54] Wes Stephenson, "The New Abolitionists: Global warming is the Great Moral Crisis of Our Time," 12 March 2013, http://thephoenix.com/boston/news/151670-new-abolitionists-global-warming-is-the-great/.

[55] Stephenson, "The New Abolitionists."

moral clarity of the abolitionists yet uneasy with the radicalism it implies. "I do know," he writes, "what it is to care deeply and urgently about an issue — a cause — of enormous magnitude, morally and politically, even

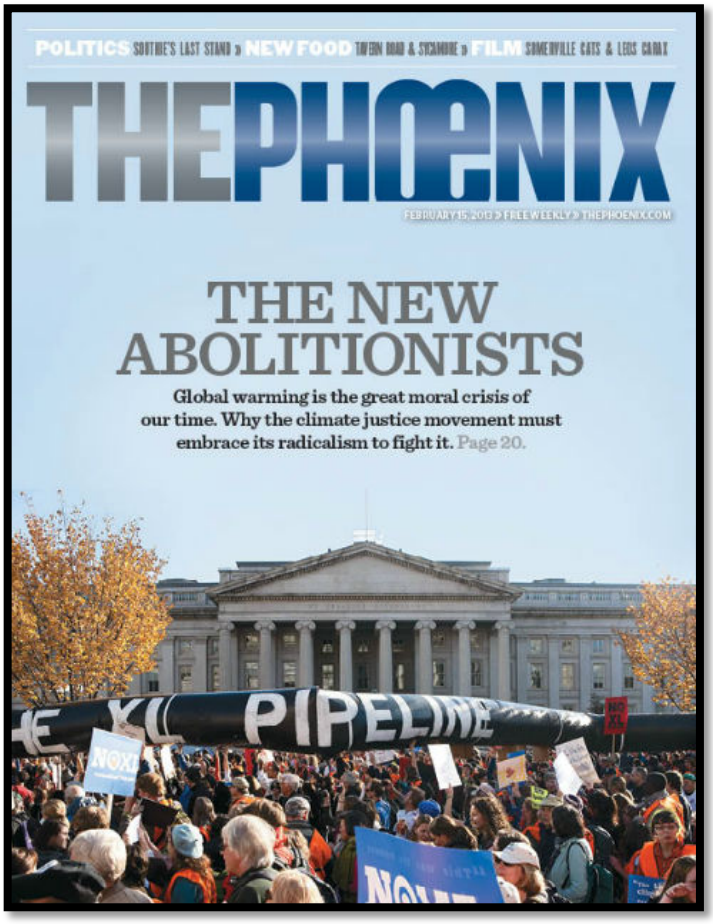

Figure 6: Wes Stephenson article on the climate movement and abolitionism in *The Phoenix*.

spiritually, only to find myself at once attracted and repelled, fascinated and frightened, by a voice of radicalism."[56] Like many other climate activists, he calls the movement of which is a part a "climate justice movement."

Stephenson and other climate activists embrace the comparison between the climate movement and abolitionism because they admire the radicalism of that nineteenth century

[56] Stephenson, "The New Abolitionists."

movement. Yet a more nuanced analysis of this comparison might give them some pause. Most obviously, the victims of slavery, Jim Crow, and apartheid did not benefit from these systems, but we all, to some extent, benefit from fossil fuels while still being subject in various ways to the consequences of continued carbon accumulation in the atmosphere. And yes, the abolition movement was radical and it leaders modeled strong moral convictions. They included William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglas. But arguably its most famous—and infamous—figure was neither of these men. It was John Brown, another man known for his "bracing moral clarity and uncompromising urgency." He acted on these convictions by massacring pro-slavery settlers in Kansas and launching the ill-fated raid on Harper's Ferry. And yes, abolition was successful, but it took the Civil War and hundreds of thousands of dead Americans to create the conditions for Congress and President Abraham Lincoln to emancipate the slaves. In short, there is a history of civil disobedience associated with the abolitionism, but also one of violence that climate activists should at least be aware of.[57]

Liberals, Disaffected Environmentalists, and Bill McKibben

The American climate activists, to the extent they have a coherent political orientation, seem almost entirely liberal or on the political left. During the 1970s as historian Adam Rome and other scholars have shown, conservatives and even some libertarians considered themselves environmentalists.[58] By the early twenty-first century, self-identified environmentalists were almost entirely liberal or even further to the left politically. In this way, environmentalism became another victim of the extreme polarization in American politics.

