

Anthro abuzz: fuel, electricity, and ethnography in the era of global boiling

ABRAM, SIMONE, BRIT ROSS WINTHEREIK & THOMAS YARROW (eds). *Electrifying anthropology: exploring electrical practices and infrastructures*. 224 pp., bibliogr. London: Routledge, 2019. £38.99 (eBook)

LOLOUM, TRISTAN, SIMONE ABRAM & NATHALIE ORTAR (eds). *Ethnographies of power: a political anthropology of energy*. x, 202 pp., illus., bibliogr. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2021. £99.00 (cloth)

The transition away from fossil fuels is the signature challenge of our times, the key to limiting the devastation of global heating that has already begun ravaging planetary ecosystems and civilizations. Against this backdrop, two recent edited volumes take up energy and electricity, respectively, as ethnographic objects and as occasions for theorizing a host of classic topics: development, the social, materiality, and politics. The case studies range far and wide, and comprise a snapshot of energy anthropology in what systems ecologists might call its ‘front loop’ phase of rapid expansion and exploration (Wakefield 2020). ‘Energy’, as one philosophical New Yorker once told Stephanie Rupp (2013: 82), ‘is in us’. Its politics shake houses and shore up solidarities. It is the fervent subject of popular Bollywood songs and investor pitch decks.

While the two volumes share many overlapping thematic concerns and contributors, they differ in emphasis and style. As its editors put it, the goal of *Electrifying anthropology* is to render the background hum of current ‘visible and interesting’ to the social sciences and humanities (p. 4). Like the contemporaneous volume *The promise of infrastructure* (Anand, Gupta & Appel 2018) there is, well, a promissory quality to the collection. It aims to showcase electricity as a neat bit of kit that can slice and dice the ethnographic in intriguing new ways.

Ethnographies of power is a shade more temperate, more rooted in traditions of political anthropology. ‘Power’ here is that overlap of politics and technics that comes to the fore wherever people encounter the ‘price of petrol, a proposed pipeline or dam, even the settings on one’s household “climate control devices”’ (p. 181). As Leo Coleman observes in his helpful

afterword, we are far from the first generation of Whitean energy anthropology, where energy is a measure of civilizational maturity. Power manifests as a dizzying array of specific projects, all arcing into the future, spinning out different trade-offs and sacrifice zones as they go.

The resulting ethnography is refreshingly humanistic, with less of the new materialism or Foucauldian odes to subtle coercions one might expect. As one heads towards the ‘southern spectrums’ of energopower, as Raminder Kaur so nicely puts it (*Ethnographies of power*, p. 28), the fantasy of energy as an object of rational control frays and more basic ethico-political questions come into focus: do such projects redirect vital flows in ways that warm, feed, or finance communities, or do they displace and pulverize them, rendering them poorer or more precarious? Are they sites of hope or despair? Many of the studies thus point to the way that energy projects bear a family resemblance to, and are often interconvertible with – albeit at varying exchange rates! – minerals, money, labour, and data. Chris Hebdon gives a magisterial overview of Ecuador’s various colonial-developmental projects, in which hydropower is just the latest in a series of yellow, green, black, and blue gold rushes. Kaur showcases how Indian nuclear power entailed a community’s brutal displacement by an authoritarian state. Elizabeth Moolenaar traces how earthquakes precipitate movements for environmental justice in Groningen, an overlooked Dutch municipality sacrificed to fracking. All these chapters underscore energy anthropology’s continuities with ethnographies of the state, development, and governance. This is not to say, however, that they are not attuned to the emergent and the conjunctural. Austin Lord and Matthias Rest, for instance, describe a fascinating case of Nepalese hydro-development rhetoric that blends classic nation-building imaginaries with a kind of shareholder citizenship, while Natahalie Ortar explains the resurgence of a self-consciously artisanal fuel source in the Lyon countryside: wood.

Although *Electrifying anthropology* also features detailed case studies, it is often more self-consciously theoretical, seeking ‘vocabularies and concepts’ that, recursively, ‘can energize our scholarly and conceptual thinking around electrification and social life’ (p, 6). Its key theme is electricity’s ability to transcend the merely social or merely technical, though in practice this move itself tends to vibrate in the direction of one pole or the other. On one hand, there is the idea of current as a medium of the social bond, as in Jamie Cross’s instant classic on the libidinally charged politics of connectivity in India, Tristan Loloum’s excursion into the technological sublime of nuclear power plant tours, or Leo Coleman’s erudite retrieval of Durkheim’s moral physics. What *is* this strange thing that is both vital and mechanical? That is Irreducible to human design yet so deeply embedded in human-designed worlds that it can – with a properly Durkheimian echo – coil at the very centre of a tragic murder-suicide, as in Hiroki Shin’s account of electricity theft in early twentieth-century Japan?

