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## Afterword: Less is the New More

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This afterword to the special issue discusses the author's affective experiences with energy transition. The particular focus is the affective promise of electrification as a means to rupture the ecological emergency generated by today's petroculture.

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As I write this, I am on a train moving at 200 kilometers an hour across north-central Germany, somewhere between Braunschweig and Magdeburg. I have traveled Germany for three decades now and the trains themselves seem quite as they always have been: modern, reliable, smooth functioning. It's almost unsettling how timeless Deutsche Bahn has made this experience. Many features of the landscape are exactly the same too: verdant and manicured fields, intermittent pine, oak and birch forests etched with small mossy streams and dotted with weathered hunters' blinds, scatters of small cubical buildings with orange and grey tile roofs indicating small towns that survived the war, tangles of damp two-lane roadways, modest church steeples in the middle distance.

The one thing that has changed, and dramatically so, is that one is almost never out of sight of a wind turbine—often several of them, since they seem to adore the company of their kind. Clusters of turbines are sometimes massively at hand, white towers stretching skyward fronted by red striped spinning blades. Others occupy the horizon, where they appear dark rather than light, spinning languorously or standing aloof like sentinels. It was rare to see a wind turbine in the mid-1990s when I first began to ride the German rails. Now I traverse what is as much an energyscape as a landscape, rife with aeolian politics.<sup>1</sup> There are over 28,000 wind turbines scattered across the country; together they generated 123 Terawatt-hours of electricity in 2022 (23% of German electricity production).

I have studied the worlding of wind power for many years now.<sup>2</sup> I am acutely aware that its promise offers no salvation from the condition now called the Anthropocene.<sup>3</sup> Most wind turbines, including most European ones, are installed under conditions that do little to remedy the problems that made it necessary to build wind turbines in the first place. In Southern Mexico, I learned from Binniza and Ikojts people that wind power can be just as extractivist as coal or oil; people there often described wind parks in the same breath as mines. They viewed green energy technology as just another pretext for the dispossession of their lands and resources in the name of northern capital and empire. Unfortunately, they weren't wrong. Where the command-and-control logic of technology is itself a huge part of the problem, it is senseless to imagine that more technology is the solution. What brought the world into the Anthropocene were the overlapping energopolitical regimes of plantation sucropolitics, the carbopolitics of machinery and mass consumption, and the petropolitics of automobility and plasticity.<sup>4</sup> All emerged within the context of European colonialism, ensorcelling the world in the service of northern desires and luxuries. An energy transition that unfolds in service of the ecocidal and genocidal trajectory of capitalist expansion will offer no relief from the Anthropocene trajectory: the storms, the droughts, the floods, the inequality, the white supremacy, the misery.

I know all this. And yet, looking out of a train window and seeing wind turbines from here to the horizon brings me a small unexpected joy. A feeling of new possibility. A glimpsed memory of a future where no petrostate mires us in its ooze. I can't quite explain the paradox of doubt and promise. But that is why attending to the affective dimension of energy transition is so important. Affect is multiple, fluid, and unpredictable. Affects hold us where we are; affects set us in motion. Affects offer stability and hereness, hope and aspiration, yet also anxiety and dread. The world of affect arrives constantly, short-circuiting critical reason and re-wiring logical categories. We are buoyed, deflated, expanded, shrunk, eddied by the duration of experience. Encounters with energy transition are part of that duration; they summon and strangle futures all the time. Affects know futures well; futurity is affect's home away from home. In any given moment, fragments of future worlds cusp and beckon, frighten and comfort. Futures also refuse to become. As Trish Kahle notes in the introduction to this special issue, "The experience of energy transition is indeed one of invitations, obstinacies, and refusals."<sup>5</sup>

Even so, refusals rarely last. One of affect's great philosophers and lyricists, Katie Stewart, writes that the world of affect is ever one of transition: "Affect helped return anthropology to sense and sensation, materialities, and viscera. It proposed a world that is lived, though not simply anchored in the consciousness of the humanist subject or its categories of thought. Rather, a world charged with affect is a prolific, mixed-use contact zone in an ongoing state of transition that leaves people 'improvising with already-felts.'"<sup>6</sup>

The world of affect is one of lived possibility, not a pre-given world that stages scripted dramas. It is always improvising and unfolding. William Mazzarella argues that one of the great contributions of affect theory has been "to address that which is at once intimate and impersonal [and that] have conventionally been imagined either as opposites or as prosthetic supplements to each other."<sup>7</sup>

The essays in this special issue have much to say about the intimacies and impersonalities of energy. Ewan Gibbs pursues the structures of feeling—feelings deeply personal and yet also deeply relational—wreathing different kinds of energy work. Victoria Googasian probes the affective infrastructure of space opera, its technopolitical utopias, its imperial nostalgias, its thirst for excessive energy, yet also its complex layering of familial intimacies and friendships that root its dramas at an all-too-human scale. Anne Pasek inquires into the overlapping of affect and energy in the context of climate action, asking what is lost when carbon sequestration work moves from intimate, material encounters with soil into the alienated field of carbon commodities like removal certificates. Animesh Chatterjee explores the affective ties of energy, colonization, and modernity, how the electrification of intimate domestic

spaces and the arrival of public lighting in colonial Calcutta materialized the ideology of western progress but also furthered the imposition of European power and class hierarchies.

