ENERGY FUTURES FROM THE PAST

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Abstract:

Energy futures from the past

How does the energy past weigh on energy futures?

STS scholars are well aware of societies' dependency to large energy infrastructures such as electric, gas, or fossil fuel supply as well as their production networks. Yet an important area of investigation remains, especially concerning the so-called « energy transition » (Fressoz, 2014) and the way infrastructures inform our political life forms (Mitchell, 2011). For instance, how do you plug wind energy to the existing electrical grids that were designed and built to accommodate nuclear or fossil fuel power plants?

In addition to inheriting material infrastructures, one also inherits past ways of thinking about the future. Those can be labelled scenarios (Dahan, 2007), sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff& Kim, 2009), promises (Van Lente, 1993) or horizons for capital accumulation (Moore 2015, Malm 2016). In the discourses of engineers and policy makers, past futures (Koselleck, 2004) frame the ways one relates to the future of energy. In the nuclear industry, for example, projects such as fast breeding reactors or nuclear fusion pertains to visions of the future that can be traced back to the 1950s. Wind or solar energy projects are still framed within the gigantism of 1960s and 1970s Western plans (Evrard, 2013). Some might even argue that there has been significant continuity in the way Western states or companies view fuel supply management since the end of World War II.

Nevertheless, these visions cannot be translated in our present without modifications. We must be sensitive to the evolutions that are dictated by the current situation regarding energy issues. The oil industry needs to integrate climate change and shortage scenarios. The nuclear industry is facing the decommissioning of infrastructures that were built four

decades ago. The world in which the current « energy transition » discourses exists is in many ways extremely different from the world that emerged from WWII.

This panel will address the following questions: how are the visions of the energy future linked to the networks and infrastructures we inherit? How do the past visions of energy future inform current expectations? How do they inform the very conception of infrastructures? How does the current energy situation modify these past visions of the future? Which conceptual and theoretical tools (e.g., imaginaries, promises, horizons for capital accumulation, horizons of expectation, etc.) are the best suited for understanding the permanence of past futures as well as their current mutations? Addressing these questions allows us to examine the promises of change that are made to satisfy climate objectives as well as the infrastructural legacy that such a transition entails.

Organized by scholars in philosophy, sociology, and history, this panel aims at encouraging interdisciplinary exchanges.

Keywords: energy, infrastructure, materiality, sociotechnical systems, past futures.