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[57] That said, I find no evidence that climate activists condone violence in any way.

[58] On libertarian environmentalism, see Brian Allen Drake, *Loving Nature, Fearing the State: Environmentalism and Antigovernment Politics Since Reagan*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013.

While still supporting politicians such as President Obama, many liberals and environmentalists have become disaffected for liberal politics and the Democratic Party more generally. Many prominent figures in the American environmental movement, such as Michael Brune, Gus Speth, and Bill McKibben now question traditional forms of political action and advocate direct-action, grassroots movement building, and to various degrees, raise serious questions about the current political and economic system. Michael Brune, the Executive Director of the Sierra Club, helped lead the organization's unsuccessful attempt to pressure Congress and President Obama to pass and sign a cap and trade bill. In the wake of that, and largely due to pressure by grassroots climate activists, Brune agreed that more drastic steps were necessary to influence the President, so he and the Sierra Club board agreed to sanction civil disobedience against the Keystone XL pipeline.

Gus Speth's disillusionment with conventional politics and the inability to address climate change is in some ways even more revealing. Called by *Time Magazine* the "ultimate insider," Speth has made a career working on environmental matters from within the U.S. government and elite institutions. He was the Chairman of the Council of Environmental Quality under President Jimmy Carter, co-founder of the National Resources Defense Council, and dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. For forty years, Speth remained deeply committed to using conventional politics to contend with global warming and foster sustainability. But no longer. "Capitalism as we know it today is incapable of sustaining the environment," he writes.[59] To Marxist scholars, of course, this is patently obvious. Speth, however, is not a Marxist and has little sympathy for variants of green socialism promoted within the academy and outside it.[60] Speth advocates the

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[59] Gus Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 63.

[60] Gus Speth interview, (July 20, 2012) and Jeff Goodell, "Change Everything Now: Interview with Gus Speth." *Orion Magazine*, September/October 2008, http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/3222/.

development of a broad movement uniting social justice activists and environmentalists as well as employing marches, demonstrations, and nonviolent civil disobedience.[61] For my purposes here, it matters less whether this is an effective strategy, then that this is a significant departure in views and politics for a prominent liberal and environmentalist.

For the rest of this section, I will focus on Bill McKibben—bestselling environmental writer, founder of 350.org, and arguably America's most famous environmentalist (Figure 7). McKibben has played a key role in bringing the issue of climate change to Americans' attention, most notably in his bestselling book *The End of Nature* (1989), and now in sculpting and leading the climate movement. Environmental historian Richard White calls McKibben the "literary face of popular American environmentalism."[62] Yet despite his influence on American environmental writing over the past generation and his pivotal role in the climate movement, he has received very little attention from environmental historians or geographers. In what follows, I will discuss McKibben's journey from environmental writer, to disaffected environmentalist, and finally to "unlikely activist."[63] His journey is indicative, I argue, of many other environmentalists during an era where green neoliberal approaches predominated yet now seem inadequate for addressing climate change.

Bill McKibben is first and foremost a writer. While a student at Harvard, he wrote for and later edited the *Harvard Crimson* student newspaper. After graduation, he worked for *The New Yorker*, then under the editorship of the legendary William Shawn, writing hundreds of Talk of the Town

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For green socialism, see Hans A. Baer, *Global Capitalism and Climate Change: The Need for an Alternative World System*. Laham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012 and John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York. *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010. In this volume, the authors have a lengthy critique of *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* and Speth's approach to the environmental crisis and his unwillingness to embrace socialism, 157-164.

