


**COMMENTARY ENERGY AND ENERGOPOLITICS**

Building on last month's series on sustainability, this issue's contributors focus on energy and energopolitics. As work on this issue began, a massive earthquake and tsunami struck Japan. As a result of these devastating natural disasters, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant was affected. This immediately brought energy issues to the forefront of public discussion. In this context, our May contributors demonstrate how anthropologists have the unique skills and perspectives to work at the intersection of politics, energy and culture.

# 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 *AN* 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 exposes how intimately modern western politics and statecraft has 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 constrict 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 territorial 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 understanding 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 reformulated 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 neoimperial 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 "energopolitics"—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 analysis 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 expertise 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 *AN*, corporate actors increasingly share in projects of political and cultural formation. As Dorle Dracklé 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 fossilized at heart, built on discards and relics. It has no real future. We are living in a fossil economy" (*The Solar Economy*, Earthscan). Working from 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 projects such as Abu Dhabi's Masdar City ([www.masdar.ae](http://www.masdar.ae)) or the DESERTEC Foundation ([www.desertec.org](http://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 communities to develop what are often termed today "sustainable solutions." We need to pay close attention, as Cymene 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 transition. 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 magnitude 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

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# Oil into Culture

## Energopolitics in the Russian Urals

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Russia's oil industry is old, but its oil boom is new. For much of the twentieth century, the oil pumped from the Soviet subsoil flowed into a socialist political and economic order, one that did not organize production, consumption, price, or value in the ways that have fed oil booms and oil busts around the capitalist world. Oil was crucial to the functioning of the Soviet economy, to be sure, but it was never directly associated with massive inequalities, unimaginable influxes of money, or soaring expectations of overnight modernization. Soviet oil was never the basis for the creation of an industrial or financial elite that could rival—or even take over—agencies of the state. When these common attributes of capitalist oil booms did begin to emerge in Russia over the course of the last decade or so, they followed not only the Soviet past but the “transitional” 1990s, when, even without an oil boom, Russians of all social stations struggled to come to terms with new inequalities, money's often mystifying peregrinations (pyramid schemes, say), and dashed dreams of rapid modernization.

These are some of the contexts for my current research on Russian “oil culture,” which explores Russia's emergence as a “petrostate” not from the perspective of oligarchs and the Kremlin (a common enough approach) but from an array of interconnected sites, groups and perspectives in a single oil-producing region—the Perm region of the Russian Urals. The research project's concrete ethnographic contexts range from new corporate social responsibility programs sponsored by energy companies to the fate of Soviet oil and gas infrastructure, and from new senses of space and vectors of inequality in rural oil-producing districts to the city of Perm's oil-fueled recent effort to brand itself as a cultural capital of Europe. This is the stuff of contemporary Russian energopolitics—fertile ground for providing an anthropological answer to a much broader question: What kinds of human social and cultural formations are being produced in the rapidly shifting energy regimes of the early twenty-first century? Below, I provide one example of how ethnographic attention to energopolitics affords new insights into both contemporary Russia and anthropological studies of energy more broadly.

### Oil into Culture

The Perm region's oil is pumped largely by Lukoil-Perm, a subsidiary of Lukoil, Russia's largest private oil company. Strikingly, Lukoil-Perm has also become a major and highly visible sponsor of cultural revival in the Perm region: grants from the company fund everything from folklore ensembles to heritage festivals, and from children's summer camps to the construction of new museum exhibits. Oil companies around the world are frequent practitioners of this sort of corporate social responsibility (CSR), and Lukoil-Perm quite directly borrowed from Western models in designing its own programs. The specific shapes of Lukoil-Perm's involvement in cultural

construction, however, owe much to the Soviet and early post-Soviet past.

