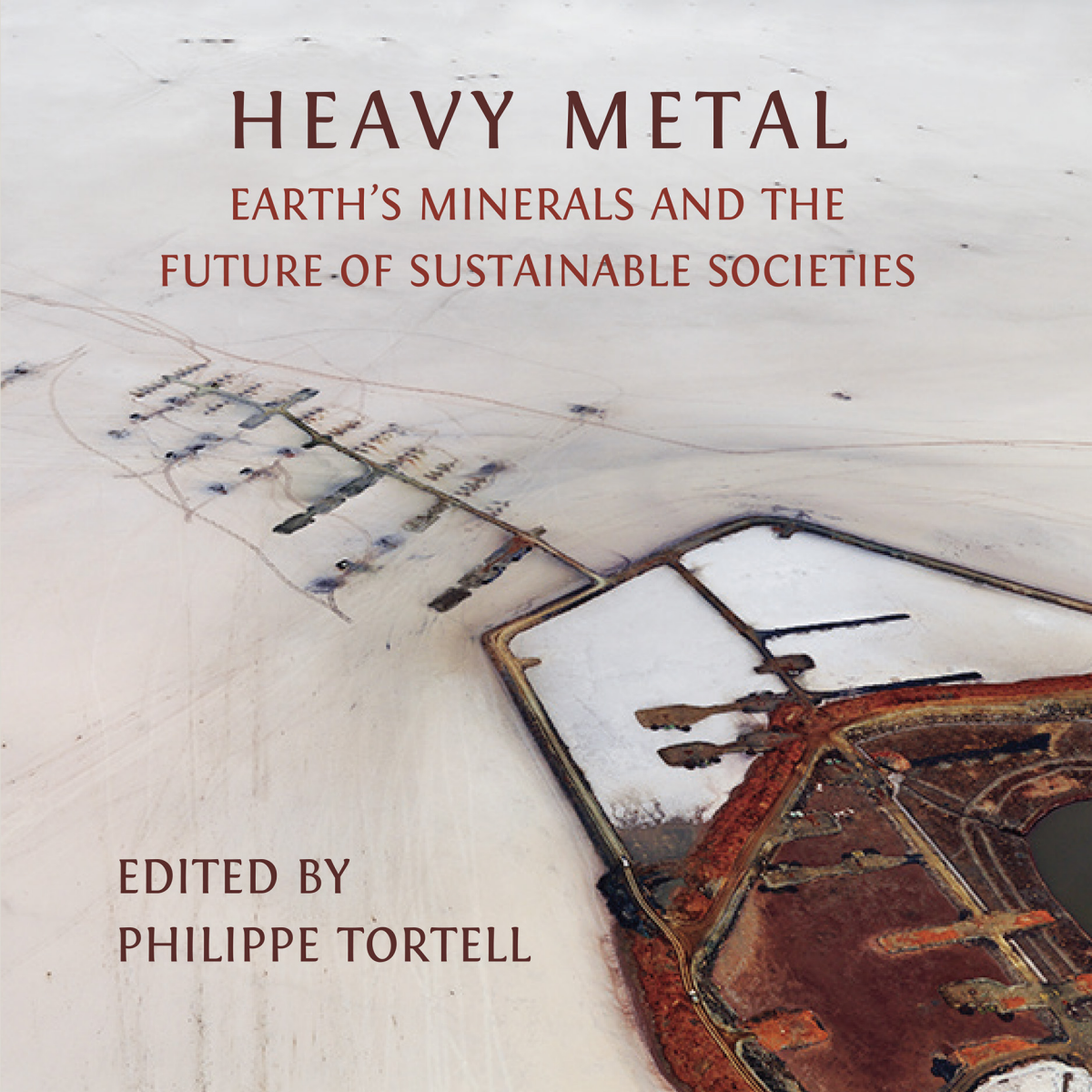
HEAVY METAL

EARTH'S MINERALS AND THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES



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The End of Endlessness

Naomi Klein

Back in 2015, I attended a meeting in Toronto, along with sixty organizers and theorists from across the country, representing a cross section of movements: labor, climate, faith, Indigenous, migrant, women, anti-poverty, anti-incarceration, food justice, housing rights, transit and green tech. The catalyst for the gathering was a sudden drop in the price of oil, which had sent shock waves through an economy that relied on revenues from the export of high-priced oil. The focus of our meeting was how we could harness that economic shock, which vividly showed the danger of hanging your fortunes on volatile raw resources, to kick-start a rapid shift to a renewables-based economy. For a long time, we had been told that we had to choose between a healthy environment and a strong economy; when the price of oil collapsed, we ended up with neither. It seemed like a good moment to propose a radically different model.

