



Resisting coal: Hydrocarbon politics and assemblages of protest in the UK and Indonesia



Benjamin Brown, Samuel J. Spiegel*

School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Coal
Protest
Social movements
Assemblage
United Kingdom
Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article examines the social and material politics of coal, focusing on mobilizations against opencast mining in the United Kingdom and Indonesia. Contested spaces and practices elicited by coal extraction provide important openings through which to understand how ‘hydrocarbon modernity’ is experienced and entangled with different processes of neoliberal capitalism. We investigate resistance against coal at Ffos-y-Fran in South Wales and the IndoMet project in the Indonesian province of Central Kalimantan, exploring how assemblages of protest have challenged the material effects, discursive practices and regimes of accumulation attendant within the coal industry. In both countries, campaigns seeking to ‘end coal’ have built dynamic geographical alliances, and as collective challenges to mining activities have unfolded, we consider how movements targeting specific sites of extraction have sought to disrupt the industry’s ‘dis-embedding’ of coal from the landscape. Drawing on accounts of how hydrocarbon politics shape societies, the approach we present draws attention to changing linkages between economic, environmental and social advocacy while illuminating the varied ways in which coal mining can compound and perpetuate inequality.

1. Introduction

Described by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as ‘capital bequeathed to mankind by other living beings’ (Sartre, 1977: 154), coal has been at the heart of material transformations in how humans live, work and relate to one another since the Industrial Revolution. Strauss et al. (2016: 10) refer to energy as a ‘master resource’ that ‘empowers and transforms the world as it flows in varied forms through natural and social circuitry’, and the legacy of coal lies not only in fuelling steam engines, powering industry and generating electricity, but in how it has enabled or constrained particular modes of political and economic power. Historically, coal has underpinned patterns of capital accumulation and uneven development, but also provided the conditions for workers to develop solidarities, mobilize their collective power to disrupt the flow of energy and effectively pursue democratic claims (Huber, 2008; Malm, 2013; Mitchell, 2011). It is impossible to understand coal without acknowledging the story of its production and the conflicts engendered throughout this process. As Malm (2013: 17) observes, ‘fossil fuels should, by their very definition, be understood as a social relation: no piece of coal or drop of oil has yet turned itself into fuel.’

In recent years, growing public concern over climate change has compounded aversion to coal, further undermining an industry already

opposed for its adverse effects on health, wellbeing, and local ecologies (Arslan et al., 2015; Bell and Braun, 2010; Bell and York, 2010; Connor et al., 2009; Morrice and Colagiuri, 2013). As the most carbon intensive fossil fuel, a phase-out of coal has been advocated as one of the simplest and most effective means of reducing carbon emissions, and as the world undergoes a ‘socio-technical transition’, edging closer towards a low carbon energy system (Bridge et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2005; Tyfield, 2014), coal’s persistence – signalled in the continuing political support for new mining and infrastructure projects by some governments – has invariably frustrated opponents. Legal challenges, divestment campaigns and protests by NGOs and environmental activists have all buttressed calls to ‘keep it in the ground’, coinciding with research suggesting as much as 80% of proven fossil fuel reserves constitute ‘unburnable carbon’ (Carbon Tracker, 2011; Cooke, 2015). In the run up to the 2015 Paris Agreement, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) executive secretary Christiana Figueres echoed the language of civil society in warning bluntly, ‘there is no space for new coal’ (*The Guardian*, 4 May 2015). However, while renewable energy appears set to eclipse coal in the coming decades, the International Energy Agency’s World Energy Outlook forecasts that coal production will continue to rise, increasing 10% by 2040 (IEA, 2015a, 2015b). Sites of extraction have thus become a focal point for social mobilizations seeking to highlight the procedural and distributive

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sam.spiegel@ed.ac.uk (S.J. Spiegel).

inequities associated with the continued exploitation of fossil fuels. Such sites are also spaces of convergence, between locally rooted place-bound struggles to rectify localized experiences of injustices as well as universal political imaginaries and identities underpinned by ideals of global environmental responsibility (Connor et al., 2009; Harvey, 1996; Schlosberg and Collins, 2014).

In this article we examine contested spaces elicited by coal extraction, drawing on experiences in the United Kingdom and Indonesia. Taking as our point of departure Mitchell's (2011) observations on how political relations are engineered out of flows of energy, our research sets out to identify how contemporary resistance to coal is manifested and entangled with broader configurations of economic and political power. We focus on assemblages of protest related to two geographically specific sites of extraction, exploring challenges to the material effects, discursive practices and regimes of accumulation attendant within the coal industry. Through analysing social mobilizations against opencast mining at Ffos-y-fran in South Wales, and the IndoMet project in the Indonesian province of Central Kalimantan, we aim to illustrate the ways in which coal extraction is negotiated and contested at different scales, emphasizing how regional histories and development trajectories intersect with transnational concerns to shape the contours of protest. In doing so, we shed light on the spatiality of social movements and how the material contingencies of energy inform their activities.

