Energy Anthropology – a thriving discipline with many insights for the energy sector

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Energy Anthropology has a long and creditable history. Relatively unheard of twenty years ago, there is now an impressive range of literature on everything from the lives of Venezuelan oil workers’ to where Norwegians hide their smart meters.

A pioneer in the field was the anthropologist Hal Wilhite, who passed away recently. In 2005, he wrote a brief editorial for the magazine ‘Anthropology Today’ arguing why energy needs anthropology. “Given the centrality of energy in daily life everywhere around the world, and its significance in some of the more contested political debates of our times,” he argued, “one would expect it to be an important emerging subject for anthropology”. At the time, he saw few signs that this was the case, but in the intervening 14 years, there is no doubt that it has now become an important area of research and publication.

Wilhite’s arguments for an Anthropology of Energy remain as relevant today as they were when he wrote his article, and his own work has been influential in sparking activity in this area. As Wilhite argued, energy has to be converted to be useful, and, as he explained, “it must pass through a socio-technological system in order to reach the site of its intended use”, meaning that energy is a quintessentially social good, one that attracts diverse stories and histories. As energy goes through stages of transformation, it throws up questions around “political economy and power, on the globalisation of social and material flows, and especially on the ways in which energy and pollution are implicated in everyday life”. All these are questions that anthropologists are well equipped to address, and an increasing number of anthropologists have been getting to grips with them since Wilhite’s article first appeared. Indeed, in the 6 years since I started teaching ‘Energy and Society’ at Durham University, the range of articles and books relevant for the reading list has fairly exploded from a select few, to way too many for anyone to read in a lifetime.

A long history

To be fair, there have been anthropologists looking at energy issues from the beginnings of the discipline, when questions of resources and calorific values had their place in analysing different social groups around the world. But from the 1970s, anthropologists began to turn their attention to energy issues, most famously Laura Nader and Stephen Beckerman, who started to publish work on the...
politics of the electrical industries based on their research in California\textsuperscript{4}. Even then, they noted a common assumption that “more energy and new sources of energy will improve our lives” that contrasted with the evidence that quality of life indicators declined as energy use grew. And they observed another contradiction between the claim that energy use patterns must be defended to maintain and continue ‘our’ pattern of life, and the evidence of dramatic and rapid changes in American life-styles over the same period. It would be hard to disagree with these observations today, and harder to contest their claim (remember, this is in 1978) that energy is a multidisciplinary concern, no longer ‘the province of physicists and engineers’, but an arena that is both of concern to a wide variety of people, and one that requires insights from all disciplines.

In particular, Nader and Beckerman pointed out that:

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The bulk of energy research that deals with scientific and technological questions is usually embedded in deeply held beliefs about the human condition and direction. Such beliefs are for the most part ignored by the researchers who hold them, even though, as with the belief in progress, they may act as important driving forces.”
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The article challenges then-widespread theories that the amount of available energy determined the form of human sociality and that it brought an inevitable drive to consume increasing amounts of energy over time. But Nader went on, not only to write extensively about energy issues from anthropological perspectives, but to be directly engaged in energy politics in California and to inspire a generation of anthropologists to bring their focus to powerful people and organisations (what she called ‘studying up’), and to look at contemporary structures of power, including energy systems.

Beyond impact studies

Although it is sometimes expected that social scientists will examine the ‘impacts’ of resource use, whether that is oil, coal or solar panels, in fact anthropology has a great deal more to offer.

Gisa Weszkalnys, for example, brought an anthropological concern with the diverse ways in which we conceptualise time to her account of how even the anticipation of energy resources can transform a society. Her work\textsuperscript{9} documented the creation of expectations in Sao Tome and Principe that brought untold change to a small society, where little, if any oil has actually appeared.

Anthropologists are paying attention to questions about how imaginaries of the future are shaped by and play into everyday life today, and into the political debates and discourses about what energy is and its role in the world; about disparities between futures promised by energy technologies and the lives of those who are exposed to infrastructural change; or the transformation in the meaning and symbolic significance of ideas, objects and managerial forms as they travel between sites where they are designed and where they are used.
My own recent work on ‘energy ethics’ looks at the potential implications of energy modelling practices on future energy system developments. When a modeller makes a decision about setting thresholds or ranges for which data they will use, and when they choose to include some factors over others, how might these choices be reflected in the models they produce? And how can these decisions remain visible when models are used to shape policies or investment decisions that might affect future outcomes? In this project, as part of the Centre for Energy Systems Integration, my team have been working closely with engineers and mathematicians to analyse the modelling process, uncover some of the cultural and disciplinary assumptions built into modelling practices, and think through their implications.

