

Energy beyond neoliberalism

Platform

The NHS was designed in 1948 by scaling up the Tredegar Medical Aid Society – a mutual health provision organisation in South Wales set up by miners and their families that had run for over fifty years. By scaling up this local community-controlled structure, the founders of the NHS fundamentally transformed the economy and politics of healthcare nationwide. Today, we need a comparable transformation of energy provision. Could Eigg in Scotland – an island owned collectively by its inhabitants and entirely supplied by renewable electricity – be the Tredegar Medical Aid Society of energy?

This article seeks to explore energy alternatives that break with the foundational assumptions of the neoliberal order. Our argument is that, rather than begging for small palliative scraps, the left must make the argument for a new energy and economic settlement. This is necessary for survival, and for justice. We need a fundamental change of direction on energy.

Energy corporations, finance and the state

In Nigeria 72 per cent of people are forced to use wood for cooking, while their country exports 950 billion cubic feet of gas every year. Much of it is shipped to Britain. Yet when Platform invited Niger Delta activist Celestine AkpoBari to London, he was astounded to hear that Britain suffers the worst levels of fuel poverty in Western Europe, with one person dying of cold every six seconds last winter. So who benefits from this disparity? The answer lies in record energy company profits. Together, the big five oil companies – BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips,

ExxonMobil and Shell earn more in one minute than 90 per cent of UK couples earn together in a year.

A century-long strategic alliance between fossil fuel corporations and Western governments has fostered an energy system that has been structured by imperial, extractivist and then neoliberal power. Global neoliberal extractivism – based on the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources – is now trying to solve the dwindling of easily accessible oil reserves by violently pushing for new reserves to be exploited. Cue Arctic drilling, fracking and efforts to extract from beneath the pre-salt ultra-deep waters off Brazil. Once discovered and measured, geological deposits are represented as ‘proven reserves’ and they then become financial assets that are tradable and valued on the FTSE.

This process thrives on accumulation by dispossession: the expulsion of people from their land, the occupation of villages by soldiers, and the poisoning of groundwater. Military, diplomatic and financial support from states to corporations is key to its facilitation. The aim of Western states is to maintain imperial power by keeping their corporations in control of fuel flows. London is now a centre of both financial and energy imperialism.

Neoliberal common sense persuades us that there is little we can do about this. We are addressed as individual passive consumers of energy, purely as ‘customers’ – and this serves to obscure our other identities, as Doreen Massey argued in the manifesto instalment on Vocabularies of the Economy. We are encouraged to believe that BP and Shell, British Gas and EDF are the organisations best placed to ‘efficiently’ extract, process and generate energy, and that the market will deliver the best prices to us as the big companies compete among themselves for our custom. Our choices as customers supposedly influence this market. But in practice, the dominance of a small number of multinational corporations annihilates the possibility of any choice that could generate significant change. As Beatrix Campbell writes, global capitalism ‘deploys the language of freedom, choice and competition to oust solidarity, co-operative creativity and equality’.¹

As a result of these companies' dominance, itself the culmination of successive privatisations by Conservative and Labour governments, Britain's fuel poverty rates are now among the highest in Europe. One in five households was in fuel poverty in 2010; 10,000 people died in winter 2013-4 from cold homes. Yet the Big Six energy companies take £1 billion per year in premiums that are charged predominantly to disadvantaged users.²

As even a study commissioned by the Oil and Gas UK lobby group admitted: 'the market has not delivered the most efficient outcome for UK gas consumers'.³ Meanwhile, under the liberalised regime in which the industry operates, the upward volatility of gas prices – which is partly due to breakdown in the ageing UK gas supply infrastructure – is allowed to feed through into immediate price spikes.

The ability to pick between different energy suppliers is a false freedom. Those who use the energy are excluded from influencing decisions on how any surplus should be invested – into fossil fuels or renewables, imported fuel or local sources – or on how to structure prices.

Nor does government make these decisions on people's behalf. Under the market fundamentalist regimes of both the Conservatives and New Labour, the UK government gave up this power to corporations. Even though energy regulator Ofgem has been slightly re-empowered in recent years, it still has no role in such decisions, or any capacity for investment into energy infrastructure.