In the following section, we begin by theorizing the relationship between energy and social movements, briefly outlining how coal has been conceptualized as a 'resource' and incorporated within wider political struggles. Drawing on insights from anthropology and critical geography, we emphasize coal's hybridity, contingent politics, and the diverse forms of value with which it is associated. The next section discusses our approach and introduces each case study, and the following sections investigate movements of resistance against coal, exploring how discontent is articulated and enacted within particular contexts. We emphasize how coal has given rise to dynamic protest assemblages and situate its extraction within a regime of accumulation that compounds and perpetuates inequalities. Our conclusion reflects on the ways in which coal is legitimated and contested, connecting geographically dispersed interests through common repertoires of struggle.

2. Theorizing resource geographies –hydrocarbon modernity and contestations over coal

We begin with the proposition that coal mining protests provide important openings through which to navigate the intersections between experiences of 'hydrocarbon modernity' (Appel et al., 2015) and related processes of neoliberal capitalism. The conversion of coal into 'energy' exposes modernity's contradictory insistence on separating the domains of nature and society (Latour, 1993). As Bridge (2009a: 43) writes, 'underground lies a world of 'natural production,' the deep-time processes beyond human control that create the hydrocarbon concentrations we know as fossil fuels...Above-ground and freed from geological fixity, energy is thrown into a tumultuous world of 'social production'". Once extracted from the ground, coal is no longer conceived of as organic matter – it becomes 'privatized and converted into standardized, appropriable, deliverable units' (Lohmann, 2016: 1), commodified and incorporated into circuits of capital accumulation. This act of translation serves to dis-embed coal from its conditions of production, concealing both its geological origins and the processes and practices that deliver it to global markets.

In recent years, there has been a resounding call for a re-engagement with materiality in resource geography, considering how the material world might constrain or enable social relations around sites of production (Bakker and Bridge, 2006). Huber (2008) and Malm (2013) provide historical materialist accounts of how coal's status as a concentrated, 'energy dense' and a geographically mobile form of fuel were

an important factor in its adoption over water power or wood fuel during the Industrial Revolution. These material, biophysical properties allowed capitalists to relocate factories to more profitable sites near urban population centres that offered readily exploitable labour over which they could exert tighter control. The widespread adoption of this concentrated form of fossil energy, which coincided with the emergence of new socio-technological systems to harness flows of energy (a key moment being James Watt's invention of the rotary steam engine in 1776), accelerated the supply of available fuel and the pace of manufacturing, thus altering human relations through appropriating and redistributing time and space (cf. Harvey, 1996; Hornborg, 2013). This corresponds with the work of Mitchell (2011), whose approach illuminates the ways in which the parameters of political possibility are delimited by complex arrangements of people, finance, expertise and violence to organize or concentrate the flow of energy. His research illustrates the integral role of fossil fuels in underpinning particular forms of political and economic power, and demonstrates how the physical attributes of coal – its bulkiness and heaviness – were instrumental in producing new forms of mass politics across Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coal required an extensive labour force to mine and transport it, and the energy on which industrial capitalism depended became susceptible to disruption through strikes and sabotage at mines and railways, enabling workers to make effective democratic claims.

The manifestation of these 'contentious' forms of political expression can be understood as a product of social movements: forms of collective action that emerge in response to experiences of injustice, oppression or dissatisfaction with the status quo (Tarrow, 1999; Tilly, 2004). Movements are distinct from organizations or singular events, since they present sustained, collective challenges to those in positions of power and are contingent on a collective identity, common purpose and the diffusion of shared beliefs amongst participants (Della Porta and Diani, 2009). Tracing the history of coal reveals linkages both to 'old' social movements dedicated to winning material gains for labour in workplace struggles, and 'new' social movements which have flourished since the 1960s, articulating demands pertaining to the environment, human rights, identity, territory, livelihood and nationalism (Bebbington et al., 2008; Conde and Le Billon, 2017; Russell, 2014). In the latter case, coal is caught within competing narratives over its utility and value, and the emphasis placed on specific grievances may shift at different scales and between social movement actors.

Struggles against coal fall under the umbrella of the environmental movement, 'one of late modernity's signature social movements' (Jasanoff, 2001: 310), and have brought diverse interests together in coalitions seeking to highlight the harms engendered by the mining and burning of fossil fuels. While 'modern' environmentalism has a problematic history, marred by charges of elitism and racism (cf. Koseck, 2004), recent decades have witnessed the ascendance of new paradigms of environmental justice. Emerging critical approaches draw attention to the procedural inequities that occur when certain groups are excluded from participating or marginalized in decision-making over resource use, and the uneven distribution of environmental burdens and benefits as stratified by class, race and gender (Bell and Braun, 2010; Schlosberg and Collins, 2014; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). Accordingly, there have also been efforts to challenge the Eurocentric representation of environmentalism as a purportedly 'post-materialist' movement, through highlighting the 'environmentalism of the poor', in which forest dwellers, peasant farmers, fishers and indigenous people have sought to preserve livelihoods by defending land and resources from encroachment by the state or capital (Martinez-Alier, 2014), and an 'environmentalism of the malcontent', using the example of protests against a coal power plant in Turkey to illustrate the different political logics which animate resistance. In this case, protests gained traction by incorporating a critique of neoliberal developmentalism and drawing attention to coercive and anti-democratic state tendencies, foregrounding land acquisition, dispossession and displacement (Arsel

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