Another – and indeed counter-Durkheimian – current that runs through *Electrifying anthropology* emphasizes infrastructural heterogeneity. Transmitting and distributing electricity is an enormous challenge. Regional interconnections, market trading, demand management, battery storage – these all require dizzying feats of legal, regulatory, economic, and technical engineering. Canay Özden-Schilling sketches the history of these feats in her description of the grid as the original ‘computing beast’, and Ortar suggests their future in her reflections on the cyborg assemblage that is the metropolitan e-bike commuter. In these elaborate contraptions, one has the implicit inspiration for theorizing electricity as something ‘indiscrete in its being’ (p. 201) that escapes conceptual closure. With her characteristically witty prose, Gretchen Bakke interrogates the very grammar of our thinking about electricity. Electricity is not so much a ‘thing’ flowing through a conduit as that conduit’s own self-movement (think the domino effect

or stadium wave), and this has implications for the design of renewables. Casper Bruun Jensen offers an extensive litany of the many ‘thing-powers’ along the Mekong Delta and the various ways they are marshalled by environmentalists and hydroelectric boosters alike.

In both volumes, the reader will thus find a wide variety of empirical and conceptual takes on energy as both a social relation between people and a technical relation between things (and, at their best, a relation between those relations). They mark energy’s arrival on the anthropological agenda and point to its political and indeed even ontological centrality for contemporary life in an age of ‘anthropogenic climate change caused by burning fossil fuels’ (*Electrifying anthropology*, p. 3).

And yet it is on this latter point that we can push further. It strikes me as symptomatic, for instance, that Marx does not appear in the index of either volume. This is not an abstract question of theoretical fealty, nor just a missed opportunity to leverage concepts in the ecosocialist tradition like metabolic rift, cheap nature, or fossil capital, to say nothing of labour power or primitive accumulation. We should ask what is at stake in this lacuna, and whether or not it is holding us to an at best casual attitude to grasping the planetary emergency.

Perhaps it’s just a question of timing. Since the 2020s, the constant floods, fires, and heatwaves that are now a permanent part of our species existence have frayed the protective layer of climate denialism we all perform daily. The climate strikes, brief possibility of a Green New Deal, and current debates between eco-modernists and degrowth advocates all suggest some encouraging measure of ‘reality testing’ (Malm 2023: 15). And the reality is daunting. It includes the fact that the majority of the carbon footprint of the wealthiest 10 per cent of the world’s population (and thus the biggest emitters) comes not from consumption but from assets they are loath to leave stranded; that agricultural productivity has been declining since the 1990s,

less and less responsive to the traditional inputs of petro-chemical farming and increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather and superweeds; that aerosol termination shock from increased regulations on sulphur emissions in maritime shipping has likely accelerated global heating; that thermal sacrifice zones proliferate to the point that air-conditioning will soon no doubt be considered a human right; that insane solar geoengineering schemes will be accepted as a rational way to continue business as usual (Malm 2023). In all of these dilemmas, we might begin to feel the maw of a system whose revolutions stretch back to New World plantations and their exhaustion of slave and soil. Turbocharged by two centuries of fossil fuel stocks, its ecological frontiers are diminishing and its externalities are folding back inwards, eating away at the vast skein of electrified infrastructures that nearly all human populations rely upon to some degree or other to sustain collective life. How, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, do we pull the emergency brake on this runaway train?

This planetary question lurks in the background of both volumes, but only occasionally do we feel its contours, as in Aleksandra Lis's illuminating account of Poland's doomed decarbonization experiments, or in Ortar's description of France's deeply confused renewable energy policies (both in *Ethnographies of power*). Given anthropology's commitment to fine-grained empirics, this ethnographic particularity is all to the good. Nor do I want to challenge the basically Weberian idea that consumption habits, engineering expertise, or the 'fossil developmentalism' (Chatterjee 2020) of postcolonial states have their own autonomous dynamics irreducible to world systematics. But the five-hundred-year expansionary drive for cheap productive inputs, the instrumental rationalities called forth to model lifeworlds as so many batteries to be drained, and the resulting colonization of atmosphere and subsurface alike could help us see connections across these otherwise disparate cases of harnessing energetic

capacity. For so many of them, climate remains ‘peripheral to the debates and political processes really at issue’ (*Ethnographies of power*, p. 190). Our own analyses might begin with this very lacuna, and draw upon traditions that can help explain it. The coming century of ‘global boiling’ (*UN News* 2023) surely asks nothing less.

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