In an earlier period decision-making power over North Sea oil was also largely handed over to private oil and gas corporations. Moreover, since the 1980s, taxes on their profits have been consistently cut, leaving Britain with by far the lowest effective tax ratio of the four North Sea oil and gas extracting countries; its tax regime is the second most generous to private oil companies in the entire world, after Ireland.

The outcome has been a dramatically reduced government take, and a fiscal regime that has been described as 'a vehicle for the delivery of corporate welfare on a grand scale'.⁴ In the six years prior to 2008 the

UK lost out on £74 billion. As companies used the cash flow from the North Sea to subsidise drilling in other parts of the world and oil prices rose further, the government succumbed to demands for ever more subsidies. Enormous revenues were accumulated by oil companies and recycled through the City of London.

Fossil fuel corporations have woven around themselves a Carbon Web – the set of legal, cultural, financial and government institutions that enable them and prevent democratic control. Decisions made behind closed doors in corporate headquarters, Whitehall and at £1,500-a-ticket conferences lock us all into decades of fossil fuel use. Individuals and wealth flow through the revolving doors between the state, oil and finance. Britain has become a petrostate, and London an oil city, extracting wealth from fossil fuels from Nigeria to the North Sea, from Azerbaijan to Egypt.

Financial holdings in the City are concentrated into fossil fuels, with 20 per cent of the FTSE 100 made up of just BP and Shell. As London's role as a central node in a global fossil fuel economy has grown, so Britain's body politic has become increasingly skewed, at the expense both of the de-industrialised regions of the UK and frontline communities in the Global South.

The big energy companies work hard to convince us that they are essential to the functioning of modern society. In a plastic world, we all use synthetic fabrics, petrol and gas heating. How could we cope without BP and Shell to provide for us? How could national cultural institutions like the Tate or the British Museum function without oil funding? (Hint: Less than 0.5 per cent of their income comes from BP.) This is aimed at creating a perception of dependency, that will allow the continued intense accumulation of wealth by corporations and elite classes.

Re-imagining our energy future

There is always more in reality than one can experience or express at any given moment. A greater sensitivity to the latent potential of

situations may encourage us to think about things not only as they are, but also in terms of what they may become.

Javier Medina⁵

Individual consumption does not begin to encompass the manifold relationships we have to energy. We take buses, we work in heated offices, we buy frozen icecream. Our public wealth is used to subsidise oil companies, our cultural institutions to launder their image, and our government sends troops to support resource grabs. We have political and economic relationships to North Sea oil, wind turbines in the Thames estuary and carbon dioxide molecules in the atmosphere.

The whole relationship of society to energy needs to change. We need to shift power away from the entangled interests of finance and the big companies, and challenge the current monopolised energy system, so that these relationships can become intentional and active, so that energy consumers can become producers, distributors, owners, sharers and collective users of energy. We need to democratise energy. This means commoning resources, dispersing economic power and ending dependence on the multinationals that exploit public resources for private profit.

How can we increase our sensitivity to the 'latent potential' of our energy structures? We need to be able to envision and describe a functional energy system that provides for people's needs and does not entrench exploitation or rely on constant expansion. To do this we need to articulate a new common sense that builds on what Gramsci called 'good sense' – working with the grain of existing values and collective practices. One way of doing this is by learning from positive, albeit contested, experiences elsewhere, including Bolivia, Denmark, Venezuela and Norway.

New strategies also need to interact with present struggles, like those of frontline communities in Lancashire and Yorkshire who are blocking fracking rigs; or the Greater London Pensioners Association and Fuel Poverty Action who are using direct action casework to fight for warm homes and democratically-owned, renewable energy; or the Hackney

housing estate residents, Islington councillors and Balcombe villagers who are setting up locally owned energy schemes.

Zero Carbon Britain have laid out concrete ideas for achieving the rapid shift away from fossil fuels that is necessary for planetary survival, through already existing wind, solar and biomass technology. But as they comment, ‘the necessary transition is at the very boundary of what is politically thinkable’. The left’s job is to make this transition thinkable by grounding it in redistribution of power and in diversity.

