

# Anthropology Book Forum

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## Energy Anthropology

TRISTAN LOLOUM, SIMONE ABRAM, and NATHALIE ORTAR, eds. 2021. *Ethnographies of Power: A Political Anthropology of Energy*. EASA Series 42. New York, N.Y: Berghahn Books, pp. 212, ISBN 978-1-78920-979

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While anthropologists have long taken an interest in the relationship between energy and society, over the past decade the interconnected events stemming from anthropogenic climate change and the widespread development of alternative energies have inspired a more recent resurgence of anthropological attention to energy. *Ethnographies of Power* is part of this wider renewal, and each of the core chapters in the volume focuses on contemporary entanglements of energy and political power within the matrices of energy production and consumption. Its overall aim is to reinvigorate a political anthropology of energy, starting from the premise that contemporary forms of governance and political organization are critically imbricated in, and shaped by, power over and through energy. The volume's editors outline the conceptual foundation for their approach in their concise introduction, positioning the collection of case studies within the framework of the Foucauldian-inspired *energopower* and *energopolitics*. Following Boyer's (2014; 2011) proposed conceptualization, these concepts are extensions of Foucault's notions of biopower, the governance over life and populations, and biopolitics, the processes through which the administration of life becomes an object of state governing strategies.

The most provocative chapter in the volume immediately follows the introduction. Kaur (Chapter 1) takes issue with Boyer's conceptualization of energopower and energopolitics that provide the framework for the volume. In Boyer's formulation, Kaur notes that, 'energy and related infrastructures become imbricated in subtle, smooth and what become rational forms of capillary state power' (pg. 26). Yet, such an approach occludes the fact that in the Global South, modern governmentality is similarly entangled with more direct and authoritarian forms of government inherited from previous colonial regimes. This has resulted in multiple, overlapping and different configurations of power and authority, and the smooth functioning of state-run energy regimes discussed by Boyer mask and deflect the violence enacted on others on the margins of biopolitical

(and energopolitical) regimes. As such, Kaur suggests that energopower and energopolitics need to be qualified for the darker underside of energy production, particularly in the ‘southern spectrums.’ In discussing the development of, and struggles against, a nuclear power plant in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, Kaur brings attention to what she calls ‘nuclear necropower’ - as opposed to biopower - to reverse such optics, bringing attention to the exclusions and violence that also accompany modern energy regimes. The biopolitical project of producing electricity through nuclear power for metropolitan hubs in southern India comes with significant risks for those living in and around nuclear power stations. Namely, the fishing and farming communities around the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant have been reduced to ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1998), sacrificed in the pursuit of producing electricity for others. In this vein, violence and destruction are not archaic aspects of contemporary governance, but exist alongside and in the service of modern biopolitical and energy projects.

Hebdon (Chapter 2) focuses on the 2019 indigenous-led protests over the elimination of fossil fuel price subsidies that forced the Ecuadorian government to negotiate with, and eventually concede to the demands of, indigenous political leaders. The plan, backed by Bretton Woods institutions, was designed to bolster renewable energy consumption by cutting government support of gas and oil with the hopes of compelling the use of alternative energies. Its failure, Hebdon argues, was rooted in the particular ways the government thought about energy. Rather than attend to the broader social, economic and political implications of an imposed transition to renewables, the government’s thinking of energy as a source of money (or rather, a governmental cost) instead of in terms of its use-values ultimately led to the reinstatement of the subsidies. Beyond reaffirming that the energy transition is a far messier project than a matter of policy and technological fixes (e.g., Burke and Stephens 2018), Hebdon raises an important observation that what energy is and means in different contexts requires careful attention.

Lord and Rest (Chapter 3) focus on the work of the Nepalese state and development organizations to extend governance over territory through efforts to secure hydro-energy resources. Attempts to enact and claim hydropower futures in Nepal have been more recently concerned with questions of security, and the authors posit that the discursive production of energy futures serves as a method for enacting a coherence that the Nepalese state appears to lack. Moreover, more recent models of hydropower development have worked to implement a new set of relations between the state and its citizens through the popularization of the shareholder model, wherein Nepalese citizens are summoned as shareholders to purchase equity in hydropower companies. Shareholding proposes a right to ownership of (national) natural resources for citizens, while also presenting investment as a civic duty and thus shaping new modes of citizenship. State territorializing efforts and the expansion of state power are now justified based on protecting shareholder-citizens’ investments. Moreover, their chapter emphasizes that ways in which energopolitical regimes rely on both elite politics as well as the hopes and aspirations of the less powerful to produce energy resources and infrastructures.

