



A failed green future: Navajo Green Jobs and energy “transition” in the Navajo Nation

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the Navajo Green Jobs effort of 2009, an attempt to “transition” energy production from coal to wind and solar for the largest tribe in the United States, the Navajo Nation. Through ethnographic “revisits,” in 2008 and 2013, I argue that Navajo Green Jobs contained two problematic hybrid neoliberal assumptions about governance and development: (1) it decentered governing authority from the tribe to “the community” while undermining the legitimacy of the tribal government, and (2) it promoted private entrepreneurship over public investment as the vehicle for energy transition. Ultimately, the Navajo Nation rejected Navajo Green Jobs and re-appropriated its temporal language in order to justify a reinvestment in coal in the form of a new energy company, NTEC. This article concludes that consideration of the spatial and social embedded nature of energy production is vital for understanding energy transitions today.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2009, dozens of young Navajo activists and organizers marched to the Navajo Nation Council to promote “green jobs” - a pathway toward “alternative” energy development within the reservation (Liu, 2010). I participated in this demonstration. We wore green shirts with white lettering that read, “Navajo Green Jobs.” The movement was the outcome of many meetings between Navajo environmentalists, tribal officials, and community members who were interested in linking tribal development initiatives with Obama’s proposed “green economy.” But we did not know at the time that we were introducing a language of “transition” into tribal political discourse that tribal officials would later use to justify greater participation in coal extraction.

By the start of Obama’s second term in 2012, the green jobs movement had stalled. The 2010 “shellacking” of a Democratic majority in Congress blocked Obama’s agenda. Not only did his party lose Congress, but many of the communities slotted for “green transition” rejected his calls to move away from fossil fuels. During the 2012 election, “hope and change” and “green jobs” was replaced with an “all of the above” approach regarding energy development (Hertsgaard, 2014). At first green jobs represented a “green new deal,” or a publicly funded revamping of U.S. energy infrastructure (Luke, 2009; Schnoor, 2009; Schwartzman, 2011). In the end, Navajo Green Jobs became another failed attempt to transition the U.S. energy economy out of fossil fuels and toward renewable technologies such as solar and wind.

In the immediate years following the push for Navajo Green Jobs,

the Navajo Nation revised its energy policy to emphasize solar, wind, and other “cleaner renewable energy sources.” This was in part a consequence of the Navajo Green Jobs movement in 2009. But in 2013, the Navajo Nation turned back toward coal. In that year, the tribe extended a 50-year lease with a major coal fired power plant and purchased a 60-year-old coalmine at \$85 million. The Navajo Nation also created, for the first time, a Navajo-owned energy company, The Navajo Transitional Energy Company, L.L.C. (NTEC). NTEC was entirely premised on the notion of energy “transition”. What had happened?

Part of the reason for Navajo Green Job’s failure is the tribe’s rejection of hybrid neoliberal policy solutions that were offered through it, such as: (1) a distrust in existing governmental practices, and (2) the idealization of entrepreneurship as the fulcrum for transitioning Navajo energy production from coal to wind and solar. A broader explanation is found in the way members of Navajo Green Jobs understood energy transition as an inevitable, linear march of new energy technologies replacing older ones. But this temporal understanding of transition did not account for uneven geography of energy development in the southwest or the spatially and socially embedded nature of coal in the Navajo Nation. It could not overcome the politics of distribution in the Navajo Nation that is built on the tribe as a welfare state. In this article, I argue that Navajo Green Jobs contained problematic assumptions about the role of decentralization and private entrepreneurship in energy transitions within the Navajo Nation. This attitude worked against the goals of Navajo Green Jobs and alienated tribal lawmakers and coal workers. Although members of Navajo Green Jobs failed to convince the tribal government to embrace sustainable energy technologies, they

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did open the rhetoric of “transition” into Navajo political discourse. This allowed companies like NTEC to repackage coal as a future-orientated industry and ignore the spatial limitations of energy production in tribal communities.

2. Green jobs and “transition” in the Navajo Nation

In this era of the Anthropocene, the politics of climate change force political and academic commentators to focus on transnational politics and governance (Peet et al., 2010). In pursuit of low carbon energy reliance, the language of “transition” has become a subject of political and academic inquiry within policy circles and energy studies. All too often, energy “transition” is understood as a temporal and not spatial process (Bridge et al., 2013). But energy transitions are complicated by the histories, cultures, practices, and existing spatial relations between sites of production and sites of consumption - often these relations of production are unequal. This insight helps us to understand the notion of “energy transition” outside of the temporal language of “progress” and to anticipate the spatial impacts of these shifts - both creative and destructive (Bridge et al., 2013, 339).

Hansen & Coenen suggest that “place-specific norms and values,” such as those defined through participation in extractive industries, “have important influences on the geographically uneven landscape of sustainability transitions” (2015). Newell and Phillips also found that the nature of transition in the global south extends beyond considerations of socio-technical capacities and are heavily reliant on the political economy of energy development of a particular place (2016). And finally, Knox-Hayes and Hayes argue that these “political economic cultures” determine the success or failures of global green initiatives and that universalistic appeals toward transition do not address immediate concerns of local and regional governance (2014). For indigenous communities in the United States, energy transitions are complicated by the histories of settler colonialism and development (Fixico, 2012; Rosier, 2013; Smith and Frehner, 2010). The United States encourages federally-recognized tribal governments to lease lands to multinational corporations for coal, oil, and other forms of non-renewable development (Hosmer et al., 2004). Decades worth of participation in this geography of energy has defined the spatial and social embeddedness of extractive industries for many reservation communities, what Osage scholar Jean Dennison calls, “colonial entanglement” (Dennison, 2012).

