

5: Just Transformations? The Role of Resistance and Community Mobilization

“Resist! Reclaim! Restructure!”: Labour’s Involvement in Energy Democracy Struggles

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Abstract

This paper explores labour environmentalist coalition building towards energy democracy struggles as an example of recent multi-actor mobilisation for progressive energy system transformation. Calls for energy democracy have recently been voiced by a range of actors in the global North and South and provide a powerful narrative for more democratically accountable, ecologically sustainable and socially just energy futures (Angel, 2016; Morris & Jungjohann, 2016). Energy democracy provides a framework that potentially unites a broad actor base, including social movements, environmentalists and labour organisations in a collective struggle against corporate, extractivist, and profit-driven energy systems (Sweeney, 2013). This paper engages with recent empirical work conducted with the global labour organisation Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) in New York City, USA, and explores how the organisation and participating unions mobilise and scale energy democracy demands through analysis and narrative building, active networking, and pathways for strategic intervention. As part of the fieldwork, the labour movement’s involvement in the planning and mobilisation for the People’s Climate March (PCM) on April 29th 2017 was also observed, which will be discussed as a concrete example of labour environmentalist mobilisation for energy system transformation. Through drawing on qualitative empirical materials from both TUED and PCM, the paper specifically explores the terms on which climate change and energy are understood and contested, engaging with alternative knowledge-making around climate change and energy generation as well as the politicisation of spaces of energy transformation within labour environmentalist mobilisation.

Environmental struggles over the expansion of tar sands pipelines in British Columbia, Canada.

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyze the causes, development, and potential outcomes of the environmental conflict between grassroots organizations, indigenous communities or First Nations, Kinder Morgan Corporation, and the Canadian government over the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.

Building on the environmental justice and political ecology frameworks, this study emphasizes the role of climate change concerns, the decline of conventional oil production, and other struggles over the rise unconventional fossil fuels in shaping the conflict in Burnaby. It also examines the opposing interests, needs, perceptions of the actors involved in the conflict, highlighting the differences in power, income, and influence in decision-making regarding tar sands projects approval. Similarly, the socioeconomic and environmental impacts of tar sands production are scrutinized, particularly, the dispossession of customary lands, and the disproportionate exposure of local communities across British Columbia to greenhouse gas emissions and water/soil pollution from the extraction, burn, and transportation of tar sands by pipelines and tankers.

The research intends to debunk the dominant narrative of the tar sands industry, which points out that it generates revenues for the Canadian economy, creates thousands of jobs, enhances national energy security and protects the environment. Furthermore, the study provides an explanation of the context, conditions, and processes that led to the organization and mobilization of a singular grassroots movement, which is comprised of indigenous communities, citizens, scientists, students and non-governmental organizations that insist on leaving the tar sands in the ground. Despite the approval of the Trans Mountain pipeline by the Canadian government, demonstrations, lawsuits, and public campaigns continue to challenge the decision. In that respect, there are still gaps in scientific knowledge regarding the organizational and mobilization capacity of the grassroots movement to create initiatives to move beyond fossil fuels in Canada.

For this research, data will be collected from legislative documents, policy reports, scientific journals, newspapers articles, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with representatives of the grassroots organizations, indigenous communities, and Burnaby citizens that oppose the Trans Mountain pipeline. These interviews will focus on their motivations for contesting the pipeline; the meanings and values they attributed to nature and their territories; the strategies to defend their livelihoods, and the differences and dynamics within the movement. The interviews are an important methodological tool to examine how the grassroots movement can reshape public participation in environmental politics, challenge the hegemonic discourse on tar sands, and contribute towards the building of sustainable societies based on local and decentralized renewable energy systems.

Solar Commons: mobilizing community trust ownership of solar energy for local social equality and new ecological imaginaries in the US and India.

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Abstract

In the transition beyond oil to a renewable energy future, community solar projects have the potential to connect clean distributed electricity technology to alternative property and value systems. Against the inertia and social imaginary accompanying remote, monopoly ownership of energy generation, community solar projects can promote cooperative ownership, social equality, and a new ecological imaginary. This paper looks at two community solar projects that innovate **community trust ownership** to

achieve social equity: one in a newly electrified Warli, tribal village in Maharashtra, India where the donors of the solar array required that fifty percent of the trustees managing the solar microgrid be women thus empowering village women to have a new voice in their community; the other in the US where a new nonprofit organization called *Solar Commons* uses community trust ownership to create income streams for local low-income beneficiaries such as an energy assistance program for a native American tribe of Ojibwe in northern Minnesota. These cases, one in the global South, the other in global North, are in the process of being scaled with the aim of creating a new kind of “commons” trust property institution through solar energy. The *Solar Commons* nonprofit was started by the author, a legal anthropologist using her community-engaged research on “commons” ownership to create a new model of community solar ownership in the US. The US *Solar Commons* projects are now receiving support from the US Department of Energy, which is assisting the nonprofit in overcoming barriers in various utility jurisdictions across the country. The author will use these two community trust solar cases to reflect on how distributed solar technology enables new local governance models. Because the author has engaged public art in both the Indian and US projects, she will also focus on how distributed solar technology can become a vehicle for emergent social imaginaries that connect community energy to social equality and ecological well-being.

Assembling urban climate justice: methodological challenges and opportunities of employing assemblage thinking on climate justice and the city

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Abstract

The role of the city in climate governance has been increasingly accentuated in recent debates on climate change mitigation. Distributive and procedural aspects of urban climate governance are negotiated and highly contested, leading to a revival of the ‘right to the city’ discourse within the academy. Yet the practical involvement of marginalised groups and subaltern strategies in policy development and implementation have been largely missing from academic production and policy making. To understand policy mobility and implementation of urban climate policies, this project claims there is a need to understand subaltern strategies and the various responses from marginalised groups within the city.

In a parallel vein, assemblage thinking has become popularised within urban studies as a means to understand and to excavate the multiple contingencies that constitute the urban fabric. However, considerably less attention has been given to the methodological implications and the transformative potential of assemblage thinking within social sciences in general and urban studies more specifically.

By cross-fertilising assemblage thinking and urban climate justice, this project aims at exploring different procedural and distributive effects of climate mitigation policies in

Bergen, a medium sized coastal city of Norway. I will explore whether a critical climate justice framework will benefit from inviting marginalised groups and subaltern strategies into urban climate governance, moving the focus from injustices to a more pragmatic, practice oriented participatory notion of justice, where subaltern strategies are front and centre of mitigation processes.

Approaching urban governance and planning from a climate justice perspective, and by exploring methodological innovations within assemblage thinking, this project seeks to contribute to the emerging urban climate justice scholarship within geography and beyond.