[61] Speth, *America the Possible*, 186-197. Indeed, Speth practices what he preaches. During the first week of the anti-Keystone XL sit-in, Speth was arrested and jailed for two-and-a-half days.

[62] Richard White, "Bill McKibben's Emersonian Vision," *Raritan* (2011), 100.

[63] Bill McKibben, *Oil and Honey: The Education of an Unlikely Activist*. New York: Times Books, 2013.

pieces. When he left *The New Yorker* in the mid-1980s, he was not known as a nature or environmental writer. But after moving to the Adirondack Mountains with his wife, Sue Halpern, he began reading more deeply in the American nature writing tradition—the work of Wendell Berry was particularly formative to his thinking—and the emerging scientific literature about global warming. It was during

Figure 7: Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* and founder of 350.org.

this time he wrote *The End of Nature*, a book that is at once about climate change and a lament for the death of wild, untouched nature. As environmental historians have long known, very few parts of Earth, especially in the United State, have been "untouched," even before the twentieth century. Yet his book clearly touched a chord with some Americans, and the book did well and it remains in print to this day.

In *The End of Nature*, McKibben exhibited some characteristics in his writing, traits that would persist throughout most of his future books and articles and influence his activism. Like another major environmental writer of the day, Michael Pollan, McKibben casts himself as a slightly

naïve, but inquisitive outsider seeking to learn more about some complicated topic such as climate change. Also, McKibben is a constant presence in his books, not only because of his distinctive literary voice, but also as a sort of character. The star of McKibben's books is always, in some sense, McKibben. He shares himself—his joys, sorrows, and sense of wonder of nature. Such an approach might seem an exercise in narcissism, but his devoted readers seem to think otherwise. It is an effective technique for connecting on a more personal level with readers than a more detached style in which his authorial voice is muted or his presence is excised from the text.

As one of the leading current practitioners of the American nature writing and environmental writing tradition, his work bears a more than passing resemblance to that of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Rachel Carson. Characteristics of this tradition include a deep engagement of an *individual* with a particular place in nature—a forest, a pond, a seashore—from which the author reflects more broadly on the relationship between people and the environment. This is a close engagement with the nonhuman world filtered through a strong individual sensibility and literary style. As with all these other writers, his engagement with nature is a much "religious and philosophical" as it is ecological.[64]

Richard White is among the few environmental historians to examine McKibben's work in any depth, and he sees his writing as essential Emersonian. Here, White is referring to the nineteenth-century transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was also Thoreau's mentor. For Emerson, objects in the material world are physical manifestations of deeper truths. Nature is always emblematic of some sort of spiritual fact. Thoreau, in part, adopted Emerson's approach as have many nature writers since. They strive for their voyages into the mountains, forests, and "the wild" and their engagement with nature to have some larger significance. When White reads McKibben, he sees this tactic used all the time. A farmer's market becomes a symbol of a "quiet revolution," an

[64] White, "Bill McKibben's Emersonian Vision," 112.

event like running a marathon becomes a reflection on the disappearance of the personal, and most telling for the purposes of this paper, the Keystone XL pipeline becomes "a 1,500 mile fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the planet."[65] Given McKibben's Emersonian approach—an approach he has used throughout his career—who better than McKibben to take a proposed pipeline and portray it as a key object in contending with climate change?