Moscow-based Lukoil consolidated control over regional oil operations in and around Perm in the 1990s, a time of tremendous popular dissatisfaction with Russia's *nouveau riche*. As the company began to realize profits from rising world oil prices, its employees in the Perm region's old Soviet oil-producing districts began to receive noticeably higher salaries precisely when the disappearance of Soviet-era subsidies for agriculture impoverished nearly everyone else. Lukoil took these emerging inequalities and accusations that it was pumping out oil, making enormous profits, and returning nothing to struggling populations quite seriously. There were likely a number of reasons for this: Lukoil-Perm's own desire for peaceful relationships with local populations and politicians; pressure from higher-level state officials whose tiny budgets and weak legitimacy left many state agencies unable to respond to the demands of local populations; and the memory of Soviet-style company towns, which made local enterprises responsible for local social and cultural life.

The institutional response to these pressures was Lukoil-Perm's Connections with Society Division, formed in the early 2000s and charged with managing the company's relationships with state agencies and local populations in oil-producing districts. The division quickly set up a procedure for awarding grants for social and cultural projects, and focused on the development of folk crafts and the reclaiming of local cultural identities. In part, this was an effort to provide seed money that would create jobs and new income for newly unemployed residents of former Soviet state farms. If there is no work to be had, one former Connections with Society employee phrased the company's idea in an interview with me, “Sit home ... sew, make pottery, do something else, and maybe you can get some sort of income.” These initiatives expanded to include massive cultural festivals, crafts fairs and museum exhibits about the region's past, all of them unfolding under Lukoil-Perm's distinctive red logo. The Perm region has recently taken to calling itself the “Region of 59 Festivals.” A large percentage of these festivals owe their existence to Lukoil-Perm.

### Culture into Politics

Although Lukoil-Perm's efforts were only somewhat successful in a pure business sense—the folk crafts industry became a new career for only a handful of people—this kind of cultural investment paid other dividends for the company. It certainly created some positive PR. Most notably from the perspective of energopolitics, CSR projects aimed at producing local culture became a central vector of regional politics in the Perm region's new oil age. Key to understanding this process is a specifically post-Soviet configuration of cultural production in the districts, towns, and villages that were home to both Lukoil-Perm's oil operations. In these places, some of the most influential residents were members of the Soviet-era “local intelligentsia” working in rural and small city libraries, museums,

schools, clubs, and low-level offices of the state administration. Many were former low-level Communist Party members who were accustomed to organizing events and festivals, and to Soviet cultural construction.

In the 1990s, such projects were habitually underfunded by the state and offered their once moderately influential organizers very little in the way of prestige on the local stage. Lukoil-Perm's new social and cultural projects changed this, while not straying far from the already-surgingly interest in rebuilding elements of local cultural identity muffled or erased by Soviet cultural construction. Suddenly, the production of culture and identity was important to someone, as it had been occasionally in the Soviet period, and there was a new set of cultural initiatives from above to work on and to adapt to local circumstances. This time, they were even backed up with actual funding—from the oil company.

The allegiance of local intelligentsias offered Lukoil-Perm a crucial route through which to influence politics at the level of districts and towns. The company then used these connections to attempt to assure local cooperation and assistance on any number of projects connected with their actual oil production activities. In many oil districts, nearly all factions and elements of the local elite were linked to Lukoil through social and cultural projects of various sorts rather than through the oil industry itself. One effect of these CSR projects, in other words, was to insert Lukoil-Perm and its representatives quite deeply into local political and social networks.

The story of the Perm region's oil boom is, in good part, a story of the reorientation of Soviet and early post-Soviet networks (industrial, political and cultural) to gather around the once low-prestige energy sector. Many in the Perm region were skeptical and even cynical about Lukoil-Perm's omnipresent CSR initiatives, but the fact that the oil company had become a chief sponsor of culture and society was hard to escape. In an age when states often seek to devolve projects dedicated to shaping local populations to private corporations—among them sprawling and wealthy energy companies—the ethnography and theory of energopolitics should increasingly concern anthropologists.

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anthropological study of energy and energopolitics is not only a conceptually important field of future inquiry but that it is also one of the important and pressing issues in anthropology today.

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