Energopolitics and the Anthropology of Energy

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Building upon our “Energy and Energopolitics” panel at the 2010 AAA Annual Meeting, we hope this special series in AV will show why it is critically important for anthropology to engage contemporary forms of energy, whether carbon-based, nuclear or renewable, more actively. This is a line of research that Laura Nader, Fernando Coronil and others pioneered decades ago. But given today’s scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change, the increasing appearance of violent conflicts driven by control over energy resources, and the growing efforts across the world to imagine and implement alternative energy futures, it seems high time that the anthropology of energy came into its own. At stake is an alternative way of understanding the operation of modern statecraft and political economy. Fernando Coronil is quite correct that we confront pervasive opacity, but not just in Venezuela and not just concerning oil. The staggering significance of energy as the undercurrent and integrating force for all other modes and institutions of modern power has remained remarkably silent, even in this era of so much talk about climate change, energy crisis and energy transition.

Carbon Democracy

In a fascinating essay, “Carbon Democracy,” Timothy Mitchell explores how intimately modern western politics and statecraft have been entangled with carbon-based fuels. Mitchell connects, for example, industrialization and urbanization in the early modern West to the coal industry’s development and shows how the rise of mass democracy linked directly to the narrow rail channels through which high energy coal moved. The greatest successes of the modern labor movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries centered around chokepoints at which coal-miners and coal-movers could construct the fossil fuel flows upon which states depended for their industrial and military programs. The social and material organization of coal revealed the vulnerable fossil pressure points of modern statecraft and allowed the labor movement to demand concessions in the form of higher wages and benefits, which in turn became pillars of 20th century social democracy. As carbon statecraft shifted its basis from coal to oil, however, international shipping rather than railways became the primary circulatory system of vital energy resources. Shipping, Mitchell notes, operated “beyond the terri- torial spaces governed by the labour regulations and democratic rights won in the era of widespread coal and railway strikes [making] energy networks less vulnerable to the political claims of those whose labour kept them running” (Economy and Society 38[2]: 407-8).

Mitchell also discusses how the new organization of fossil energy fueled Keynesian economic theory since its conceptualization of potentially limitless national economic growth depended critically upon an under-standing of oil not only as an inexhaustible resource but as a resource that would eternally continue to decline in price. Keynesian expertise is, for Mitchell, like other forms of postwar economic expertise, fundamentally a “petroknowledge,” but anchored specifically to postwar western colonial control over the burgeoning Middle East oil fields. When that control began to dissolve in the late 1960s and early 1970s, oil began to be reformu-lated by states and energy corporations as a potentially exhaustible resource whose price could and would fluctuate dramatically. With this disruption of the epistemic and material basis of Keynesian statecraft, the space for neoliberal policy and neocolonial intervention, a politics promoted both by western states and transnational energy corporations, opened. And so, to make a long story short, here we are.

Energopolitics

There are gaps in Mitchell’s schema. For one thing, as the recent tragedy in Japan should remind us, contemporary statecraft and democracy is as much nuclear as carbon. Nonetheless, Mitchell’s analysis offers a compelling introduction to what we term here “energopolit-ics”—power over (and through) energy—and offer as an alternative genealogy of modern power and modern statecraft to the much-analyzed phenomenon of “biopolitics”—power over life and population. Biopolitical anal-ysis is necessary, but not sufficient to understand the complex operation of modern states and modern power that have always sought to control and capitalize on the transformational power of energy. When one considers the biopolitical projects of Foucault’s modern prisons, factories and schools, for example, where would these exemplary modern institutions and their forms of expert-ise be without the harnessing and transformation of energy into their lighting and electricity, into their heat, even into their bricks and cement. The point here is not to promote naïve materialism but rather to argue that power over energy has been the companion and collaborator of modern power over life and population from the beginning. We continue to live in an era of carbon statecraft, but a neoliberal one in which, as Doug Rogers shows us in this AV, corporate actors increasingly share in projects of political and cultural formation. As Dorle Drackle and Werner Krauss advise here, we now need to better understand energy governmentality in its carbon and post-carbon forms.