The social democratic settlement was grounded in redistributive justice, i.e. in equitably sharing out economic resources; but it failed to transform underlying power structures, ultimately allowing capital to continue to thrive. Without participation in decisions over the allocation of surplus and investment into energy or housing, people remain excluded from shaping and defining their community.

Solutions need to be grounded in a politics that is sensitive to autonomy and local variation, and committed to decentred decision-making.⁶ We need countervailing initiatives located in broad-based institutions and networks that have an interest in challenging over-centralisation or private appropriation of power. These could include networks of rural producer-user energy co-operatives, borough-run electricity grids and regional mutual pension funds. We can learn from the commons: resources controlled by and available for use by a whole community. And by combining commons-based energy structures with more centralised institutions, we can ensure a lasting diversity of collective social relations that can prevent a resurgence of corporate power.

Energy commons

The commons as a form of collective ownership and use of resources has a deep history in Britain. But the concept regained increasing international popularity following the Zapatistas take-over of San Cristobal de la Casas on New Year’s Eve 1993. Commoning – producing and reproducing a commons – means developing non-capitalist ways of

managing resources that are democratic, horizontal, participatory and respectful of local difference. But ‘beyond the state and the market’ does not necessarily mean ‘without state and market’: a state can still be used progressively to expand our spaces for community life, while commons are also at risk of being subjugated to broader market mechanisms.⁷ They create space for autonomy and democracy – but do not exist in isolation.

There is no commons without community – but in a progressive approach to the commons, ‘community’ should be ‘a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other’, rather than ‘a gated reality’.⁸ The commons should represent a commitment to a broad and relational imaginary of place, not a return to exclusionary traditions.⁹

We all regularly engage with and use land, water, air, digital commons – they are so widespread that they’re largely invisible, taken for granted. But they are also part of our existing experience of the world, and this means that the idea of the commons forms part of the stratified deposits of ‘good sense’ that are available to us for challenging neoliberal common sense.¹⁰ Such is the ‘pull’ of the commons that some resources are even experienced as common (for example fresh water lakes and rivers) when they are actually private. Corporations may own many of the UK’s waterways, but their history as collective, communal resources cannot so easily be erased. So how do we imagine commoning energy?

Commoning energy is already a reality elsewhere in Europe. Most notably, it underlies Denmark’s remarkable success in ending dependence on imported fuel, which has in large part been replaced with local renewables. Denmark’s wind power revolution has been described as ‘a grassroots, community-based initiative, underpinned by decentralised, cooperative and municipal ownership alongside small-scale private ownership’.¹¹

This came about after an intense political struggle over energy policy in the late 1970s, when a coalition of leftists, greens and conservative rural interests united in distrust of proposals based on

centralised forms of energy (oil and nuclear-based). Instead they promoted an alternative vision of a more localised and decentred non-nuclear future based on renewables and more radical democratic practices. And they achieved remarkable success. Within twenty years the country went from dependence on oil imports for 90 per cent of its energy demand to self-sufficiency in energy. Crucially, 80 per cent of wind turbines in Denmark are owned by co-operatives or families. This starkly contrasts with Britain, where community ownership of renewables is miniscule.

This transformation was achieved through a combination of targeted government subsidies to support the fledgling wind sector, a renewables quota for electricity distribution companies, and 'residency criteria' laws that limited ownership of wind turbines to those living in the local municipality. Community participation in ownership and development meant there was little public opposition to the placement of wind farms. Ownership of the electricity distribution system is also decentralised in Denmark, with 55 per cent of the grid owned by user-run co-ops, 12 per cent by municipalities and 26 per cent by Denmark's state oil company. The state played an enabling role by setting targets, rules around ownership, and prices.¹²

Germany's energy economy is currently being transformed by its policy of *Energiewende* (Energy transition), supported by both main political parties, but during the process neoliberal power and more democratic forces are battling to assert themselves. On the one hand land grabs by private equity firms in former East Germany are turning collective farmland into privatised solar plants. On the other, Germany is witnessing a mass movement towards community and city-controlled renewables. From Berlin to small villages, a re-municipalisation effort is seeking to bring energy generation and distribution back under collective ownership.

