

Energy Colonialism: Roots, Racialization, Recurrent patterns

Thursday 16 June 2022 15:00 (1h 30m)

Energy colonialism is an essential, yet scarcely theorized concept for understanding how past, present and future energy systems are shaped by imperial and neocolonial imaginaries and practices. These perspectives are important in contemporary debates on energy transitions in face of the climate crisis, namely with regard to green finance flows, new green geopolitics, and energy governance. Current energy endeavours seem largely driven by vested interests, and mostly fail to pay attention to questions of justice or to critical developmental, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory viewpoints. We thus can identify colonial continuities pervading contemporary debates, i.e. in the 'run-up' for (green) hydrogen produced the Global South to sustain economic growth in the Global North, in colonial imaginaries of terra nullius conceptions reproduced in energy partnerships, and not least in financial dependencies that stabilize the political economy of clean energy.

This panel aims to initiate conversations that suggest new ways to understand and research energy transitions, by focusing on resource distribution along (gendered and) racialised lines, on the ways in which developmental imaginaries and colonial ideas shape energy partnerships, on green finance flows and neocolonial patterns of green finance tools.

We invite papers which focus on roots and recurrent themes of energy colonialism and highlight intersections between energy transitions and neo/post/de-colonialism. We also welcome pieces, which zoom in on energy justice and connect this to postcolonial critique, for instance with regard to the politics of energy partnerships (and technologies), energy governance, or energy finance.

Abstracts:

Glocal Justice? Colonial Narratives in Germany's and the European Green Hydrogen Strategy

Dr. Anne Kantel

Green hydrogen and its synthesis products are regarded as important elements of the energy and climate transition in both Germany's and the European hydrogen strategy. Importing these products is considered an important strategy component as particularly Germany's own potential for renewable energy production is limited. Policy makers are increasingly looking at countries outside the European Union with favorable geographic and climate conditions to meet import demands for green hydrogen in the future. This paper explores if and how Germany's and the European hydrogen strategy take the needs and desires of potential partner countries into consideration. By using the theoretical approach of coloniality as a lens, it seeks to make visible (post-)colonial path dependencies and narratives within current hydrogen policies and outlines potential counter-narratives and different knowledges when it comes to the production and import of hydrogen. The paper concludes by recommending points for research and policy that can contribute to the development of partnerships that take sustainability and energy justice for all actors involved into account.

Exploring colonial continuities in Mozambique's energy system: electricity networks and extractive relations

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There are multiple ways of defining and understanding energy transitions, but many scholars now argue that systemic changes in energy systems require deep transformations in social and ecological dimensions that support social life, especially in urban areas. These systems and associated infrastructures have been shaped by distinct historical and political-economic processes, which in African contexts involve colonial histories of settlement, planning, and market formation. Accordingly, understanding energy transitions requires accounting for historical path dependencies that are embedded in energy systems, yet these have received little attention to date.

In this paper, drawing on a collaborative project about electricity grid access in urban Mozambique, we examine the ways that colonial legacies shape the contours of the country's current energy system, and efforts

by planners and policymakers to promote more just and sustainable energy futures. First, we focus on electricity provision to examine the effects of locations of power generation sources in relation to distribution and consumption centres, and the lack of redundancy in the network, meaning that no system of electricity dispatch exists in cases of excess or deficit of electricity. We explore the government's plans to construct new power generation sources to supply external markets while building grid interconnections with southern African neighbours, and its parallels with colonial-era hydroelectric planning, in which whole regions were sacrificed to support national development objectives. We then turn to resource extraction, and the prospects for lucrative energy investments in natural gas or large hydropower, which have led to the deprioritizing of distributed renewables, to the detriment of local energy needs.

Hydropower as a Target of Resource Extractivism. Recurrent Patterns of Dam Construction and Energy Production in East and Sub-Saharan Africa, 1950-1970

Dr. Birte Förster, University of Bielefeld

Already during the First World War, the British War Cabinet adopted plans for more efficient resource extraction from the colonies. To this end, the "Water-Power Committee of the Conjoint of Scientific Societies" was set up in 1918 in order to research the possibilities of generating water energy. However, the implementation of such plans only gained momentum in the British and French colonial empires after the Second World War, when both launched major programmes to promote 'development' in their colonies. Their aim according to contemporary development discourses –was industrialisation which in turn should lead to prosperity. Therefore, not only metropolitan development programmes, but also funding by the World Bank, concentrated on the expansion of infrastructures that would provide energy for metal smelting and roads, ports and airports for the transport of goods. A closer look at infrastructure projects in Uganda, French Cameroon and Ghana, however, shows that these ideas rarely worked out. Instead of mineral resources, water energy itself became a resource that was exploited but did not serve the expansion of local industries. This will probably also apply to the initially failed dam project on the Konkouré River in Guinea, which is currently being completed with funds from the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, but even more so to planned projects for green energy such as Grand Inga. The lecture will discuss the historical continuity of water energy as a resource and the role of infrastructures as (colonial) power retainers both in terms of their materiality and the continuity of their inherent development ideas, as well as the long-term financial dependencies they produce and the conceptualisation of their users.

The Paradox of Technocratic Governance: The Extractive/Emancipatory Potential of Indigenous Utilities?

Dr. Liam Midzain-Gobin (Brock University) and Joshua McEvoy (Queen's University)

Settler states are the site of competing claims to sovereignty, with Indigenous nations asserting their authority in the face of settler colonial claims to jurisdiction. In this paper we explore the tension between these claims through the realm of energy governance and utility infrastructure, and specifically the British Columbia Utilities Commission's (BCUC) Indigenous Utilities Regulation Inquiry. Through an analysis of the Inquiry and its final report, we argue that such 'technical' bodies represent a sort of security professional, effectively depoliticizing the ongoing reproduction of settler sovereignty. In the BCUC's Inquiry, this takes the form of prioritizing "economic reconciliation" and the creation of legal "certainty" which enables the continuation of a colonial form of the security/development nexus in and through energy. However, as observed in the final recommendations of the Inquiry, engaging with these technical bodies on issues such as energy governance also offers Indigenous nations meaningful opportunities to build their own infrastructure and institutions, thereby enacting their own decision-making authority. Understood in the context of the contemporary reconciliation discourse, processes of energy governance, and specifically the Inquiry and its recommendations, thus represent at once both a novel approach to reifying settler sovereignty and an opening for greater Indigenous self-determination.

Energy colonialism: debates, phenomena, and steps towards a research agenda

Prof. Franziska Müller, University of Hamburg

Energy colonialism is an essential, yet scarcely theorized concept for understanding how past, present and future energy systems are shaped by imperial and neocolonial imaginaries and practices. Energy coloniality becomes manifest as power over energy transition processes, as an epistemic force with regard to knowledge orders and knowledge transfer, and as a coloniality of being with regard to livelihood and energy poverty. Facing climate crisis and the rise of green capitalism, energy colonialism may serve as a concept that offers new analytical perspectives to understand, criticize and connect apparently unrelated phenomena such as green financialisation, land conflicts over solar and wind park sites, hydrogen geopolitics or energy extractivism. However, debates on energy colonialism are still scattered and a systemic overview is lacking. This paper hence seeks to recapture current debates on energy colonialism, with the aim of carving out typical claims, blind spots and challenge, and creating a research agenda.

Track Classification: Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial Working Group