

Principal: Sally Rooney
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“We must hold corporations accountable for climate change”

Let me tell you a story about my hometown.

One day in 2005, five men from County Mayo, Ireland, blockaded the site of an onshore gas pipeline in protest of its construction.

These men, fathers of my friends and friends of my father, laid their bodies on the muddy ground outside the pipeline construction site, forming a physical barrier to prevent workers from entering the site.

I was 14 years old at the time and as news quickly spread across town, I ran to the construction site to catch a glimpse of these men who would later be known as the Rossport Five.

As I looked at their determined faces and weathered bodies, it struck me, the courage it takes to stand up against the destruction of one's homeland.

The pipeline, called the Corrib gas project, was managed by the corporation, Shell, and planned to run through the community of County Mayo, stripping my neighbors of their homes and decimating our natural resources.

When the Gardai, the national police of Ireland, showed up at the protest site, they shouted insults and threw rocks at the men in an attempt to intimidate them and break their spirits.

Despite this, the Rossport Five did not relent.

As their bodies were dragged across the ground by the Gardai, forcing them away, they remained faithful to their pursuit – the pursuit against a multinational corporation's exploitation of their community.

These men remained steadfast in their pursuit even as they were shackled in handcuffs, thrown into Gardai police cars, and arrested.

Their efforts that day launched what would become a decade-long protest against the Corrib gas project and Shell.

While the gas pipeline was eventually built in 2015, the Rossport Five and the protest movement they ignited successfully delayed the construction for 10 years, costing Shell 1 billion euros.

While this is a story of commitment to one's community, both the people and natural resources, it is also a story of what success looks like when protesting corporations' role in the climate crisis.

When we compare the story of the Rossport Five with modern-day climate change activism, we see a stark difference in approach.

Modern-day climate efforts focus on altering the behavior of individuals through awareness campaigns, protests, and punchy slogans such as "Save the Turtles" and "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle".

Rather than placing the blame on individuals, I argue that we must understand climate change as the product of capitalism.

And in doing so, we can change our efforts to combat it.

The solution to climate change under our current capitalist system is to upend corporations' profit structures that reward exponential growth at the expense of individuals and the world's natural resources.

Today, in front of an audience I am so honored to speak to, I hope to convince you that we must do everything within our power to hold corporations accountable for climate change.

For centuries, humans occupied the earth with little to no effect on the environment.

Humans once lived in harmony with the environment, utilizing its riches without placing undue burden on its resources or polluting its air, water, or land.

It wasn't until the turn of the 19th century, with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, that the first instance of warming temperatures due to increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was recorded.

The Industrial Revolution was led, in large part, by corporations' desire for increased manufacturing, production, and profit.

To obtain this growth, companies began burning unprecedented amounts of coal for fuel and cleared millions of acres of trees as cities grew and housing and factories were built.

Industrialization, which began in Europe and the U.S., quickly spread across the globe as companies looked to increase their profits in new regions.

Thus, they turned to the colonies of the world. In colonized regions of the world, European and American-backed companies culled forests and excavated minerals – emitting greenhouse gases and tearing apart the native land, people, and governance systems.

During this time, my country of Ireland was under British rule.

Driven by the demands of British corporations, natural resources native to Ireland, including timber, copper, and iron, were exploited from the land — leaving large swaths of my country decimated, uninhabitable, and severely changed for generations to come.

As an Irish citizen, I have witnessed the devastation that has ravaged the lands of my country.

I have seen when corporations, desperate for new ground to extract of resources, pull into town with their excavators and drills. For them, my homeland is their profit.

But the reality is that growth is the engine of the capitalist system. And growth comes at the expense of humans' symbiotic relationship with the environment.

This is not to say that individual behavior doesn't play a role in climate change.

It is evident, through fast fashion, single-use plastic, and long-haul plane travel, that it does.

However, it is the capitalist system that affects the behavior of the individual. Not the other way around.

The needs of the individual and the needs of the capitalist system are not aligned.

At its most basic, what do individuals need to survive? They need nutrient-rich food, clean air, fresh water, and adequate shelter. All of which are necessities of a healthy climate.

But at its most basic, what do corporations need to survive in the capitalist system? Profit.

We cannot expect corporations to act in our best interest, and in the best interest of the planet, when their only incentive is profit at the expense of everything else.

Once we assert that corporations and the capitalist system are inherently the root of our current climate crisis, we can begin to answer the question, “So what do we do about it?”