Alternative Energy Visions and Transitions

This is therefore a pivotal moment, an important time for critical intervention. Fossil fuels have never appeared as exhaustible and carbon statecraft has perhaps never seemed so vulnerable. The German politician and renewable energy visionary, Hermann Scheer, argued that accelerating economic and technological change may be the hallmark of the modern economic age, but nevertheless “[m]easured by its claim to shape the future, it is a thing of the past. The modern age is already fossil-ized at heart, built on discards and relics. It has no real future. We are living in a fossil economy” (The Solar Economy, Earthscan). From working within the heart of western petropolitics, Scheer was tireless in his advocacy for a post-fossil future that would replace the inefficient long supply chains and intrinsic power inequalities of the fossil economy with what he envisaged as a truly democratic organization of power emphasizing short supply chains and a plurality of power production centers. Scheer’s vision of a solar energy economy enabling a new solar citizenship of interlinked energy producers and users is only one vision of radical transformation among many. Imagining alternative energy futures is now a fully globalized practice and the confluence of western and non-western imaginations of alternative energy in proj-ects such as Abu Dhabi’s Masdar City (www.masdar.ae) or the DESERTEC Foundation (www.desertec.org) augurs the further pluralization of energy futurology.

In addition to the important revelatory work anthropologists of energy can perform on carbon statecraft in crisis, we should also offer serious attention to the efforts of individual states, corporations and communi-ties to develop what are often termed today “sustainable solutions.” We need to pay close attention, as Cynmene Howe does here, to the relations between logics of energy development, extant social institutions, emergent technologies, histories of political relations, and cultural understandings of energy, since all are vitally important forces affecting the pathways of energy tran-sition. Recognizing and tracing the interactions of this multiplicity of forces will not only build a base of new anthropological knowledge but it will also help anthropologists to critically illuminate the limits of current western political discourse on energy transition, a discourse which typically offers two positions: either (a) there is actually no need for transition between carbon and post-carbon energy or (b) we need transition but it will be a fluid, unproblematic, unviolent transition that can be accomplished without interrogating the magni-tude and methods of energy usage that carbon statecraft institutionalized. That wish to believe in fluidity is, to paraphrase Mitchell and Scheer, still the oil talking. It is the sign of a political culture unable to think beyond its energopolitical basis, and thus clings tenaciously to its past, desiring above all else permanence in a state of emergency and transition.

In sum, we hope we have made our case that the

See Energopolitics on page 7
Oil into Culture

Energopolitics in the Russian Urals

DOUGLAS ROGERS

With a major university's oil boom, it's not just its oil industry that's expanding. Its culture is too.

The Perm region is one of the most productive oil regions in Russia, producing about 40% of the country's total output. However, the region's cultural landscape has also undergone significant changes as a result of the oil boom.

One of the most notable cultural changes in the Perm region has been the rise of folk crafts industries. These industries have been developed by local residents as a way to supplement their incomes and to promote their cultural heritage.

However, the cultural changes in the Perm region are not just limited to the rise of folk crafts industries. The region's cultural landscape has also been shaped by the oil company's efforts to become a cultural capital of Europe.

The Perm region has been a major site of Russian energopolitics, which is the study of the relationship between energy production and political power. The region is home to many of the country's largest oil companies, including Lukoil, which has played a significant role in the region's cultural development.

The oil company's efforts to become a cultural capital of Europe have been particularly significant. The company has invested heavily in cultural projects, including the construction of new museums and folklore ensembles, and has supported the development of local cultural identities.

The Perm region's cultural landscape is a product of the interplay between economic development and cultural production. The region's cultural landscape is a reflection of the region's economic success, and it is a testament to the region's cultural vitality.

The Perm region's cultural landscape is a testament to the power of energopolitics to shape cultural production and political power. The region's cultural landscape is a product of the interplay between economic development and cultural production, and it is a testament to the region's cultural vitality.

Douglas Rogers is the author of *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals* (Cornell 2009). His research on Russian oil culture is funded by NSF and the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research.

CREDITS

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CONTENTS

- Energopolitics in the Russian Urals
- Culture into Politics
- Anthropological study of energy and energopolitics

Glossary

- Energopolitics: The study of the relationship between energy production and political power
- Ethnography: The study of human culture from an anthropological perspective
- Anthropology: The study of human societies and cultures

Further Reading

- *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals* (Cornell 2009)
- *Energopolitics: Anthropological study of energy and energopolitics* (2010), by Douglas Rogers
- *Expertise: Cultures and Technologies of Knowledge* (Cornell University Press, 2012)

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