White sees McKibben as representative of a brand of environmentalism that has "a real concern with the planet, a fundamental decency, belief in the power of personal transformation, and reluctance to engage with politics that go much beyond self-improvement and exhortation."[66] Until his involvement with 350.org, and more importantly the anti-Keystone XL struggle, that was a fairly accurate assessment of McKibben's approach and politics. His political actions, such as they were, focused on individual choices he made to address environmental dilemmas and advocating markets to reward better environmental behaviors. In short, they seemed much in line with what Ted Steinberg calls green liberalism. This is best illustrated by one of McKibben's least well-known works, *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families* (1999). Here, McKibben talks about the many threats to nature and communities because of global warming and other environmental problems. For him, the best way an individual can address these problems is by having one child. At first glance, this might seem a familiar argument, a holdover of the neo-Malthusian politics of the 1970s in the wake of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968). But McKibben's book is addressed at middle-class Americans like himself. Like his other books, *Maybe*

[65] The "carbon bomb" quote has been repeated frequently in the press about the Keystone XL pipeline. The earliest use of the quote I can find by McKibben is in an interview with Chris Hedges in May 2011. Chris Hedges, "The Sky Really is Falling," *truthdig*, May 30, 2011, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_sky_really_is_falling_20110530.

[66] White, "Bill McKibben's Emersonian Vision."

One becomes a reflection on a global issue—climate change and overpopulation—and his own personal reckoning of what he learned and his family's decision to only have one child.[67]

When asked directly, McKibben is quite coy about his politics. He says he's "not an ideological person," but sees a need to regulate and tame corporations. Even if he or other climate activists wanted to radically change our economic system, he adds, it would probably take too long and the science demands we take actions to address climate change now, thus forcing us to use the political and economic tools at our disposal.[68] He defers the deep political thinking in the climate movement to others, such as Gus Speth, and more importantly Naomi Klein. Unlike McKibben, Klein is very clear where she stands. In a widely circulated piece titled "Capitalism vs. the Climate" published in *The Nation* in 2011, Klein sees the free-market ideology that has dominated economic thinking for the past generation as the key reason nations have been unable to address climate change.[69] In her view, coping with climate change will require combating this ideology and promoting policies that will revitalize the public sphere, regulate corporations, and promote planning among other things. It is a critique not only of the free-market fundamentalist (i.e. neoliberal) variant of capitalism today, but of capitalism more generally. Yet despite McKibben's close professional association with Klein, he rarely strays into the more overtly ideological territory that Klein stakes out. Indeed, a close reading of many of McKibben's writings and speeches (albeit not a full sampling) finds scant mention of capitalism at all.

In this way, McKibben has much in common with another prominent progressive figure of the moment, Elizabeth Warren. Like McKibben, Warren has become an icon of the liberal left,

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[67] Bill McKibben, *Maybe One: A Case for Smaller Families*, New York: Plume, 1999. At times, this journey is quite personal. In one chapter, he discusses in detail getting a vasectomy after the birth of his daughter, 181-183.

[68] Bill McKibben interview, (July 23, 2013).

[69] Naomi Klein, "Capitalism vs. the Climate," *The Nation*, November 9, 2011, http://www.thenation.com/article/164497/capitalism-vs-climate.

taking on the big banks in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, first as overseer of the Toxic Asset Relief Program (TARP) and now as a senator from Massachusetts. Yet despite her critique of the malfeasance of financial firms and the ineptitude of government regulators, she has never called for the abolition of capitalism, just its deep reform. Both McKibben and Warren have, as of yet, successfully channeled and domesticated the more radical voices in the climate movement and progressive movement respectively for broader audiences. Indeed, both are not only liberal, but populists, too. In the way McKibben depicts himself in his most recent book, *Oil and Honey: The Education of an Unlikely Activist* (2013), it is hard not to be reminded of a man who reluctantly entered the political arena, journeyed to Washington, fought a long, and possibly unwinnable battle, against corrupt political and corporate interests: Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), the populist Depression-era film about a naïve young senator from out west sent to the nation's capital. Like Stewart in the film, McKibben is constantly self-deprecating and hopelessly square, but retains faith in ordinary Americans ability to triumph through their combined protests. The rise in prominence of McKibben and Warren seem a cautionary tale for more radical elements of the left. They reveal, I suggest, that despite the increasing dire scientific reports about climate change and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, most Americans seem uninterested in politics that would entail a radical transformation or our political and economic system.