At the time that we met, a federal election campaign was just gearing up in Canada, and it was already clear that none of the major parties was going to run on a platform of a rapid shift to a post-carbon economy. Both the Liberals and the New Democratic Party (NDP), then vying to unseat the governing Conservatives, were following the playbook that you needed to signal your 'seriousness' and pragmatism by picking at least one major new oil pipeline and cheering for it. There were vague promises being offered on climate action, but nothing guided by science, and nothing that presented

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a transition to a green economy as a chance to create hundreds of thousands of good jobs for the people who needed them most.

So, we decided to intervene in the debate and write a kind of people's platform, the sort of thing we wished we could vote for but that wasn't yet on offer. And as we sat in a circle for two days and looked each other in the eye, we realized that this was new territory for contemporary social movements. We had all, or most of us, been part of broad coalitions before, opposing a particularly unpopular politician's austerity agenda, or coming together to fight against an unwanted trade deal or an illegal war.

But those were 'no' coalitions, and we wanted to try something different: a 'yes' coalition. And that meant we needed to create a space to do something we never do, which is dream together about the world that we actually want. What we came up with was the Leap Manifesto.

I am sometimes described as the author of the Manifesto, but that's not true. My role was to listen and notice the common themes. One of the clearest themes was the need to move away from the national narrative that many of us had grown up with; one that was based on a supposedly divine right to endlessly extract from the natural world as if there were no limit and no such thing as a breaking point. What we needed to do, it seemed to us, was set that story aside and tell a different one based on a duty to care: to care for the land, water, air—and to care for one another.

When we first launched the Leap Manifesto, we hit up against a narrative that runs extremely deep; one that predates the founding of young countries like Canada.[1] It begins with the arrival of European explorers, at a time when their home nations had slammed into hard ecological limits: great forests gone, big game hunted to extinction. It was in this context that the so-called New World was imagined as a sort of spare continent, to use for parts. (They didn't call it NewFrance and New England by accident.)

And what parts! Here seemed to be a bottomless treasure trove—of fish, fowl, fur, giant trees and, later, metals and fossil fuels. In North America and then in Australia, these riches covered territories so vast that it was impossible to fathom their

boundaries. These were places of endlessness—and whenever we began to run low, our governments just moved the frontier west.

The very existence of these lands appeared to come as a divine sign: forget ecological boundaries. Thanks to this body-double continent, there seemed to be no way to exhaust nature's bounty. Looking back at early European accounts of what would become Canada, it becomes clear that explorers and early settlers truly believed that their scarcity fears were gone for good. The waters off the coast of Newfoundland were so full of fish that they 'stayed the passage' of John Cabot's ships. For Quebec's Father François-Xavier de Charlevoix in 1720, 'The number of [cod] seems equal to that of the grains of sand that cover the bank'.[2] And then there were the great auks. The feathers of the penguin-like bird were coveted for mattresses, and on rocky islands, particularly off Newfoundland, they were found in huge numbers. As Jacques Cartier put it in 1534, there were islands 'as full of birds as a field of grass'.[3]

Again and again, the words inexhaustible and infinite were used to describe the Eastern forests of great pines, the giant cedars of the Pacific Northwest, all manner of fish. There was so much that there was a glorious freedom to be careless. Thomas Huxley (the English biologist known as 'Darwin's bulldog') told the 1883 International Fisheries Exhibition that 'the cod fishery are inexhaustible; that is to say nothing we do seriously affects the number of fish. Any attempt to regulate these fisheries seems consequently [...] to be useless'.[4]

That's a lot of famous last words, given what we now know. Given that by 1800 the great auks were completely wiped out. Given that beaver stocks began to crash in Eastern Canada soon after. Given that Newfoundland's supposedly inexhaustible cod was declared 'commercially extinct' in 1992. As for our inexhaustible old-growth forests: virtually wiped out in Southern Ontario. More than 91% of the biggest and best stands on Vancouver Island, gone.