These examples do not necessarily constitute a purist energy commons, but they are commoning energy, drawing on non-state and non-market approaches. Britain has the potential to follow the Danish model, making use of local wind and solar potential as an important

move towards energy commons. But a significant barrier hindering UK renewables is the role of national right-wing politics in shaping and exacerbating local opposition to wind farms, taking advantage of local suspicion of imposed industrial projects. Too often the response of those on the left has been to deride this opposition as NIMBY and right-wing. Those looking to common the UK's energy should also hear in these complaints an experience of disenfranchisement, of exclusion from decisions and their benefits by a London elite. It should be remembered that renewables can also be subjected to enclosure and wealth extraction – ultimately benefiting private equity interests in the City.

Such suspicion can be countered by enabling communities to take control of and benefit from new energy infrastructure. The Isle of Eigg in the inner Hebrides undertook a historic community buy-out in 1997, and took control of their land. In 2008 the community switched on the island electrification project, making 24-hour power available for the first time to all residents and businesses on the island. Hydro, wind and solar energy now contribute over 95 per cent of the island's electricity demand. Eigg has also inspired energy co-operatives in England, ranging from places resisting fracking such as Balcombe and Barton Moss, to inner city estates in Hackney and Brixton.

Expanding the energy commons beyond such small communities requires attention to the 'material requirements for the construction of a commons-based economy'.¹³ Some commons are easier to conceptualise than others. An area of land is stable through time and needs a known amount of work to be useable for activities such as foraging or grazing cattle by a community. The use of a digital commons like Wikipedia is limited only by the technologies of connectivity that maintain it as well as the work of its moderators: its user community is distributed across the world. It seems that energy is easier to imagine as a commons on a localised scale – as we have done here – but we need to develop the vocabulary and concepts of energy commons that are necessary to address bigger scales.

Silvia Federici has argued that scaling up means posing the question of how to bring together the many existing and proliferating forms of

commons, so that they can begin to cohere and help provide a foundation for evolving new models of production and distribution.¹⁴ This is most obviously necessary when we try to grapple with questions like climate change or regional inequality. Locally-managed commons-based energy systems are good at empowerment and enabling variation, but they can't answer all the challenges we currently face. We need to be able to co-ordinate, share and allocate resources at a higher level.

From offshore oil to offshore wind

2 °C remains the official international target for limiting the damage caused by climate change, despite increasing recognition that this would still bring devastating consequences. And according to the International Energy Authority (a conservative source), if the world is to achieve the 2 °C goal, no more than one-third of existing proven reserves of fossil fuels can be consumed prior to 2050. Clearly, moving beyond extractivism means coming to terms with leaving fossil fuels in the ground.

The most recent figures from DECC show the UK as having around 2.9 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, implying a maximum 'burnable carbon' total of 954 million barrels. At the current breakneck rate of extraction of 518 million barrels per year, the UK will reach this limit within two years.¹⁵ To avoid contributing to catastrophe, Britain must completely change direction and move to rapidly replace fossil fuels with renewables (as well as significantly reducing its 1700 TWh demand for energy). Britain has the capacity to generate vast amounts of electricity from offshore wind, wave and tidal energy. In the deep waters off Cornwall and Scotland, floating turbines could be anchored to the ocean floor by cables. In 2010, the Offshore Valuation Group estimated that Britain could generate more than 1500 TWh per year from floating wind turbines alone, close to the UK's total energy demand, including transport.

But the urgent need to upscale renewables infrastructure must not lead to multinationals once again picking Britain clean of its energy

wealth. Instead of becoming another sphere of accumulation, offshore electricity generation must be based on long-term planning that balances energy needs with biodiversity and local jobs. The lessons from the neoliberal experiment with oil are clear. Privatisation saw a drastic reduction in the state's take in oil revenues after 1982, and Conservative governments entirely depended on company-provided data for assessing tax rates and production costs. Energy economist Ian Rutledge compared the negotiation process to asking a small child whether it could think of any persuasive reasons why it should be given a large ice cream.¹⁶

How can a new social settlement ensure public benefit from renewables? One useful step would be to set up a national renewables company that owns and operates a significant stake in offshore wind. While increasing government revenues, the most important function of such an entity – as with state-owned oil companies – would be to improve the state's bargaining potential and regulatory process. By acting as the 'eyes and ears' of government within the offshore industry, a national energy company could make available considerable insider information.¹⁷ In making this argument Vickers and Yarrow were discussing the privatisation of Britoil and British Gas, but the argument also applies to offshore electricity, where the rents will be similarly enormous, and thus also the economic value of information.

This does not mean that all offshore wind needs to be owned by a centralised entity. In Denmark, major offshore wind projects have been built by various public companies, ranging from state oil company DONG to municipality-owned entities. In South America, innovative public-public partnerships in the water sector have seen city councils bringing in expertise from worker-run co-operatives in other countries.¹⁸ Other public-public partnerships can be created to access finance. A large wind farm off the coast of Copenhagen was built by the city council-owned utility company together with a co-op comprising 10,000 local residents. The rapid growth in Denmark's wind turbine manufacturing industry benefitted from the absence of patenting of prototypes, allowing companies to quickly innovate and improve the

technology, the result of a fortuitous nineteenth-century law banning rural technology patents. Institutional blocks to the privatisation of technologies and information will be important to decentralising power over the UK energy system, and developing it fast.

If the state holds major equity holdings in offshore wind, this opens the potential for an Offshore Wind Fund, taking inspiration from Norway's oil fund. If based around participatory and decentred decision-making rather than diktats by elite technocrats, such a fund could disperse economic power. By enabling community bodies to allocate funds to local energy generation or saving projects, new energy structures would be democratised. Funds could be limited to energy projects that meet rigorous local content and local, common ownership guarantees. This would boost regional and community economies in both urban centres and peripheral rural areas. Combining revenue reform with land reform would ensure that renewables generation is not dominated by a small number of already wealthy landlords.

Taking finance back from the City

Just two companies – BP and Shell – make up almost 20 per cent of the value of the FTSE 100. Shares in these companies form an average 30 per cent of most pensions; their shares are seen as offering a hyper-secure long-term investment, similar to a government backed bond.

However, the corporations' actual share value is largely predicated on their proven reserves. As new oil fields are discovered, the value goes up. Yet, as we have noted, the International Energy Agency argues that to prevent a 2 °C increase, two thirds of proven fossil fuels must be left in the ground. That means our struggle to shut down most extraction is also a struggle to wipe out most of BP and Shell's share value. Planetary survival is pitted against pensioners' future income.

Unless we change the basis of those pensions. If we wrested back control over our financial resources, we could also pay for the transition without falling hostage to exploitation by international finance. As it stands, neoliberal power builds dependency and puts limits on

collective action through institutionalised gatekeeping, which restricts who can access investment, and in what form. This bottleneck kills many dreams. Community-owned renewable energy projects across the country are on hold, unable to access the funds to build.

The solution is not to go begging to the City, but to work to pool our resources and re-appropriate the wealth that we ourselves have produced, and to enlarge the sphere of production that exists outside market relations.¹⁹ Much of the country's wealth is already ours – it is theoretically public – but control over it has been handed to private companies and asset managers. They use our wealth to speculate on assets largely unrelated to the real economy of goods and services, seeking to increase privatisation and generate ever higher levels of accumulation.

Ethical investment mechanisms in themselves are not enough; where such considerations do exist, they are often applied only as a filter to weed out the apparently 'worst' of the best-performing company stocks. However, a growing climate divestment movement is beginning to force money out of fossil fuels. The Rockefeller heirs joined in September 2014, Glasgow University in October. But if our aim is to breach the walls of neoliberalism, this movement needs to go beyond persuading disinterested asset managers to move money from fossil fuels to privately owned mega-renewable projects.

The recent decades have seen wealth extracted from Britain's regions and centralised in the City of London, through pension contributions, insurance payments and public-private partnerships. Divesting from extractivism depends on taking back control over capital from the City. This could mean local authorities re-investing their pension funds locally to build new council housing or renewable energy, as in Enfield in North London. It also means creating a financial infrastructure that is able to redistribute, and give ex-industrial regions the power to rebuild, by recycling their wealth in the local community. In an economy no longer driven solely by shareholder interests, low-return but secure investments into infrastructure could be prioritised.

Pressure is building to divest from fossil fuels. But the ultimate aim

is to divest from neoliberalism itself. By commoning finance, we could break the grip the City holds over the rest of Britain, and create the basis for a new financial architecture, dedicated to economic and energy democracy.

Workers and power

Alliances between labour unions and environmental movements can play a key role in transforming the neoliberal energy settlement. The fundamental change in energy infrastructures needed to address climate change in Britain could create 1.33 million full-time equivalent jobs in wind, marine, solar power, geothermal, synthetic gas and support services according to Zero Carbon Britain. Issues around synthetic gas have yet to be fully worked through, but it does open the door to retooling some of the existing downstream fossil-fuel infrastructure, including the Grangemouth refinery, where in 2013 workers were battered into accepting worsening employment conditions in order to save their jobs. Such retooling would provide these workers with a long-term role in our energy future.

The transition will transform what jobs are required and where. The Energy Democracy Initiative, a global trade union network for a just transition, has argued that organised labour needs to look beyond its ‘traditional job-protection focus’ to join with other sectors in campaigning for the creation of economic development models—based on decentralised renewable energy systems. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) are an exciting example of such ‘social movement unionism’, and are building a practical, just and socialist response to climate change. One of the largest unions in South Africa, NUMSA represents almost 300,000 workers in energy intensive industries, and in 2011 it established a worker-led Research and Development Group on renewables and energy efficiency, including workers from solar panels and wind turbine factories. NUMSA has been trying to build international networks for just transition, guided by the idea that labour should contribute to a common good.

NUMSA's efforts carry echoes of the attempt to restructure Lucas Aerospace in the 1970s. Engineering shop stewards sought to convert the company from manufacturing missiles to producing socially useful products. They won a lot of support for their alternative corporate plan, which included plans for the production of ecological vehicles, energy conservation machinery and equipment for the disabled. However, with the exception of Industry Minister Tony Benn, the Labour government opposed the plan, and the vision for Lucas Aerospace was not realised.

This example points to the potential role of democratic worker control and involvement in restructuring towards a low-carbon economy. As well as mobilising trade unionists in support of sustainability, movements pushing for transition need to ensure that community-based energy projects create skilled, stable and unionised jobs. The interests of workers need to be centrally embedded in how we shape proposals for our energy future.

Concrete policy steps to achieve this could include legal requirements to meet significant 'local content' quotas: these could nurture domestic industry for the long run, build a new skills base and invigorate local economies. Feed-in tariff programmes could specify wage levels and union requirements, and incentivise local manufacturing of material components. The local content elements of Ontario's feed-in tariff has created 20,000 jobs and was on track to create 50,000 – until the EU challenged it for breaching WTO rules.

We also need energy authorities and bodies to have strong elected worker representation on their boards as in Norway and Denmark. Effectively combating the climate crisis will be greatly aided by workplace democracy, with workers and trade unions centrally involved in planning and structuring the transition.

Decolonising energy

Fuel flows through pipelines and along shipping routes from Nigeria, Azerbaijan and Kuwait to Britain. Except, of course, that neither crude,

nor the far lighter gas, flow of their own accord. The web of pipelines and tanker routes is not a rain catchment area where mountain streams head downhill, joining tributaries and rivers to provide water to the city in the valley. Fossil fuels require pressure to be forced down a pipeline, while political and financial forces determine the route along which it is transported. The global oil market didn't evolve into this form of its own accord. The transfer of fuel is the product of wars, labour and political struggles, costly infrastructure, mass displacement, imposition and arming of undemocratic regimes and intensive corporate lobbying.²⁰

In a 1993 meeting with BP directors, Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd emphasised that 'there were some parts of the world, such as Azerbaijan and Colombia, where the most important British interest was BP's operation. In those countries he was keen to ensure that our [the FCO's] efforts intertwined effectively with BP's'. This statement neatly sums up Britain's external energy policy: the interests of the state (often also framed as 'security' of energy supply) are seen as ensuring British corporations' control of fossil fuels. This prevents crude from being managed and exchanged by countries outside the neoliberal consensus: it keeps the oil *flowing*. David Cameron's broader instruction to British diplomats to prioritise British exports only underscores the point: 'every submission and every brief for a visit now has to include the commercial interests'. As well as diplomatic support, external energy policy mobilises UK export credit finance and DfID, the Ministry of Defence and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Carbon colonialism means that oil executives and shareholders in London's City are reaping rewards from militarisation, repression and poverty, as well as the catastrophic consequences of climate change in the Global South.

New gas pipelines promoted by the EU on behalf of oil companies (such as BP's Euro-Caspian Mega Pipeline from Azerbaijan to Italy) require continued pressure in the flow for another four or five decades. To counter concerns over the carbon and political impacts of such projects, state and corporate PR strategies deploy the 'energy security' argument as a way of setting parameters for media and public debate.

The rhetoric of ‘keeping the lights on’ re-asserts a politics of demanding oil, gas and other fuels for ‘us’ – and not ‘them’. ‘Security’ also privileges top-down and militaristic solutions that disempower and exclude the majority. When government identifies ‘energy security’ as a priority, progressive and green campaigners – aiming for short-term victories – are sometimes tempted to adopt these frames in the hope of opening doors to decision-makers. But accepting this framing further consolidates the power of the neoliberal energy consensus. It helps executives like Shell’s Jan Kopernicki in his demand that Britain redirects billions towards building new warships, on the grounds that ‘the UK’s economic security depends on energy security: without enough energy, the economy simply cannot keep going’. Kopernicki wanted more navy frigates to escort Shell tankers off the coast of Somalia: ‘I don’t want to be alarmist but I provide transport for essential oil and gas for this country and I want to be sure that the lights are on in Birmingham, my home city.’

Assisted by concepts like ‘energy security’, carbon colonialism keeps the violence of oil extraction invisible or distant from privileged publics in the Global North. Despite the appearance of an increased global interconnectedness, we remain oblivious ‘to the blood in the food we eat, the petroleum we use’.²¹ We need to overcome this invisibility by establishing a different relationship to the sources of our energy.

Norway has made some efforts in this regard: well-resourced Parliamentary committees investigate the international impacts of Statoil, actively engaging civil society in a process of collective learning. This has its limitations, but the outcome is a more deliberative politics of energy, a geography of responsibility that is different from Britain’s colonial practice. In decolonising energy, we can also learn from recent attempts to create more reciprocal energy relations in Latin America. Venezuela has developed a practice of energy solidarity of sorts, including its 2007 provision of cheap fuel for London’s buses and subsidised heating oil to fuel-poor and indigenous communities in the US.

Dismantling energy colonialism and replacing it with energy solidarity means doing more than building new energy models

grounded in justice, democracy and sustainability in Britain. First steps towards reparations for theft and abuses of the past should include support for grassroots climate adaptation plans and welcoming climate migrants (i.e. granting migrants the same employment and welfare rights as British citizens); cleaning up the toxic legacy of oil spills in the Niger Delta and elsewhere; support for projects like Yasuni-ITT in Ecuador, in which oil would be left in the ground in exchange for compensation from rich countries; and support for public-public partnerships in which public institutions build services for public needs, rather than exporting energy and water privatisation camouflaged as 'services'.

Movements: build and confront

A new social settlement cannot be built solely from the top down. Social movements and forces must articulate, demonstrate and embody the values, discourses and frames that make up its underlying common sense. Contending but allied social forces can tell different stories, animating the imaginary and proposing new models of social relations. Resilient movements in debate with one another can build strategies for radical and lasting change. The political activity of the left cannot be reduced to the conquest of institutions – we need to aim to transform reality itself.²²

Despite the neoliberal hegemony, we can invoke the ever-present critical and healthy nucleus within our common sense that opposes injustice, to articulate counter-hegemonies and re-work assumptions: Why subsidise BP and Shell, some of the most profitable corporations in the world? Why invest billions into searching for new fossil fuels when burning them would make the planet uninhabitable? Why ask the fuel-poor on pre-payment meters to subsidise the rich? Why import oil and cause devastation in the Niger Delta, when we could meet our energy needs domestically? Why not run renewable energy on a collective and public basis, rather than replicating the North Sea giveaway to corporations? Why not use council pensions to fund

energy efficiency retrofitting and new council housing stock, rather than hand them over to City investors to finance deep water drilling? Why not begin today the inevitable work of dismantling the fossil fuel industry?