Conclusion

This essay opened with a depiction of forty-eight people at a sit-in at the White House, and it is to that image I would like to return. I argued that these activists represented various facets of a new climate movement coalition, one that spanned different generations, regions, and races. Yet why does this story matter for environmental historians, geographers, and other environment-society scholars? It does in three ways.

First, none of these actions would have happened, or played out in remotely in the manner that they did, without the use of social media. The traditional media has commented extensively on the role of social media in the Occupy Wall Street movement and Arab Spring. Scholars are only beginning to assess how crucial such technologies were in making these events happen. Certainly with the climate movement, leaders and organizers are quite emphatic in claiming that the technologies were essential for soliciting supporters, fostering community, and organizing the sit-ins, demonstrations, and other events that have marked the past few years of the movement. Yet there is a potential dark side to this embrace of new digital technologies. Revelations from NSA-whistle blower Edward Snowden and the documents he released to the press suggest that activists of all stripes—possibly even those in the climate movement—are readily monitored by the NSA and other U.S. security agencies. Perhaps this is just paranoia on the part of some climate activists, but there is some evidence that the federal government has monitored other peaceful, law-abiding climate groups.[70] At the very least, it is clear that tools such as Gmail, Skype, Facebook, and Twitter are also accessible means to monitor climate activists as they are to build networks for growing and nurturing the climate movement.

Second, the story of the climate movement thus far shows a campaign making strides, significant in some cases, to build a more diverse environmentalism that places justice at the center of its politics. The willingness of established social justice and civil rights activists such as Van Jones, Julian Bond, and Reverend Lennox Yearwood and their organizations to build meaningful alliances with mainstream environmental groups is an encouraging sign. So, too, is the broad coalition of local environmental groups, urban progressives, and conservative rural landowners working together in

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[70] Andy Revkin, "Climate Campaigners Were on Terrorist List," *Dot Earth blog*, October 23, 2008, http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/23/climate-campaigners-on-terrorist-list/?_r=0 and Nafeez Ahmed, "Pentagon Bracing for Public Dissent Over Climate and Energy Shocks," *The Guardian, Earth Insight*, June 14, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2013/jun/14/climate-change-energy-shocks-nsa-prism TransCanada has also claimed Jane Kleeb and supporters of BOLD Nebraska are terrorists. See Melanie Wilkinson, "Anti-Pipeline Leader" 'We Are Not Terrorists,'" *York News Times* [York, NB], June 23, 2013.

Nebraska. It is a refreshing departure from the divisive environmental controversies common between environmentalists and rural farmers, ranchers, and loggers in the American West during the 1990s and early 2000s. Whether this coalition endures, remains to be seen. The continued involvement in climate politics by rural landowners in Nebraska and elsewhere seems particularly questionable once the Keystone XL issue is resolved. Yet it would be a mistake, I believe, to entirely discount the impact of such landowners working in concert with more progressive groups and environmentalists—sometimes, literally, going to jail together. For some landowners, it highlighted who their friends really were.[71]

Finally, those concerned about climate change have often wondered whether a movement to address climate change would ever emerge in the United States. Now, it has happened, although it is still not as broad as is needed and is still largely a matter of interest to liberals, not withstanding the few notable exceptions in Nebraska. The past generation of environmental politics has been dominated on the one hand by a popular ethos that says the best way to address environmental problems such as climate change is through individual action and consumer choices, and on the other, by a political economy emphasizing free-market solutions to all problems. The climate movement, to various degrees, challenges both of these. Whatever the fate of the Keystone XL pipeline, the campaign against it shows a movement wrestling with the legacy of an earlier era of environmental reform and the fracturing of the environmental movement during the past generation. Its supporters have forged a coalition, but the strength of their bonds seem sure to be tested in the years ahead.

[71] Randy Thompson interview, (June 28, 2013).