

Energy Resources: Europe and Its Former Colonies

Rachel
Carson
Center

03–04 October 2012, Munich, Germany

Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) and Center for Public History, University of Houston, Texas

Conveners: Martin Melosi (University of Houston), Helmuth Trischler (RCC)

Presenters: Brian Black (Penn State University), Claire Campbell (Dalhousie University), Ilediwa N. Chimee (University of Nigeria), Giuliano Garavini (University of Padova), Ingo Heidbrink (RCC / University of Maryland), Per Högselius (Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden), Chijioke L. Iheanacho (Imu State University, Nigeria), Chris Jones (University of California, Berkeley), Arne Kaijser (Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden), Kairn Klieman (University of Houston), Marc Landry (Georgetown University), Philipp Lehmann (Harvard University), Clapperton Mavhunga (RCC / Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Valentina Roxo (RCC / LMU Munich), Kate Showers (University of Sussex)

The Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) and the Center for Public History at the University of Houston, Texas jointly convened “Energy Resources: Europe and Its Former Colonies” on 3–4 October 2012. Following up on the successful 2001 workshop “Energy Capitals: Local Impact, Global Influence,” presenters at the workshop used a historical perspective to analyze the role energy resources played in the relationship between European nations and their former colonies. The diversity of approaches and conclusions discussed illustrates the complexity of this seemingly straight forward question.

Participants’ definition of “former European colony” was challenged from the onset. The papers presented in the opening session, *The Politics of Hydro-Power*, examined case studies in countries rarely listed among the former colonies—Greenland and Austria. In his paper, **INGO HEIDBRINK** analyzed the promise and also the risk of Greenland, a former Danish colony, financing its national sovereignty with the potential hydropower frozen in the Greenlandic ice cap. Draw-

ing on a similar historical experience, he explores Greenland's brief dally with de facto political and economic sovereignty during World War II (WWII), which was sustained on the high revenues generated from the cryolite mine in Ivigtut due to the increased wartime demand for aluminum.

Heidbrink states that this experience has misled the young country into believing that one industry (hydroelectricity) can sustain the whole country, and argued that true economic independence requires a diverse economy that is not dependent on the main customers in of one industry. The discussion following this paper concluded that there are solutions for Greenland's economic sovereignty, despite its limited natural resources, but first the clear imbalance in intellectual power needs to be addressed.

Continuing on the topic of hydropower, **MARC LANDRY** discussed the transformation of the Hohe Tauern mountains into a source of auxiliary power for Austria's hydropower plants as a legacy of the country's annexation by Nazi Germany in 1938. Particularly interesting was the atypical decision by German occupiers to choose what was considered the more modest decentralized, but quicker, plan for developing Hohe Tauern's water power, most likely due to pressure to rapidly build up the economy for war. Landry concludes that the National Socialist period prevented the postwar Austrian republic from implementing what was considered at the time to be a more radical plan to develop this unique power.

GIULIANO GARAVINI started the following session, Vantage Point: Europe, with a paper on the Western European experience during the 1973 Oil Shock and the role this event played in European the integration process. Claiming that this event was the last of with global significance in the decolonization era, he argued that the Western European reactions to the oil shock illustrate the following: contrary to most postcolonial relationships, influence and "dependency" across the Mediterranean is a two-way process, and that the energy choices in Western Europe have in fact be influenced by the political and cultural relationship with its previous colonies.

ARNE KAIJSER and **PER HÖGELIUS** discussed one Western European country that does not quite fit Garavini's conclusions, non-colonial Sweden. In an attempt to address the neglected history of Swedish energy imports, this paper tackles the countries dependency on a foreign supply of coal and oil for its national energy and the strategies developed to cope with it. The attempt to develop domestic energy resources was labeled as problematic, due both to the considerable cost and the environmental degradation that accompanied this strategy. Therefore, the authors emphasizes, the ultimate strategy to cope with dependency was the diversification of both the energy sources—to include nuclear power and natural gas—and of Sweden's energy import supply partners. While this strategy is considered notably successful, the threat of climate change and political emphasis on environmental conservation has added a new challenge to Sweden's energy consumption, two-thirds of which is supplied by non-renewable energy resources.

In the final paper in this session, **VALENTINA ROXO** shed light on the unique experience that Azerbaijan had under Russian colonial rule, due to its natural oil resources but also its expertise in the oil-extraction industry. Diverging from other repressive colonial experiences, the premature decline of oil reserves on the

Apsheeron peninsula—a result of imperial exploitation—expedited post-industrial development in Azerbaijan. No longer a leading oil producer, Azerbaijan became the number one Soviet supplier of advanced technology and highly qualified experts, whose discoveries changed the course of Russian oil history.

In his keynote presentation after dinner, **BRIAN BLACK** outlined the development of the international petroleum market from 1900–1930. He asserts that the change in the use and importance of crude oil—from a useful resource to an essential commodity—lead to new models of development during this time period. Emphasizing the complex strategic relationship between national security and the supply of crude oil, Black demonstrates how nations allowed the industry to evolve into an intricate network of multinational corporations that exploit and degrade local populations and their environments.

In the first session of the following day, Transitions in Energy Resources, **IHEDIWA N. CHIMEE** presented on the exploitation of Nigeria’s coal industry by British colonists and its implications for the development of the indigenous economy and environment. The evolution of a multi-layered system of dependency was described, resulting on the one hand from British dependence on Nigeria’s agricultural and mineral resources, and Nigeria’s dependence on European manufactured goods on the other. Specifically, the paper highlights the exploitation of the coal mine in the Udi hills to fuel British industrialization, especially its railways. Chimee concludes that the colonial power progressively expanded the resource base of Great Britain through the systematic exploitation of the indigenous population, whom they drove from their lands and into poverty.