Interdisciplinary work is essential to make progress in this field.

This approach complements work done by Mette High and Jessica Smith on what it means to understand how people frame their lives in ethical terms – before we judge the coal worker in Wyoming, for example, we should listen to them describing their lives, and understand that they feel their work in bringing energy to the nation - to people far away who need to heat their house or charge their phone - is a gift that they have dedicated their lives to offering, and for which they feel they have received little gratitude. Perhaps then it might be possible to consider what changing energy policies or markets mean to people’s lives, and how important it is to respect the views of those whose lives are to be radically changed by decarbonisation.

Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, who visited DEI from Rice University a few years ago, have brought these kinds of concerns to understanding the controversies around wind energy in Mexico. Writing about what they call ‘Aeolian politics’, they argue that we must do more to recognise how the production, supply and use of energy services are bound up in the production and reproduction of political power, institutions and relations. In Tehuantepec, a huge boom in wind energy installations has been largely funded by transnational corporations for their own benefit, while local communities have been bypassed, receiving little of the benefit yet sacrificing their livelihoods that are deeply entwined in environmental conditions.

A number of anthropologists have been writing recently about public protests around renewable energy, showing that objections to wind energy developments, such as in Catalonia, rarely see renewable energy itself as a problem. Instead, protest is more likely to arise from a deeper history of exploitation, or the recurrence of power relations that are bound up in colonial patterns or what have been called ‘extractive mentalities’. Spanish authorities had long defined rural Catalonia as ‘remote’ and ‘empty’, not economically productive, and where incomes were low. This may be based on economic figures, but it is a very partial understanding of life in Catalonia, as Franquesa shows. On the contrary, it is a classic tactic of colonisation first to define the area to be colonised as ‘empty’ or unproductive, in order to justify the colonial power’s desire to move in and extract resources for its own benefit.

In Catalonia, a long history of being seen as a place where resource could be extracted, or where dangerous plant (such as nuclear reactors) could be situated away from heavily populated areas, led to resentment, fuelled by nationalism. Inviting foreign investors to build wind turbines was interpreted as just the latest example of selling Catalonia to the highest bidder, undermining local
environmental practices, destroying the integrity of those farmers who had invested years of their lives in building up organic agriculture and tranquil tourist retreats, and ‘once again’ undercutting the value of life in Catalonia. Similarly, in the Western Sahara, the state of Morocco has invested heavily in building wind farms to raise its generation of renewable electricity. But this is a contested territory, and for the Saharawi people of Western Sahara who have been displaced by the Moroccan state to make way for this new infrastructure, the wind farms do not signify a sustainable future.

Energy futures
Given the rate of production of anthropological research on energy, this short article gives no more than a brief glimpse at a handful of the issues that have been written about. Anthropology of energy is growing and thriving, with a European Energy Anthropology Network now consolidated, and about to produce its first book, and the longer term prospect of an ‘Energy Anthropology’ handbook in the next year or two. Durham has been at the forefront of these activities, co-founding the network and leading on the editing of the handbook, as well as playing a role as international partner to a new multidisciplinary research centre on ‘socially inclusive decarbonisation’. These are exciting times, in which we can be in no doubt that energy needs anthropology.

Anthropological projects on Energy Futures show how deeply people’s desires and imagination about the future drive their energy practices today; research that links with studies of infrastructure shows the broader implications of changing energy installations on the lives of those who live alongside them; and studies that demonstrate the links between access to energy and access to states or other organisations are all driving energy anthropology forward. New research burrows through the hype about ‘blockchain energy trading’, the redesign of solar kits for a circular economy, or tracing the long term impacts of state-sponsored dams – all of these are examples of areas where anthropologists are seeing the links between policy, finance, beliefs, powers, social economy and the co-optation of arguments for energy transition by corporate interests at the expense of citizens and the dispossessed.

With increasing urgency being attached to the task of decarbonisation, it is more important than ever that anthropology plays a role, not only to reach the parts that other researchers cannot reach, but to bring forward a broad range of research sensibilities that highlight just how deeply energy is implicated in all of our lives, for good or ill.
References:

3. Find out more about Durham University’s MSc Energy and Society Directed by Professor Simone Abram
   www.durham.ac.uk/mscenergyandsociety/
10. Find out more about the National Centre for Energy Systems Integration www.durham.ac.uk/dei/projects/cesi/
14. A doctoral research project at Durham, funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund is investigating “The Role of the Arts in Climate Change Mitigation: Environmental Philosophies of Saharawi Refugee-Citizens”
   https://sites.durham.ac.uk/GCRF-CDT/hamza-lakhal/

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