I argue that we must think outside the framework of our current political system.

Making noise in the streets is beneficial only up to a point. We can cry out into the void of public outrage with little effect.

This is because corporations do not care about public perception unless it affects their bottom line.

Thus, we must be willing to affect what corporations do care about, their profit.

Let’s look once again at the efforts of the Rossport Five.

Their single act of blockading the onshore pipeline spurred a decade-long movement of activists working under the name of Shell to Sea to oppose the construction of the Corrib pipeline.

While protestors in this movement made noise – they picketed in the streets, stood their ground against police, and tore up wooden roads laid over the bogland – the success of their campaign came from the direct impact on Shell’s profit structure at the expense of 1 billion euros.

If a grassroots, community-based movement like Shell to Sea can cause a multinational corporation like Shell to lose 1 billion euros, think of what a network of these movements can do when working strategically together.

They could cause disruptions to the day-to-day operations of corporations, until corporations determine that breaking into these news lands is more hassle than it’s worth and move out of our communities.

The way in which to disrupt corporations’ profit structures is through delays, distrust, and boycotts.

It is only when we employ these tactics that corporations will feel the brunt of our activism and change their practices.

As I speak today at the UN Climate Week, I'd be remiss if I failed to mention that in holding corporations accountable for climate change, we must think not in terms of borders but in terms of a global order.

As the expansion of the Industrial Revolution into the colonies of the world shows us, capitalism is inherently transnational.

But what does this mean in terms of climate change?

A recent study found that multinational corporations emit nearly 20% of global CO2 emissions.

A majority of this CO2 production occurs in nations where multinational corporations operate overseas manufacturing facilities, wreaking havoc on the environments of poorer countries including Pakistan, Haiti, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

CO2 is emitted in these countries through the making and assembling of products for corporations that will then be sold to consumers in the Western world.

And why do corporations choose to manufacture their products overseas? Because it costs less, thereby expanding their profit margin even further.

I was 26 years old when I published my first book. I was young, ambitious, and relished in the praise I received for my freshman novel.

It was in this flurry of literary excitement that I failed to take much interest in the intricacies of my book deal.

It wasn't until my agent handed me the signed copy of the deal that I noticed the address of the printing press where my book was being printed. The address was in Indonesia.

My heart sank. The greed that I had equated to corporations sending their manufacturing overseas at the expense of the climate was the same greed that I was ignorantly contributing to.

I crumpled up the piece of paper and vowed never again to take a willfully blind eye to the environmental impacts of my novels.

And I haven't. For my second novel, and all my subsequent novels, I took due diligence in ensuring that my book be printed in a UK-based printing press that is both artist-run and environmentally conscious.

This is all to say that we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to corporate destruction of our environment.

We must unite neighbors, communities, and the global order against the greed of corporations at the expense of the climate.

And in the absence of corporations' overarching presence in our communities, we may slowly reestablish a symbiotic relationship with the environment.

I close today with a reference to my novel, “Beautiful World, Where Are You”.

In the novel, one of the characters discusses the fall of the Late Bronze Age during the 12th century BC.

Many historians suggest that the Late Bronze Age fell due to what they describe as a “general systems collapse,” largely as an effect of naturally occurring environmental changes.

Eileen in the book says:

“I think this puts our present civilisation in a kind of ominous light, don’t you? General systems collapse is not something I had ever really thought about as a possibility before. Of course I know in my brain that everything we tell ourselves about human civilisation is a lie. But imagine having to find out in real life.”

We *have* found that out in real life, a lie about human civilization – the lie that our earth can withstand the rate at which we emit carbon emissions.

Climate change has the potential to produce an entire system collapse on a global scale if we do not act.

It is with this that I ask you all to change your approach to fighting climate change.

It is only when we begin thinking and operating outside of our current political order that we can see climate change for what it is – a result of capitalism’s never-satisfied growth, at the expense of the people... the climate... and the world order.

To be a part of the fight against climate change is to be a critic of corporations’ destruction of the planet.

- It is recognizing that the world hasn't always been this way.
- It is holding corporations accountable for their role in the climate crisis.
- And ... it is attacking what corporations care about most – their profit.

If we are successful in our fight, we can take ourselves off the precipice of general systems collapse and secure a world in which our children will look back at us with appreciation and pride.

For it is pride that is the root of corporate greed, and it is pride that just might save us.