

# The Coal Rush and Beyond: Comparative Perspectives

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Conveners: A/Prof James Goodman (UTS), Prof Heather Goodall (UTS), Prof Linda Connor (Sydney)

This workshop sponsored by the ASSA addressed the dilemma between coal dependence and the imperative to dramatically reduce greenhouse gases. Political debates about climate change have not directed public deliberation to the social dynamics of emissions-intensive industries like coal, or the prospects for transition. This workshop was conceived as a forum to engage directly with today's Coal Question.

The workshop asked how is coal dependence maintained? What factors may be emerging to support a transition beyond coal? How are these questions answered for contrasting localities in the global coal chain?

In order to capture and address the global and translocal dimensions of the coal rush, the workshop brought together twenty scholars investigating the coal economies in Australia, India and Germany, as well as postgraduate students and activists.

Heather Goodall opened proceedings, reflecting that dialogue between North and South informed the workshop, as well as the research activity of many in the room. Many papers considered coal in relation to histories of imperialism and capitalist development. All contributions from the two days suggest that social theory, historical and political economic analysis is essential for explaining the coal trade's continued growth and resilience. They further suggest that a future 'beyond the coal rush' would involve normative-political change.

Presentations from Devleena Ghosh and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt captured the ways coal mining has shaped India's colonial trajectory. Ghosh presented a fascinating paper on relationships between the construction of coal railways (with enduring national narratives about progress) and the arrival of new kinds of labour communities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her paper illustrated that, as in colonial times, the rail-coal nexus has been central in postcolonial nation-state-building. Lahiri-Dutt complemented this analysis with her account of the ways the national coal industry in India assumes wider social, cultural and political meanings associated with economic development, nationalism and nation-building.

Papers addressing the Australian experience echoed these themes. Hans Baer described the nexus between state and coal capital since colonisation in Australia. As the fossil fuel sector is challenged by the climate movement the government has rushed to defend coal, gas and oil as the mainstay of the economy. Superseding fossil fuels in Australia thus requires a political strategy focused on recapturing the state: a market-based approach is insufficient. Echoing Baer's analysis, Jeremy Walker conceptualised the Australian fossil fuel regime as akin to the Venezuelan petro-state. These papers opened up debates about how to characterize the 'extractive state' and its changing logic under climate change, and led to discussion of related concepts such as the 'resource curse', or 'coal curse'.

Revisiting the discussion of moral economies, Duncan McDuie-Ra presented a paper on the Northeast border region of India. His ethnographic work in Nagaland illustrates that coal is one of a number of natural resources that are caught up in the negotiation of national development objectives and economic hopes of local communities, including those supporting the movement for regional autonomy.

Kanchi Kohli's first paper provided a case study that draws out the broader themes discussed by Ghosh and Lahiri-Dutt. Her paper focused on the Singrauli region – India's energy capital for the last few decades. Singrauli had been identified by the State and private investors as a mining and power generation hub and since then been denaturalized of its social and ecological contexts. Kohli described the impacts of coal developmentalism, as well as shifting political economic dynamics in future land use planning of the area. She also points that places such as Singrauli, due to their geographical location, have not found place in national and international environment, human rights or elite climate activism as well.

Issues of political economy were recurrent themes in conversation. One interesting discussion focused on the interrelationship between government policy, the coal market and other markets for alternative energy e.g. gas and renewables. Tom Morton presented a paper on the German 'energy transformation' (*energiewende*) – a set of laws that plans the transition away from nuclear power, including increased renewable energy production to 35% of total energy production by 2022. Brown coal is becoming the transition fuel between nuclear and renewables. Workshop participants discussed whether coal is a passing phase, or a permanent transition?

James Goodman presented a co-authored paper with James Anderson that argued that coal, along with other fossil fuels (gas and oil), is at the heart of capitalist crisis. Material dependency on relatively cheap and accessible fossil carbon is deeply structured into the economic system. The dilemma posed by climate crisis vis-à-vis coal dependence is that overabundance of reserves means social and political limits on the exploitation of these resources must be instituted somehow. The central proposition of their paper was that capitalism is uniquely productive in creating ecological problems and uniquely incapable of solving them.

Other papers addressed the medium term dynamics of coal capital. Bob Burton's paper asked the question: is Big Coal becoming Little Coal? He pointed out that the cost of coal in most countries, to fuel coal power stations, has risen dramatically. In a number of major countries electricity demand is falling, renewables energy production is growing and the retirement of old coal plants has been accelerating. Added to this are corruption scandals such as CoalGate in India and the ICAC inquiry into coal leases in NSW, as well as the increasingly significant transnational opposition to new coal developments.