What is more, in an era of “zombie” neoliberalism (Peck, 2010), local manifestations of “transition” contain neoliberal policy tropes and structures (Bond and Dorsey, 2010). Since the 1990s, we have seen that neoliberalism works beyond the “retreat of the state” and is embedded in new government programs (Bakker, 2010, 720; Lockie and Higgins, 2007; Peck and Theodore, 2012). In practice neoliberal rhetoric, frameworks, and policy solutions combine with other trends in governance to produce *hybrid* neoliberal outcomes (McCarthy, 2005). Understanding neoliberal governance as a particular and not just global phenomenon is difficult because it combines with trends that are unique to a community, i.e., “variegated” or “actual existing neoliberalism” (Brenner et al., 2010; Brenner and Theodore, 2002). However, critics question how we can talk about neoliberalism as a multi-scalar, global phenomenon if it is always particular to place. As Bakker writes, scholars “limit” their analyses to issues of “when, where, and why neoliberal projects are implemented, succeed and/or fail” when they are entirely reliant on limited case studies (2010, 721). While Bridge claims, “...the significance of neoliberalization lies not in marketization,” or what I refer to in this article as entrepreneurship, “but the transformation of property on which market exchange ultimately rests” - leading to new state-led forms of “primitive accumulation” (2014). In other words, neoliberalism is fundamentally a global, government-led wave of private enclosures and we have to remain cognizant of its universal characteristics when working through case studies. But Indian reservations require attention to the continued threat of colonialism,

historical process of development, and Native-led challenges to embedded governing trends, which is why a focus on neoliberalism’s hybridity is more useful for understanding how it confronts the spatial and social embeddedness of existing governing practices.

In the Navajo Nation, energy “transition” introduced neoliberal policy frameworks that changed not only the kinds of energy produced within the reservation, but also the conditions under which they were produced. “Transition” that is assumed as a temporal and “inevitable” (Powell, 2017) forward movement of new technologies blinded members of Navajo Green Jobs from focusing on the uneven and spatially defined geography of energy production in the U.S. Southwest. For most of the twentieth century, the Navajo Nation was “incorporated” (Hall and Snipp, 1988; Reno, 1981) into the construction of a southwestern regional energy economy in which raw coal was mined *within* the reservation, but converted into energy and consumed *outside* of it (Needham, 2014; Nies, 2014). This energy economy was spatially defined and socially embedded. Navajo Green Jobs proposed changes to tribal control over energy development that would have disrupted the internal distributive politics of coal in the reservation. Through ethnographic revisits between 2009 and 2013, this paper provides a longitudinal assessment of energy “transition” discourse in the Navajo Nation. Claims in this article are based on the author’s meeting notes as a participant during the Navajo Green Jobs campaign from 2008 to 2009 and subsequent interviews with key actors involved in activism and governance within the Navajo Nation. This case study demonstrates transition can be both “creative and destructive”; and in the context of neoliberal governance, a vehicle through which neoliberal policy frameworks intrudes onto the landscape.

3. Extracting Indian Country

Extractive industries have long victimized indigenous communities throughout the world (Churchill and LaDuke, 1986; Gedicks, 1993, 2001; LaDuke, 1999). In the United States, the role of tribal governments in agreeing to and encouraging extractive industries has complicated existing settler-colonial dynamics. Through “blood struggle” (Wilkinson, 2005), accommodation, or what some view as a politics of “recognition” (Coulthard, 2014), tribal peoples have increased their political rights vis-à-vis the U.S. federal government. In the mid-1970s, the U.S. devolved authorities previously reserved to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in order to elect tribal “councils,” including the ability to make final decisions on coal and power plant leases. This devolution of authority was understood for most in “Indian Country” through the idiom of “sovereignty” and “self-determination.”

But the “sovereignty” of indigenous governments is internally contested and concerns tribal policies toward extractive industries for both jobs and revenues (Barker, 2005, 2011; Powell, 2015; Smith and Frehner, 2010). In earlier scholarship, Dunbar-Ortiz (1979), Reno (1981), Ruffing (1978), Snipp (1988) and others (Jorgensen, 1978) argued that the legacy of mineral development for Native communities is part of a larger history of colonialism, which created “dependency” on coal as a primary source of development (Ambler, 1990; Weiss, 1984; White, 1983). From a political ecology perspective, resource extraction in tribal lands is understood as an extension of colonialism and environmental racism (Ambler, 1990; Churchill and LaDuke, 1986; Fixico, 2012; LaDuke, 1992, 1999). In this work, legal-political rights that were won through struggle and activism in the 1970s are today instituted through extractive industries in problematic ways. The legal-political-territorial rights afforded to tribal governments are not always consistent with the “lived” dimensions of indigenous territorial sovereignty (Coffey and Tsosie, 2001; Powell, 2015).

The Navajo Nation, the largest recognized tribal government in the United States, is still heavily dependent on coalmining and coal combustion for jobs and revenues, despite recent setbacks to the industry. Since the federal government established the Navajo reservation in 1868, Navajo boundaries have expanded. This is rare in Indian Country

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