CHRIS JONES, discussing another former British colony—which frequently has been analyzed for its own imperial behaviors and not its former colonial experience—encouraged participants to remember the colonial history of the United States when discussing its energy transitions. He argues that the United States have their former colonial master, Great Britain, to thank for its extremely successful first energy transition, from wood and animal fat to coal. Because the United States had witnessed Great Britain’s experience with coal and industrialization, when they found their own coal resources they were able to imagine it’s potential. This imagination allowed them to both speed up the transition, but also to slow it down where necessary, having also observed the potential negative consequences.

In the session Greening Energy Resources, **CLAIRE CAMPBELL** highlighted the importance of the relationship between Nova Scotia’s energy history and its sociopolitical identity for the jurisdictions current public policy—providing 25 percent of the provinces electricity from renewable sources by 2015. Campbell claims that this current campaign is only a continuation of a two-hundred-year-old debate on Nova Scotia’s place in Canada and the world. Can its use of energy resources offer an answer to this question? She concludes that, while the province’s multi-faceted energy profile has played a considerable role in its nation-building process, so too has the entrepreneurial, self-reliant, and globally-minded thinking of its citizens.

The second paper in this session was arguably one of the first to take a more established approach to the topic of the conference. **KATE SHOWERS** gave a powerful presentation on the implications of European renewable energy mandates for the environment on the African continent. Connecting the dots, she demon-

strates that the “new” proposal for using Africa to generate hydro, solar, and wind power to fuel the Europe-an smart grid is not new at all. Rather, Europe has a long history of reliance on Africa for renewable energy. It began with the pre-colonial trade in human energy—slaves—and continued through the colonial era in the form of wood and water. By highlighting this past, Showers hopes to offer a better framework for analyzing the continuation of possible patterns in the current energy relations between Africa and Europe.

After lunch **KAIRN KLIEMAN** began the session Oil in Africa with a paper on the role of US and European oil companies in African from 1920–1960. In her research, Klieman hopes that as a historian she can offer a new perspective on the origins and implications of the so-called Oil Curse—the situation in which a country receives considerable revenues from oil and yet the economy stagnates, living standards decline, and the corruption in government increases. Her paper explains how oil companies, both national and international, occupy an obscure and unknowable space between the government and private sectors and thereby played a very significant role in shaping the relationship between Europe and its former colonies.

This holistic, deep-history perspective on the role of oil companies in Africa was complimented by a case study of one country’s personal experience. **CHIJOKE IHEANACHO** presented a paper on the roots of the Niger Delta crisis, connecting it to the process of pursuing sustainable energy resource development. It is argued that any analysis of the crisis must recognize that the pursuit of a sustainable energy resource development strategy not only denied the poor majority in this region sovereignty over their own land, but also blocked them from participating in meaningful investments in the land, labor, and capital. Despite the considerable wealth the Nigerian state has accumulated from oil revenues, both the social and ecological state of the Niger Delta continues to suffer considerably under the exploitation of its main natural resource, oil.

The final session of the workshop looked at Ways of Knowing and Innovating in Energy History. In the first paper of this session, **CLAPPERTON MAVHUNGA** challenged the current labeling of firewood in Africa as an environmental problem by reminding participants that firewood has been an energy form long before the continent was colonized. In his thought-provoking paper he explores the local knowledge that allows Africans to make fire purely from plant products. To do so, he adopts an approach that sees African linguistic devices, such as proverbs, registers, folklore, and riddles, not only as archives but as philosophies towards plants. This approach emphasized the importance of engaging with the local knowledge and tradition stored in the practices and languages of the people of Africa.

The final paper, presented by **PHILIPP LEHMANN**, drew on examples from the past to illustrate how the current endeavor to harvest the energy of the Sahara desert is a continuation of a European fascination with the “limitless” energy potential of deserts. Discussing first Roudaire’s vision of increasing precipitation by creating a massive lake in the Sahara from water diverted from the Mediterranean and later, inter alia, plans to dam the Congo river to increase the size of Lake Chad, Lehmann demonstrated that energy—in all its forms—was central to the conception of these enormous projects aimed at transforming a desert. In addition, he argues that, much like today’s vision for the Sahara, although these projects promised manifold return, their realization would also have first required unprecedented amounts of energy.

The workshop concluded with an open discussion in which the co-organizers summarized what they considered some of the main ideas participants could take away from this workshop: 1. The importance of energy transition studies and technological regimes; 2. Significant turning points in “European” energy history had been identified (the First and Second World War, the 1960’s, 1968/9, and 1973); 3. An understanding of the long-term continuity and path dependencies of these ideas has been lost due to a focus only on the moments of change; 4. It is necessary to breakdown the European “Unit” and map its multiple geographies—it is clear that there are multiple ways of visualizing Europe; 5. A decentralization of Europe is necessary to address the question of energy resources; 6. It is clear that discourses on energy resources have been a leitmotif in European history since the eighteenth century on; and 7. While the framework of pre- and post-colonialism is a useful analytical basis particularly when applied beyond the traditional sectors, it is a very loaded theme that can be restrictive.

In conclusion, three areas were identified in which environmental historians could expand their research on the topic of energy resources: 1. Take the material dimension of energy resources into consideration, 2. Incorporate the consumer perspective into research, and 3. Address the dimension of knowledge and know-how concerning energy resources in the relationship between Europe and its former colonies.

- Rachel Shindelar