Our economic niche was always voraciously devouring wilderness—both animals and plants. Canada was an extractive company, the Hudson's Bay fur trading company, before it was a country. And that has shaped us in ways we have yet to begin to confront. But it does go some way toward explaining why it caused such an uproar when a group

of us got together and said: actually, we have hit the hard limits of what the Earth can take; we have to leave resources in the ground, even when they are still profitable. The time for a new story, and a new economic model, is now.

Because such enormous fortunes have been built in North America purely on the extraction of wild animals, intact forest, interred metals and fossil fuels, our economic elites have grown accustomed to seeing the natural world as their God-given larder. What we discovered with the Leap is that when someone or something (like climate science) comes along and challenges that claim, it doesn't feel like a difficult truth. It feels, as we learned, like an existential attack.

The economic historian Harold Innis warned of this almost a century ago. Canada's extreme dependence on exporting raw natural resources, he argued, stunted our country's development at 'the staples phase'. This is true for large parts of the US economy as well—Louisiana and Texas for oil, West Virginia for coal. This reliance on raw resources makes economies intensely vulnerable to monopolies and to outside economic shocks. It's why the term banana republic is not considered a compliment.

Though Canada doesn't think of itself like that, and some regions have diversified, our economic history tells another story. Over the centuries, we have careened from bonanzas to busts. In the late 1800s, the beaver trade collapsed when European elites suddenly lost their taste for top hats made of pelts and moved on to smoother silk. In 2015, the economy of Alberta went into free fall because of a sudden drop in the price of oil.

The trouble isn't just the commodity roller coaster. It's that the stakes grow larger with each boom-bust cycle. The frenzy for cod crashed a species; the frenzy for tar sands oil and fracked gas is helping to crash the planet.

And yet despite these enormous stakes, we can't seem to stop. The dependence on commodities continues to shape the body politic of settler-colonial states like Canada, the United States and Australia. And in all three countries, it will continue to confound attempts to heal relations with First Nations. That's because the basic power dynamic—our countries relying on the wealth embedded in their land—remains unchanged. For instance, when the fur trade was the backbone of wealth production

in the northern parts of this continent, Indigenous culture and relationships to the land became a profound threat to extraction. (Never mind that there would have been no trade without Indigenous hunting and trapping skills.) Which is why attempts to sever those relationships to the land were so systematic. Residential schools were one part of that system. So were the missionaries who traveled with fur traders, preaching a religion that cast Indigenous cosmologies as sinful forms of animism—never mind, once again, that the worldviews they attempted to exterminate have a huge amount to teach us about how to regenerate the natural world, rather than endlessly deplete it.

Today in Canada, we have federal and provincial governments that talk a lot about 'truth and reconciliation' for those crimes. But this will remain a cruel joke if nonindigenous Canadians do not confront the 'why' behind those human rights abuses. And the why, as the official Truth and Reconciliation Commission report states, is simple enough: 'The Canadian government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources'.[5]

The goal, in other words, was always to remove all barriers to unrestrained resource extraction. This is not ancient history. Across the country, Indigenous land rights remain the single greatest barrier to planet-destabilizing resource extraction, from pipelines to clear-cut logging. We're still trying to get the land, and what's underneath. We see it south of the border as well, in the Standing Rock Sioux's pitched struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline. This was true two hundred years ago, and it is true today. When governments talk of truth and reconciliation, and then push unwanted infrastructure projects, we must remember this: there can be no truth unless we admit to the 'why' behind centuries of abuse and land theft. And there can be no reconciliation when the crime is still in progress.

Only when we have the courage to tell the truth about our old stories will the new stories arrive to guide us. Stories that recognize that the natural world and all its inhabitants have limits. Stories that teach us how to care for each other and regenerate life within those limits. Stories that put an end to the myth of endlessness once and for all.

Endnotes

1 *The Leap Manifesto*, https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/

2 François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North-America* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), p. 70.

3 Jacques Cartier, *A Memoir of Jacques Cartier, Sieur de Limoilou, His Voyages to the St. Lawrence, ed. James Phinney Baxter* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1906), p. 93, https://libsysdigi.library.illinois.edu/oca/Books2009-06/memoirofjacquesc00baxt/memoirofjacquesc00baxt.pdf

4 Thomas Huxley, 'Inaugural Address', *Fisheries Exhibition Literature* 4 (1884): 1–22; full text available at: http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/SM5/fish.html

5 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), p. 3, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf