Energy and Capitalism (M.A. 2 Credits)

Dept. of Sociology and Social Anthropology, CEU

Fall Term 2020, Mondays 15:30 - 17:10

Important: Class is offered both offline and online (asynchronous). This version of the syllabus refers to the offline class.

Instructor: Sergiu Novac, PhD

Office hours: Online, by appointment

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Course Description:

This course is designed as a foundation to the emerging field of "energy humanities". From the vantage point of meltdown - our present conundrum -, thinking about energy is more urgent than ever. Through the lens of energy, we will explore key categories of the social sciences, such as development, power, labor, expertise and infrastructure.

Energy certainly is not a 'new' topic of interest for the social sciences. The young Marx repeatedly expressed his enthusiasm for the steam engine, perceiving it as the epitome of progress (luckily, he later changed his mind). In his analysis of economic and cultural development, Weber paid great attention to resource consumption and to energy scarcity. And already in the 1930's, Lewis Mumford laid out a breathtaking historical analysis of the interaction between humans and machines, where energy played a key role. For anthropology, it was Leslie White who, in the 1940's - and in a very evolutionary-deterministic manner - attempted to explain all cultural development through quantitative energy consumption patterns. However, it was the 1970's that provided a turning point in the interest of the social sciences towards the topic of energy. The rise of neoliberalism, the oil crises, the maturation of commercial nuclear power production and the mainstreaming of environmental movements soon led to the establishment of the independent field of Science and Technology Studies within the humanities.

However, at the core of this class lies the belief that our present engagement with energy is qualitatively different. The issue is not, as it was in the 1970's, whether or not we run out of oil in the near future, it is about whether or not we will still exist as a species in the near future. Therefore,

the class is neither a historical survey on thinking about energy in sociology and anthropology, nor is it an introduction to the field of Science and Technology Studies. Throughout the class, we will engage with recent pieces of academic literature, which are premised on the deep and increasingly problematic dependence of the world we inhabit on fossil fuels. For this purpose, we will also need to engage with electricity, nuclear power and the renewable energy transition. Most of the names previously mentioned will be featured in the class (some more heavily than others), but the ultimate goal is to facilitate an informed discussion about a potential world without fossil fuels and the ways that world could look like.

Learning Goals:

- Foundational introduction to the 'energy humanities' subfield;
- Critical awareness and extensive knowledge of key debates about the role of energy in development, with particular focus on colonialism and capitalism;
- In-depth understanding of the power relationships involved in the extractive industry and transitions to low carbon or alternative energy futures;

Assignments:

These are very particular circumstances and the health concerns of everybody involved in the teaching process are the top priority. In case you can't make it to the class, please inform me personally via email.

In-Class Activity:

Attendance and participation are mandatory. If you miss **three** classes or more, you cannot pass the course. You are expected to come to class having read the assigned readings, to raise questions and concerns, and to engage in constructive conversation and debate with your peers.

Presentation (max. 15 min):

Each student will conduct an in-class oral presentation of one of the assigned mandatory readings for the course. Presentations are expected to not only synthesize the text, but also raise questions and offer critical insights which should help trigger a conversation in class. Student presenters are also expected to start their presentation with a 'found object' exercise (see next point).

Found Objects (max 5 min):

Each student presenter will start by introducing a 'found object' on an energy related topic to the class. This could be a newspaper article, television/movie/youtube clip, any other cultural image/media object, or even a physical object of their choice. The purpose is to briefly explain to the class why the 'object' triggered the student presenter's interest. It is encouraged to try to connect

the found object to the day's topic/readings, but this is not required. A brief demonstration of what could potentially be a brief 'found object' presentation will take place during the first meeting of the class.

Midterm paper (Week 7, Deadline for submission, Sunday, November 8):

Each student will spend at least one hour (preferably more) playing the interactive documentary/video game 'Fort McMoney' (http://www.fortmcmoney.com/ , dir. David Dufresne, 2013). The midterm should be a reflection paper (1000 - 1500 words) in which students describe the paths taken during the game and the people they encountered. The paper should connect to the readings encountered in class up to that point (proper referencing is mandatory), providing a reflection on one of the topics of the game.

Technical notes: The game is freely available and runs in a web browser, there is no need to install anything. It is highly recommended to use headphones while exploring the game. You will require Adobe Flash Player to run it, which most new web browsers have deactivated as a default setting. You will need to activate flash in order to run the game - instructions can be easily found online. If there are any issues, contact the instructor. A brief demo will be conducted during the introductory class on how to access the game.

Final Paper (Deadline for submission: Monday, January 4, 2020):

The final assignment is a scenario-based final paper (minimum 3000 words). The scenario is based on an experiment *in/with* time. The scenario is the following: you are writing the paper from the year 2050. This is the not-so-far-in-the-future goal currently set for achieving a zero-carbon based economy. As long as you follow sound academic referencing standards, you are free the chose the format of the paper: it can be a reflection paper on what was achieved (or not) and what this means for society; or a research paper on a case of your choice, imagining what it means to live in a zero-carbon economy. Surely, you can chose to go the dystopian path and write your paper from the perspective of no goals having been achieved and what this means (however, please try to avoid zombies, since current pop culture imaginaries infused us with an overdose of that); it can even be a letter or manifesto from the year 2050 to the past (2020) about energy, society and capitalism. More details will follow during class.

Important: By week 10 (November 23) students are expected to send via email a brief outline (300 words) with the idea for the final paper to the instructor. During week 11, students will have a brief online 1-on-1 online consultation with the instructor regarding the outline for the paper.

Recommended General Readings (not mandatory readings for class):

- Boyer, Dominic, and Szeman, Imre (eds.). 2017. *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Johns Hopkins University Press. (available at CEU Library)

- Crosby, Alfred W. 2006. *Children of the Sun: A History of Humanity's Unappeasable Appetite for Energy*. W. W. Norton & Company.

- Huber, Matthew T. 2013. *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*. University of Minnesota Press. (available at CEU Library)

- Moore, Jason W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. Verso. (available at CEU Library)

- Mumford, Lewis. C1934. *Technics and Civilization*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. (available at CEU Library)

- Nader, Laura (ed.). 2010. *The Energy Reader*. Wiley-Blackwell.

- Nye, David E. 1997. *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies*. MIT Press.

- Smil, Vaclav. 2017. *Energy and Civilization: A History*. MIT Press. (available at CEU Library)

- Wilson, Sheena; Carlson, Adam, and Szeman, Imre (eds.). 2017. *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*. McGill's-Queen University Press. (available at CEU Library)

Course Outline:

Week 1 (September 28): Introduction

- Introductory course (no readings for class).

Week 2 (October 5): Capitalism's Frontiers

- Moore, Jason and Patel, Raj. 2017. *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. Verso. Required Readings: "Introduction" and Chapter 6 "Cheap Energy".

(Highly) Recommended:

- Le Guin, K. Ursula. c1976. *The Word for World is Forest*. The Library of America.

Week 3 (October 12): Utopia Subverted

- Malm, Andreas. 2013. *The Origins of Fossil Capital: From Water to Steam in the British Cotton Industry*. Historical Materialism 21.1 (2013) 15 - 68.

- Hughes, D.M. 2017. *Energy without Conscience. Oil, Climate Change and Complicity*. Duke University Press. Required readings: Chapter 1 - Plantation Slaves, The First Fuel, and Chapter 2 - How Oil Missed Its Utopian Moment.

Week 4 (October 19): Anthropology Electric

- Winther, Tanja, Wilhite, Harold. "Tentacles of Modernity: Why Electricity Needs Anthropology." Cultural Anthropology 30, no. 4 (2015): 569–577.

- Gupta, Akhil. *An Anthropology of Electricity from the Global South.* Cultural Anthropology 30, no. 4 (2015): 555–568.

Recommended:

- Hughes, Thomas Parke. 1993. *Networks of Power – Electrification in Western Society, 1880 – 1930.* JHU Press (available at CEU Library).

- Coopersmith, Jonathan.1992. *The Electrification of Russia, 1880 – 1926.* Cornell University Press (available at CEU Library).

- Nye, David E. 2010. *When the Lights Went Out. A History of Blackouts in America.* The MIT Press.

Week 5 (October 26): The Violence of Oil (1)

- Rogers, Douglas. 2015. *Oil and Anthropology.* Annual Review of Anthropology 44.

- Watts, Michael. 2001. Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity. In Watts, Michael and Peluso, Nancy (eds.), Violent Environments. Cornell University Press.

- Documentary Film: Black Sea Files (Ursula Biemann, 2005) - will be watched during class.

(Highly) Recommended:

- Yergin, Daniel. 2008. The prize: the epic quest for oil, money & power. Free Press. (Entire book, available at CEU Library).

- *Alternatively*: The prize (8 episode documentary based on Yergin's book available on youtube): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2hSATHD634

- *There Will Be Blood* (Film, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007).

Week 6 (November 2): The Violence of Oil (2)

- Appel, Hannah. 2012. *Offshore work: Oil, modularity and the how of capitalism in Equatorial Guinea.* American Ethnologist 39/4.

- Ferguson, James. 2005. Seeing like an oil company: Space, security and global capital in neoliberal Africa. American Anthropologist 107/3.

Week 7 (November 9): Energy, Power, Democracy

- Boyer, Dominic. Energopower. An Introduction. Anthropological Quarterly, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Spring 2014), pp. 309 - 333.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 2011. *Carbon Democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil.* Verso. Required Reading: 'Introduction' (1-11) and 'Conclusion: No More Counting on Oil' (231 - 254).

Midterm Exam (Deadline for submission, Sunday, November 1:

- 'Fort McMoney': http://www.fortmcmoney.com/ , dir. David Dufresne, 2013; see Assignments section for details and discuss with the instructor in case there are questions.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2010. *Unconventional Crude: Canada's Synthetic Fuel Boom*, in Nader, Laura (ed.). 2010. *The Energy Reader.* Wiley-Blackwell. (recommended reading for Midterm).
- Preston, Jen. 2017. *Racial extractivism and white settler colonialism: An examination of the Canadian Tar Sands mega-projects.* Cultural Studies, 31: 2-3, 353-375. (recommended reading for Midterm).

Week 8 (November 16): Nuclear Interludes

- Hecht, Gabrielle. 2018. *Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence.* Cultural Studies, 33 (1), pp. 109 - 141.
- Masco, Joseph. *Engineering the Future as Nuclear Ruin.* in: Stoler, Ann Laura. 2013. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Duke University Press.

Recommended:

- Josephson, Paul R. 2005. *Red Atom: Russia's Nuclear Program from Stalin to Today.* University of Pittsburgh Press (available at CEU Library).
- Schmid, Sonja D. 2015. *Producing Power. The Pre-Chernobyl History of the Soviet Nuclear Industry.* MIT Press (available at CEU Library).
- *Into Eternity* (Film, dir. Michael Madsen, 2010).
- *Containment* (Film, dir. Rob Moss and Peter Galison, 2015).
- *Unter Kontrolle* (*Under Control*, Film, dir. Volker Sattel, 2011).

Week 9 (November 23): Questioning Growth

- Altvater, Elmar. 2002. *The Growth Obsession.* Socialist Register, Vol. 38.
- Lohmann, Larry. 2016. *What is 'Green' in 'Green Growth'.* In: Gareth Dale, Manu V. Mathai, and Jose Puppim. 2016. *Green Growth: Ideology, Political Economy, and the Alternatives.* ZED Books.

Week 10 (November 30): Green Capitalism?

- Rogers, Heather. 2013. *Green Gone Wrong: Dispatches from the Front-Lines of Eco-Capitalism.* Verso. (Required reading: Introduction - Green Dreams, and Chapter Six: The Price of Air, Carbon Offsets).

Recommended:

- Lohmann, Larry. 2010. *Neoliberalism and the Calculable World: The Rise of Carbon Trading.* In Kean Birch, Vlad Mykhnenko and Katherine Trebeck (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism: The Collapse of an Economic Order?,* Zed Books.

- Gökce, Günel. 2012. A dark art: Field notes on carbon capture and storage policy negotiations at COP17. Ephemera Journal, 12 (½): 33-41.

Week 11 (December 7): Alternatives

- Schwartzman, D. 2011, *"Green New Deal: An Ecosocialist Perspective".* Capitalism, Nature, Socialism, 22(3): 49-56.

- Dale, Gareth. 2019. *Degrowth: with and against the Green New Deal.* The Ecologist.