Culture is essential to politics: we build energy democracy in radio plays and ownership structures, toys and electricity grids. But language and ideas are not enough in themselves to change the energy basis of society. We need to create the necessary political space and build the infrastructure, institutions and practices that will make an alternative energy system.

‘Alternative’ must mean more than a small-scale off-grid utopia. Nor does it mean an alternative but separate system, in parallel with neoliberalism. If we were to proceed on this basis elite groups – including new elites – will in all likelihood seek to recuperate, to take over, to concentrate power, and subject collective projects to their private interests. This is what happened in Norway, where deliberative processes were subverted and technocrats enforced their will against democracy.²³

To prevent this, movements need to dismantle existing power structures at the same time as building our energy future. We should aim to take space and make demands that force the hand of neoliberalism and authoritarianism; to strangle corporate power by denying it what it needs – possibilities for ever greater accumulation; to build the future while we confront the present.

Conclusion

The Labour Party may be busy developing alternative energy policies, but there’s no sign that it is breaking with the neoliberal framing of debates, or challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions listed earlier. To break the neoliberal energy consensus, we need both bolder policy proposals (like an Offshore Wind Fund and public-public partnerships) and social movements pushing back against fossil fuel corporations and pushing forward visions for a just energy economy.

With CO₂ in the atmosphere having passed the ‘safe’ 350 parts per million mark, the scale of the rapid power-down necessary to prevent runaway climate change is alarming. The ambition to provide energy for everyone’s needs may come into conflict with such a rapid power-down and we have no easy answer to this conflict. But if energy resources available to us as a population are to shrink, we need institutions that will prioritise energy justice, and which give access and decision-making power to those who have been marginalised and excluded by our energy and political system.

Sooner or later climate change is going to force a collapse in the current social settlement. What will take its place is still up for grabs. In a different climate, it is not only energy infrastructures that will be reconfigured; so too will be border and migration regimes, welfare and flood defence, food and water supply. The future settlement could take the form of an even more isolated and paranoid Fortress Britain. But this is not the only possibility. Energy systems help shape our economic and political structures, and an energy future grounded in democracy will create the potential for more just outcomes.

A paradigm shift is necessary: ‘from consumptive energy to productive and regenerative energy, from capital-intensive energy to low-cost energy, from labour-displacing energy to livelihood-generating energy’, from the use of fossil fuels to meaningful work.²⁴

This is a call for energy democracy. Not energy security or energy separation. These are too rooted in the neoliberal common sense, and serve to empower militaries and heavy-handed governments over a passive population. A survivable and just energy future means breaking the grip of elite interests on our energy systems, ending dependency, increasing autonomy, building diverse power structures through which we can hold one another to account, and leaving fossil fuels in the ground. Energy democracy would put an end to fuel poverty and create conditions for economic democracy; and it would take power out of the hands of unaccountable elites. We are not limited to a single unitary model – a resilient energy future will be composed of diverse energy commons, solidarities and practices. We believe energy democracy can

be realised by scaling up from decentralised, community-controlled renewable energy projects, and using the state's institutions to pool and redistribute resources.

Referring to the pioneering Tredegar Medical Aid Society, NHS founder Aneurin Bevan described the creation of the NHS as 'We are going to Tredegarise you', Seventy years later, could Britain's energy be Eigg-ised?

This essay was written by Platform. We combine research and art, education and campaigning to drive social and ecological justice and challenge the power of the oil industry. Platform consists of Farzana Khan, Mika Minio-Paluello, Sarah Shoraka, Emma Hughes, Anna Galkina, James Marriott, Jane Trowell, Sarah Legge, Mark Roberts, Tanya Hawkes and Adam Ma'anit. We tweet @platformlondon.

Notes

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