

CORPORATION

Will an energy transition help fossil fuel companies?

CAMERON HU

It is summer 2021, and the financial pages are celebrating a peculiar insurgency. A hedge fund has persuaded ExxonMobil shareholders to elect new directors to the board of the oil multinational. The new directors pledge, in turn, to reduce the position of fossil fuels in Exxon's global portfolio of extractive projects. The founder of the hedge fund insists this campaign "isn't really about ideology, it's about economics."¹ BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, and the largest Exxon shareholder to throw its weight behind the activist investors, agrees: this is about the oil corporation's ability to survive an energy transition. It is about Exxon's "long-term strategy" and "long-term shareholder value."² If Exxon redirects its program of permanent growth from petroleum molecules to wind farms and carbon capture, perhaps Exxon can endure indefinitely, proving itself as secure an investment as ever.

The bleak prospect of Exxon outlasting the age of oil turns our attention from petroleum molecules to the petroleum corporation and its form—and in particular, to the way the petroleum corporation's orientation toward indefinite existence will shape any political struggle over the "long term." What is the meaning of transition to a future less destructive than the present, if that transition preserves the customary agent of destruction? What changes, and what persists, if Exxon or Chevron prolongs its reign on Earth by swapping one energy **resource** for another within its resource portfolio, swapping wind for oil the way it swapped Arabian deserts for Texan plains in the twentieth century, or Great Plains fracking for deepwater extraction in the twenty-first? Transition may be business as usual for those energy corporations whose form is decidedly "immortalist."³ We might begin to wonder how features of the petrocapitalist present could endure, perniciously, even after the waning of hydrocarbon energy—not only in the lingering toxicity of corporate petrochemistry, but equally, in that immortalist mode of enterprise one Exxon CEO celebrated with this maxim: "*Presidents come and go. Exxon doesn't come and go.*"⁴

Fossil fuels conjured the world of immortalist corporations. There were, of course, corporations before coal and oil—most familiarly, the imperial company states exemplified by the British and Dutch East India companies—but the wholesale organization of capitalist **economy** around so many death-averse private business corporations arose hand in glove with the advent of large-scale, fossil-fueled infrastructure: the steam-powered railways of the nineteenth century. In choreography with the vast timelines for constructing and profiting from America's transcontinental railroads, signature machines of continental imperialism, the business corporation was reconstructed as a nonfinite device for continuous management and accumulation.⁵ Under pressure from railway industrialists and their associates in steel and **finance**, states progressively removed prior restrictions on the location, capitalization, legal immunity, mergers and acquisitions, and indeed *duration* of corporate operations.⁶ The immortalist corporation embodies a reorganization of economic and political time internally related to the steam engine's coal-powered reorganization of space-time. Staring westward down the tracks toward a vanishing point, the business corporation began to contemplate infinity.

And if fossil fuels contoured the corporation as a prospective immortal, corporate immortalism, in turn, gave determinate form to fossil-fueled existence in the twentieth century. The project of endless corporate expansion through extraction sent petroleum multinationals throughout the world in order to replenish what they had elsewhere pumped—or else die—and made them omnipresent forces in global economy and ecology. Still more significantly, the aspiring permanence of petroleum multinationals also determined basic features of North Atlantic *thought*. The oil corporation's project of endless survival would generate many dominant modes of theoretical and instrumental knowledge—among them the very conceptual languages through which Earth is today grasped as a vulnerable object that demands transition. Geological science was progressively elaborated and dignified as a discipline in proportion to its value in the continuous renewal of corporate resource portfolios. Futurological methods of **scenario planning**, so basic to global climate governance, emerged within oil multinationals in response to the threat postcolonial oil revolutions posed to their survival. The Gaia hypothesis, forerunner of Earth System Science and Anthropocene discourse, was articulated by James Lovelock as a contract scientist for Royal Dutch Shell. Explaining that affiliation some years later, Lovelock pointed to Shell's ambition to exist forever. He knew, Lovelock wrote, of “no other human agency that plans so far ahead.”⁷

So much of our ability to think critically about Earth and its future is an artifact of corporate immortalism. Should fossil fuels disappear at some future

date, it will remain to ask what features of petrocapi-talism persist in their wake, not least in the corporate form and the encompassing styles of reason and action that grow from corporate immortalism. The climate crisis might turn out to be just the first episode in a hyper-repetitive serial drama inaugurated, but not exhausted, by fossil fuels. As in the following scenario, as plausible as any other:

Exxon's new directors turn the company from oil and gas to some putatively less destructive energy resource—call it resource *x*. The corporation's drive for indefinite life is thereafter routed through the continuous extraction of *x* and the continuous elaboration of new sciences to enable it. *X* proves harmful to the sites of its extraction/production and their communities. But according to the planetary scenarios contemplated in distant metropolises, *x* is essentially preferable to fossil energy. Decades pass, and it becomes first thinkable, and then indisputable: Exxon's elaboration of resource *x* has degraded some basic mechanism underlying collective life—one hitherto unknown to exist, a mechanism whose existence, like the environment or the Earth System, has come into view as a consequence of its destruction.⁸ Now activist investors, fearing that resource *x* too will become valueless and illiquid in the long term, endeavor once again to save Exxon from untimely death. The insurgents elect new directors to its board, promise to swap the promising resource *y* for the formerly promising, now disgraced resource *x*. . . .

See also: **Clean, Electricity, Mining**

Notes

- 1 Clifford Krauss and Peter Eavis, "Climate Activists Defeat Exxon in Push for Clean Energy," *New York Times*, May 26, 2021.
- 2 BlackRock Inc., "Vote Bulletin: ExxonMobil Corporation" (May 26, 2021), <https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/literature/press-release/blk-vote-bulletin-exxon-may-2021.pdf>.
- 3 Abou Farman, *On Not Dying: Secular Immortality in the Age of Technoscience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).
- 4 Steven Coll, *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 68.
- 5 Timothy Mitchell, "Infrastructures Work on Time," *E-Flux*, January 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/new-silk-roads/312596/infrastructures-work-on-time/>.
- 6 Suzana Sawyer, "Corporations," in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Hilary Callan (New York: Wiley, 2018), 6.
- 7 James Lovelock, *Homage to Gaia: The Life of an Independent Scientist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 193.
- 8 David Bond, "Environment: Critical Reflections on the Concept," Institute for Advanced Study Occasional Paper 64 (2018).