

Summary of Paper for CIRIEC Congress 2016:

“Energy Democracy”: A Liberatory Conceptualization

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A long history of fossil fuel extraction and use for electricity generation played an important role in the almost irreversible carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere (Foster, Clark & York, 2009), among other climate change outcomes that had and continue to have a devastating impact on ecosystems and communities worldwide. While the transition away from fossil-based resources is an important component of the fight against climate change, what is often overlooked is the centralized ownership and control of electricity generation by corporate and state actors. This ownership scheme overwhelmingly favours electricity generation for the sake of profit and growth instead of human and ecological realities. Meanwhile, those who are most directly impacted by the destructive elements of the electricity sector, namely community members and workers worldwide, are excluded from ownership and circles of decision-making. This lack of democracy in the electricity sector is mutually reinforcing with a lack of democracy in the economic and political realms produced and reproduced daily by capitalistic social relations. With this in mind, the goal of our paper is to conceptualize “energy democracy” from a liberatory standpoint: How can communities take “power” back from centralized actors in the electricity sector?

The first part of our paper aims at dismantling the myth that the transition to a sustainable energy sector is a technological issue. While renewable energy is often touted as a key component in the transition towards a cleaner and more “democratic” electricity sector, the ownership of these projects still predominantly remain in the hands of corporate and state actors (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014). Our paper argues that renewable energy is not inherently more democratic compared to fossil fuels; it can only be more conducive to it. The transition towards a sustainable energy sector cannot be solely a technological one; the underlying socio-political aspects that influence how a certain technology is designed and applied must be also addressed.

The second part of our paper looks at Community Energy (CE), which appears as a more democratic alternative to centralized ownership and control in the electricity sector. CE broadly refers to direct community participation in, and ownership of, renewable energy (RE) projects, and is considered an economically positive and (increasingly) a socially necessary development on the way to a sustainable energy future as well as a key component of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). Despite their democratic potential, our paper reveals that CE projects face

numerous market- and policy-related barriers that impede their proliferation. Furthermore, CE projects that are able to get off the ground seem to be placed predominantly in the rather affluent communities of the global North, and are lagging behind in engaging participation from their members beyond investment.

With these realizations in mind, our paper subsequently aims at conceptualizing “energy democracy” from a liberatory standpoint. This conceptualization builds on our understanding that “energy democracy” cannot be achieved only in the electricity sector, but is an important component of a much broader political project that aims at dissolving centralized economic and political power and democratizing it. Our paper identifies seven main component of “energy democracy”: (1) Use of renewable energy technologies; (2) Opposition to harmful extraction/consumption; (3) Decentralization of generation; (4) Collective Ownership and Control; (5) Prioritization of the use-value of energy; (6) Liberatory institutions beyond the electricity sector; (7) Solidarity with other democracy/social justice struggles. Further elaboration on each of these components will be provided during our presentation.

Overall, our paper argues that increasing the implementation of renewable energy technologies and/or the involvement of the SSE in the energy sector is simply not enough to democratize the energy sector. What CE projects and broader social movements must address are the social relations undergirding the lack of democracy in all realms of life. In this sense, we believe that our paper can serve as an important guide for SSE organizations and movements paving the way towards a more democratic and sustainable energy future.

References:

Foster, J.B., Clark, B, & York, R. (2009). “The Midas Effect: A Critique of Climate Change Economics” *Development and Change*, 40(6), 1085-1097.

Huybrechts, B. & Mertens, S. (2014). The Relevance of the Cooperative Model in the Field of Renewable Energy. *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, 85(2): 193-212. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/apce.12038>