Lis (Chapter 4) reflects on the politics of carbon dioxide reduction efforts in post-EU accession Poland. In the last decade, various infrastructural projects have been proposed to curb

emissions, including carbon capture, storage facilities and efforts to develop electric vehicles. Yet, climate change policy in Poland has become highly nationalized, making it difficult to appreciate the global impacts of national energy consumption. Lis highlights the ways in which energy transitions have become part of wider political projects and visions of state building, sovereignty and modernization. Such context helps explain some of the paradoxes of Poland's energy politics, and sheds light on the ways in which specific political meanings of energy inform energy choices. It additionally offers an example of the appropriation of energy transition discourses for alternative political pursuits.

Moolenaar (Chapter 5) explores the sites of natural gas extraction in Groningen, Netherlands, and the experiences of those who live in an extraction zone marked by seismic events caused by drilling. Long denied by the industry, the relationship between drilling and seismicity was officially recognized in 2012 following a major earthquake that resulted in damage to residents' homes and other structures. Moolenaar recounts the technopolitical measures that were adopted by governmental agencies in response, and some of the unanticipated changes that resulted from new forms of intervention into the lives of those living near the gas fields. Namely, Moolenaar posits that new political subjectivities have emerged in response to these interventions, foregrounding experiences of economic and political marginality and the comparison of the area with other 'resource colonies' or sacrifice zones.

In the final chapter, Ortar asks why people in France are increasingly opting to use firewood for heating despite the fact that changes in routines, particularly involving energy choices, are costly. These decisions have largely been made in the absence of direct state policy to encourage the use of wood, and raises questions as to the relationship between consumers and governmental power in determining different forms of energy use. The study responds to major questions within energy studies and policy circles that focus on how entrenched patterns of energy consumption can be altered, particularly in France, where it appears more than ever locked into nuclear energy as a primary source of electricity. In exploring the motivations and daily practices involved in using wood in the region of Lyon, Ortar posits that wood heating has developed into a parallel economy of self-supply, involving specific social networks and particular forms of knowledge. This raises further questions as to the role of informal economies in today's energy landscapes, and how they may affect current and ongoing efforts to transition to renewable energies.

Coleman provides a few closing thoughts in the *Afterword*, reemphasizing Kaur's (Chapter 1) exhortation to move beyond the conceptual framework of 'energopolitics' modeled after Foucault's analysis of power and governance to account for the dominate forms of energy production and consumption that not only augment life, but similarly rely on violence and death as integral to their processes. At the same time, the case studies included here all take a national and state-centric view of energy, approaching the energy-power-governance nexus as (somewhat unproblematically) stemming from state-level politics. This perspective is explicitly forwarded in the *Introduction* in the observation that the chapters all 'focus primarily on secondary state effects rather than those directly employed by states, yet for all that, they are studies of state power' (2). Yet, in approaching questions of energy using the analytical toolkit of political anthropology, this

view tends to overlook the ways in which state optics have long occluded attention to the non-state actors and groups who also take part in governing (e.g., Li 2005), and raises important questions as to how we might better take into account the multiple spheres of overlapping and indeterminate authorities involved in energy production and consumption hinted at by Ortner and Kaur in their respective contributions.

Overall, the case studies here firmly demonstrate that the production and consumption of energy is critically entangled with localized politics, cultural values, and specific forms of knowledge. Far from being imposed from afar as rational biopolitical projects, an understanding of contemporary energy regimes requires attention to the places where these regimes are enacted, experienced and contested. While the rationalities and discourses through which state agencies organize flows of energy are significant forces in contemporary energy landscapes, the case studies included here also point to the role of practices of meaning-making, non-state actors and divergent projects – not all of which are bent on capital accumulation. Finally, the volume raises important questions as to what new economic disciplines are being cultivated in the name of energy security or climatological necessity and those regions and peoples who are sacrificed in the pursuit of ‘clean’ energy production. Usefully, all the chapters are available through Berghahn’s [Open Access collection](#), and the discussions here would be useful to those interested in the study of energy and society, infrastructure, speculation and the state.

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