Labor is often the meeting place of energy and affect in these essays. Gibbs and Pasek explicitly explore affects concerning labor, including the phenomenon, as Kahle puts it, of “hating work and loving labor.” For Chatterjee and Googasian, labor is never far from the spotlight either, whether in the immense technical works of space opera or in the humble appliances of modernizing electrified households. Energy’s affective promise is to deliver us from work, to return to us the biophysical energies needed for labors of self-realization. Pasek pivots to labor’s most famous lover, Karl Marx, since his theory of alienation is predicated precisely on imagining a gap between the extractive energy relations of commodified work and the coming communist utopia of energy expended solely for purposes of human thriving and happiness.

But—and I am not happy saying this—does not the apotheosis of labor also fall victim to the ideology of liberalism, in which labor is inseparable not only from value but also from virtue? What have we high-functioning liberal subjects learned in this life other than that labor is what defines us, labor gives our lives meaning, we have to labor to be good people, thriving relationships require us to “put in the labor,” and so on? Marx knew he wasn’t labor’s first. John Locke and Adam Smith had both loved labor too, and, in their romance, they held that productive activity was the *sine qua non* of human experience. Marx inherited much from their lovecraft. When it comes to labor, the major difference of opinion between Marx and the British political liberals and economists who preceded him is only about what should become of the objective fruits of productive activity: should they rightfully be alienated to become private property capital (Locke and Smith say yes) or, in Marx’s embrace, restored to a species-level commons available to (all) their makers? Otherwise, Marx, Locke, and Smith share a political ontology, the Minecraft logic that the world amounts to resources that can and must be developed.

That said, commons restoration does suggest an energy transition of sorts. There’s unlikely to be private jet travel in that world for one thing. And that’s not inconsequential, since one 40-minute celebrity jet trip between Los Angeles and Las Vegas equals the average annual carbon emissions of one person. Even so, is it enough? Marx’s thinking was intuitively metabolic. Yet, he couldn’t conceptualize the kind of ecological devastation that would result from a socialist apparatus of commodity creation, especially one powered by fossil fuels. European state socialism was just as obsessed with growth as western capitalism, constantly seeking to exceed the production targets of its planned economy. Engels might actually have been a bit more intuitively environmentalist. His first book, *The Condition of the Working Class*

in England (1845) attuned at least to the negative environment within coal mines, the “want of oxygen, excessive dust, powder smoke, carbonic acid gas, and sulphur, in the atmosphere of the workings.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the embarrassing secret about socialism has always been its deep kinship with liberalism. Liberalism grew in the killing fields of plantation colonies. Socialism assembled in the machine world of factories and mines. Yet both began life believing productive activity was the engine of progress. Still socialism evolves; it is not lost. Ecosocialism is worlding itself more effectively and diversely today than the tempting mirage of ecoliberalism and its overtures of green growth. Much turns on the ethics of “degrowth,” borrowing from the *décroissance* of maverick Marxian philosopher, André Gorz.

Gorz saw the ecological emergency coming fifty years ago and asked whether the world wanted reform or revolution. He chose revolution because he saw the growth logic of capitalist society as fundamental to its operation. On the one hand, paraphrasing Marx, capital simply wishes to propagate itself. But there is a structure to its sprawl: capitalism utilizes scarcity as a means for reproducing social inequality and preserving hierarchy in its class structure. New technological achievements and luxuries enjoyed first only by the elite attract the desires of the masses toward them. As the masses gain access to old luxuries, new unattainable luxuries develop to replace those that no longer distinguish social classes. This treadmill of luxury means that no universal “good life” will ever be enjoyed in a capitalist society no matter its accumulation of useful things—“the mainspring of growth is this generalized forward flight, stimulated by a deliberately sustained system of inequalities.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, ecoliberalism’s answer to the ecological emergency is to offer us the luxurious forms of Tesla cars and Powerwall batteries. And, once those have been thoroughly massified, it will move on to electrified private helicopters or some other luxury.

Gorz termed this constant process of dispossession through innovation the “poverty of affluence” and argued that to break with its growth ideology a society would first have to affirm a set of values opposed to hierarchy and privilege: “The only things worthy of each are those which are good for all; the only things worthy of being produced are those which neither privilege nor diminish anyone; it is possible to be happier with less affluence, for in a society without privilege no one will be poor.”<sup>10</sup> Gorz imagined the world of *décroissance* as a slow and steady one defined by universally available highly durable goods, beautiful public dwellings and transportation, a twenty-hour work week focused on providing essential needs for all, with the remaining time left over for creative self-realization. *Décroissance* certainly does center a principle of commons. But more importantly it is a worlding of less, anathema to liberalism’s centuries-long worlding of more.

