



Breaking the impasse

The rise of energy humanities

by Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman

“Today’s energy dilemmas are fundamentally all within the traditional areas of expertise of the humanities.”



WE’VE BECOME ALL TOO FAMILIAR with bad news stories about the fate of the humanities and their seeming lack of relevance to the 21st century. Our story is about an area of humanities research that is contributing directly to the solution of an immense “real world” social problem: how to find our way toward a sustainable energy future.

“Energy humanities” is an emerging field of scholarship that overcomes boundaries between disciplines and between academic and applied research. Like its predecessors, energy humanities highlights the essential contribution that the insights and methods of the human sciences can make to areas of study and analysis that were once thought best left to the natural sciences.

Energy is a perfect example of an issue that exceeds the traditional division of academic labour. As we’ve entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, experts and publics across the world want to know how to cope with rising demand for energy when our current energy portfolio is already inducing global warming, ocean acidification and climate change.

A 2013 report by the World Energy Council offered two possible scenarios for the energy supply mix that would develop by the mid-21st century: an “affordable and accessible” one and a “sustainable” one. In these projections, by 2050 we will likely be using 60 percent more total energy than today, with most of that increase coming from coal, oil and gas. In the “sustainable” scenario, we still would use 27 percent

more energy, but nuclear, biomass and renewables would make up more of the total than now.

So, it is not an exaggeration to ask whether human civilization has a future. Neither technology nor policy can offer a silver-bullet solution to the environmental effects of an energy-hungry, rapidly modernizing and growing global population. Energy humanists contend that our energy and environmental dilemmas are fundamentally problems of ethics, habits, values, institutions, beliefs and power – all areas of expertise of the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

The impasse afflicting humanity – the gap between knowledge and action, insight and involvement – is an impasse that has repeatedly been addressed in post-Enlightenment humanist thinking. Indeed, solving our dilemma requires the humanities’ involvement – not as an afterthought to technology and policy, but as a fore-runner researching the cultural landscape around us and imagining the future relationship between energy and society that we need to strive toward.

We’ll make a bold claim: the humanities are key to moving this civilization forward. Without their insight, it is likely that we’ll lazily opt for “affordable and accessible” instead of “sustainable” and never get to where we need to be.

The good news is that this is not just a story we humanists are telling ourselves. When energy humanists talk with scientists, engineers, government – and yes, even the energy industry – we often discover that they have been waiting for us to arrive. Those who are closest to the blunt necessity of energy for our complex, modern

societies are aware of the huge challenges of mitigating the environmental effects of energy use. They are looking for change. But when it comes to how the public would react to policies that necessitate significant changes in their daily lives, they realize they need insight and guidance from humanists and social scientists.

And, this is not just a new kind of applied research or consulting work. Energy humanities is already producing theories that any hardcore scholar would love. Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*, on how the Keynesian model of growth depended on a cultural understanding of oil as an inexhaustible, cheap resource, has had an impact on research across the disciplines. Stephanie LeManager’s *Living Oil: Petroleum and Culture in the American Century* constitutes a rich archive of the omnipresence of petroleum in daily life. Matthew Huber’s *Lifeflood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* traces the ways that an existence organized around property, mobility and entrepreneurship is linked directly to the presence of cheap and seemingly inexhaustible forms of energy. We can no longer fully understand developments in culture, society, politics and economics without paying attention to the role played by energy in each domain.

Mike Hulme, a professor of climate change, noted that research cited for the third Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was dominated by the natural sciences. Dr. Hulme thinks this is a big mistake, and we do too. We can only solve our energy and environmental dilemmas by making humanistic research part of the conversation. **UA**