For Burton, the promissory narratives and legitimation strategies of coal are challenged. The prospect of 'clean coal' has largely vaporised. Jon Marshall analysed the political expediency of the 'clean coal' fantasy, a discourse the industry has tactically discarded when political pressure subsided. Marshall observed that clean coal functions to prolong coal usage, throttle alternate energy, and allay political discomfort and anxiety. This reflects an underlying fragility and fear rather than the monolithic self-presentation of the industry. Marshall argued that we cannot expect a rational response to the climate change challenge from the industry most dependent on extracting and burning fossil fuels. .

Stuart Rosewarne discussed the dynamics of coal trade and production between Australia and India as a process of transnationalisation. India's troubles in securing reliable domestic thermal coal supply have instigated an international search for energy security. He observed that Australian thermal coal is a proven low-risk investment for state-owned firms such as Coal India. This pattern of investment is predicated on moving beyond the market, insulating the Indian energy supply chain from the uncertainties of global supply. Rosewarne's political economic analysis demonstrates coal prices alone will not shape the industry's future.

Discussion led to the question: will the trends indicating coal's decline occur fast enough for those concerned to halt fossil fuel extraction to meet climate stabilisation goals? Again, the workshop participants looked to socio-political dynamics for the answers.

Participants discussed the growing movement for fossil fuel divestment. Peter Christoff presented a paper on campaigns seeking withdrawal of investment funds by institutional investors, public agencies and individuals. Targeting investment finance can be read as a 'moral movement' redirecting the economic system 'from below'. Moral claim-making is key. Beyond this, messages refer to the instability, vulnerability and fragility of fossil fuel industries. The divestment campaigning (on particular banks, universities etc.) resolves some of the problems in targeting a fossil fuel dependent society in general. Discussion focused on the outcomes of this strategy in terms of governmental responses, which are presently unclear.

Rebecca Pearse presented findings from a book co-authored with Rosewarne and Goodman on Australia's grassroots climate movement (*Climate Action Upsurge*, Routledge 2014) and some of her more recent research. She argued that social movements are engaged in an experimental process of seeking to translate an abstract (future, not-present, science-based) crisis into a concrete felt reality. They have adopted a systemic diagnosis of climate change, with broad popular/ist dimensions, across technocratic, anti-statist and moral protest. Since the mid-2000s, the movement has focused attention on the fossil fuel commodity and key sites of expansion; increasingly so since 2010.

A key point of discussion was the 'local' dynamics of contestation over coal. A paper presented by Geoff Evans discussed the politics of coal dependence in the Hunter Valley in NSW, and prospects for developing an agenda for a just transition. Linda Connor's paper based on a many years of ethnographic research illustrated that diverse groups across the Hunter Valley have become alert to the social, ecological and economic risks of coal. The fact that health and water risks have been at the forefront of community protests illustrates the diverse set of ethical and social concerns at play.

Attention to place-based contention highlighted interesting points of contrast between strategies for climate action, and those seeking different outcomes. A second paper presented by Kanchi Kohli (with Manju Menon and Bharat Patel) looking at contention over coal-related infrastructure in the Kutch region of Gujarat focused on this theme. In Kutch there is a crowded field of agents seeking sway over new coal developments. Kohli argued that 'outside' actors can operate with their own rigid ideas of what is 'good' for the region. Local participants respond with a wide range of actions including taking on the role of stakeholder and opportunistic litigation to realise old and unsatisfied development aspirations. Kohli raised the question - how negotiable are the goals of those are trying to persuade them?

Aspirations for social development also came up in regard to Indigenous Australia. A paper presented by Heidi Norman provided an overview of Indigenous land rights in Australia and implications for ongoing contention over fossil fuels. She discussed the controversial 2012 application by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council to explore for coal seam gas in NSW. Considerable debate with opponents has occurred. The impact is both cultural and economic, as the claims affect Indigenous cultural heritage as well as financial viability. Reflecting on the sociopolitical context of this debate, Norman argued that neoliberal rhetoric has a particular appeal in the context of an oppressive State. In this context entrepreneurial resource exploitation can be presented as a means to realise self-determination.

The final paper from Robyn Eckersley and Peter Christoff took the participants back to the question of international policy reform. They floated the idea of a Coal Non-Proliferation Treaty for the orderly and equitable phase-out of trade in coal. The short timeframe available for climate stabilisation and limitation of pricing mechanisms warrants an alternative approach. This kind of treaty would have the benefit of being an instrument focused on fossil fuels not on emissions in abstract. It could begin on the regional level between key trading partners, and mirror divestment campaigning. A range of challenges was discussed including ideological commitment to developmentalism, WTO rules, and implications for growth.

The workshop was a successful interdisciplinary encounter. Comparison between locations, contexts and interpretations of participants opened up new dialogues about the possibility for a post-coal future.