The terrific thing about less is that so long as it doesn't have to account to the logic of more, it is relatively easy to achieve. Work harder at being greener? Sure, but what about just not doing very much at all. This is controversial. But in fact, doing less in general (including consuming less, travelling less, mediating less, working less) would likely be more environmentally beneficial than maintaining the same levels of energy expenditure while decarbonizing energy sources. I have in mind also the parable of Marshall Sahlins's "original affluent society": that if productive activity is considered more as an occasionally necessary evil rather than a permanent obsession, then leises and pleasures become less an anxious vanishing point—commodities ever sought and rarely enjoyed—and more the norm of lived experience.<sup>11</sup>

Our focus on labor, energy, and affect in this special issue thus indexes a deeper feeling, an emergent desire perhaps, one that is so far outside the mainstream of northern liberalism that it is downright kinky: the desire to power down from a modernity that runs on stress, anxiety, stimulants (to go go go), depressants (to snatch a few hours of oblivion). Joseph Campana describes how the centralization of oil capitalism in modern economies infiltrated cultural rhythms, creating an "interlacing of energetic and affective cycles constituted by the oscillation between booms and busts" and manifesting in wild swings of exuberance and catastrophe.<sup>12</sup> For Campana, petroculture disposes us to manic activity even in the context of sincere efforts to escape petroculture; he instead urges us to resist our most zealous impulses and instead to explore powering down, not so much in the sense of turning off lights and turning to bikes but rather by retraining "the susceptible and interlocking circuits of feeling and flesh" to do less.<sup>13</sup>

Retraining feeling and flesh for a life of less is how I imagine energy transition. It's going to take some time. We have been raised as high-carbon thrill seekers and scratching those itches feels good. Cymene Howe and I have suggested indulgence in low carbon leisure and pleasure activities as a transitional mode.<sup>14</sup> It turns out that many of life's greatest happies—walks, singing, resting, reading, playing, lovemaking—are not the ruin of the world, even in excess. You can get started right now. But how about taking a nap first?

And while you are resting, here is something to dream on. I saw energy transition once. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s, in a six-flat building with a concrete courtyard. Since there wasn't anywhere to play outdoors, I often roamed our building's expansive basement, which was something of a wonderland of ancient technologies. There was a wooden high-tank toilet, for example, a Victorian-era invention that I have literally never seen anywhere else in my life. But the most spectacular relic was the massive steel furnace installed to burn coal to heat the flats above. It was as large as a dragon. But it never stirred; the building had already converted

to natural gas heating by the time my family arrived. At the time I remember wondering why this dormant monster was still there. In retrospect it's quite possible that it couldn't be removed. Its mighty metal carapace was so imposing that the building must have been built around it, quite the metaphor for coal's central place in the making of modernity. Parked in front of the furnace was a steel cart filled with the remains of its last meal, the final load of unburned coal. Nearby a coal shovel still leaned against the wall. My friends and I used to take pieces of coal out of the cart and pretend they were precious jewels. They glittered even in the dusty basement light.

These days I often think about that furnace. The end of the coal era in my childhood home did not seem to be the kind of rational and tidy energy transition that many dream about today. But I also find a joyful surge in the idea that when the time came for change it happened suddenly and dramatically. I like to imagine it as a slapstick with the agents of the *ancien regime* shouting and running around, bumping into each other, dropping their shovels and bolting for the door. The last ones out look over their shoulders and see a new world being born behind them. But maybe it was just a humble ending, with vacant looks and sad shrugs. What matters is that when affect hands you a raw day, remember that this is also what is happening right now, everywhere around us. No matter what the CEO of Shell says, our children are going to play in the ruins of petrol pumps. How is that for a feeling?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See for example the arguments in Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, "Aeolian Politics," *Distinktion* 16, no. 1 (2015): 31–48; and Jennifer Carlson, "Farmers of Energy: Ethnographic Perspectives on Energy Citizenship in Germany's Energy Transition," *Perspectives on Europe* 45 (Spring 2015): 91–95.
- <sup>2</sup> See for example Dominic Boyer, *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene* (Duke University Press, 2019).
- <sup>3</sup> For a review of recent scholarship on the Anthropocene, see Julia Adenay Thomas, ed. *Altered Earth: Getting the Anthropocene Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this argument, see Dominic Boyer, *No More Fossils* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).
- <sup>5</sup> Trish Kahle, "Introduction: Affects of Energy Transition," *Regeneration: Environment, Art, Culture* 1, no. 3 (2025).
- <sup>6</sup> Katherine Stewart, "In the World that Affect Proposed," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2017): 192–198, 194.
- <sup>7</sup> William Mazzarella, "Sense out of Sense: Notes on the Affect/Ethics Impasse," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2017): 199–208.
- <sup>8</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/index.htm).
- <sup>9</sup> André Gorz, *Ecology as Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1980), 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Gorz, *Ecology as Politics*, 8.
- <sup>11</sup> See Chapter One of Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Routledge, 1972).
- <sup>12</sup> Joseph Campana, "Power Down," in *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017: 60–75), 65.
- <sup>13</sup> Campana, "Power Down," 65.
- <sup>14</sup> Howe and Boyer, "Aeolian Politics"; for an expanded version of this argument see also Dominic Boyer, "Revolution and Revellion: Toward a Solarity Worth Living," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 1 (2021): 25–37.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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