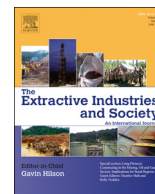




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Anticipating fracking: Shale gas developments and the politics of time in Lancashire, UK

Anna Szolucha

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, Fosswinkelstgt 6, 5020 Bergen, Norway



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ABSTRACT

For over four years, local residents, the government, industry and scientists have been anticipating the start of shale gas operations at a site at Preston New Road in Lancashire, North West England. This paper examines how these different social actors perceive and think about time, as well as the future of fracking. Many of their disagreements expose the diverging ways in which they make sense of time and point to time and temporality as a useful lens for understanding their respective rationalities. Time also emerges as a principal mode of experiencing inequality, because not all notions of time are equivalent in relation to power. The three dispositions towards time that are played out in the shale gas debate in Lancashire construct time as: owned, as being the same in every moment, and as having real social and environmental effects. This article analyses the politics of time, which is an arena in which these notions are articulated and negotiated, and where they compete for a hegemonic position with varying success. It concludes by arguing that inscribing the future with particular characteristics is a powerful tool that forecloses some arguments and creates power disparities in debates around unconventional resource extraction.

1. Introduction

There is now a 24-h protest outside the Preston New Road (PNR) shale gas exploratory pad, but before the drilling rig was brought in at around 4 a.m. on 27 July 2017, life at the site used to begin around 7 a.m. as the protesters gathered and the HGV trucks delivering aggregate and equipment started arriving from 7.30 a.m. The construction of the fracking pad (that was completed in summer 2017) is perceived as a national test case that could influence the future of shale gas in the UK. Cuadrilla Resources – the site operators – are intending to drill and hydraulically fracture up to four exploratory wells, the vertical section of which will extend to a depth of 3500 m (Arup, 2014). This will be Cuadrilla's latest attempt at exploring for shale gas in Lancashire after they ran into technical problems at a few other sites: their first shale gas well at Preese Hall caused minor earthquakes in 2011, prompting a temporary moratorium on fracking in the UK (Fig. 1). The moratorium was lifted in 2012 and in 2014, then-Prime Minister David Cameron announced that Britain was going “all out for shale”.¹

Early mornings in North West England are often quite chilly and the brisk wind from the Irish Sea that rolls over the Fylde plain pierces through the bodies of arriving police liaison officers, as well as the gas workers and security guards who wear orange high-visibility clothing and safety helmets as they change shifts. This is a crucial window of

opportunity that protesters use to try to block the entrance by lying on the ground, “locked-on” to other protesters. These blockades, which can involve as many as thirteen people, have obstructed the entrance to the site and prevented HGV deliveries for many hours, which has had an impact on Cuadrilla's daily regime.

The time regime at the PNR site has been subject to a traffic management plan approved by the local county council, which is the minerals planning authority for Lancashire. This regime integrates the rota of Cuadrilla's contractors and employees, the delivery schedules of suppliers, the overtime arrangements of police officers, the travel time of motorists who drive on this main road in the direction of Preston or Blackpool, and the tactical time of the protesters engaged in direct action. It also organises the free time of local residents and people from across the country who gather at the entrance of the future fracking pad daily to engage in small acts of resistance by walking slowly in front of trucks, climbing on top of tankers, or waving placards asking passing drivers for “honk support”. Although these activities seem to converge in the same temporal moment, they represent different relationships with the past, present and future; they are grounded in disjunctive senses of time reckoning (temporalities) and different social orderings of history. They are each imbued with their own social and cultural assumptions about the relationship between past, present and future (Hirsch and Stewart, 2005).

¹ E-mail address: Anna.szolucha@uib.no.

¹ For a more detailed timeline of events, see Supplementary materials.



Fig. 1. Cuadrilla's developments within its licence area in Lancashire. Adapted from Oil and Gas Authority, information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

Despite the complexity of this situation, in dominant narratives, fracking sites are often perceived as futuristic arenas where the modernising potential of states is being realised for the benefit of their populations. Conversely, in critical accounts, shale gas developments function as sites of corporate dominance of speculative futures and group interests. Taking cue from the anthropology of the future, I challenge the images of homogenous time that these accounts rely on, and show how multiple forms of time reckoning coexist side by side and compete for a hegemonic position. The aim in analysing these different temporalities is to provide a grounded account of an experience of “temporal incongruity” (Miyazaki, 2015) that is characteristic of many modernisation agendas. The diverging senses of time, that form the object of this study, can be understood as context-specific and multiple socio-political and cultural imaginaries of time and future. They are analysed here to explore the ways in which they act on the present (Persoon and van Est, 2000). Pels (2015) pointed out that the recognition of the multiplicity of ways in which people think about the future should prompt us to ask questions such as: “What is it, when is it? Where, and for whom does it work? Whose future is it, and whose does it exclude?” Although Pels (2015) employs these questions mainly for the task of critical self-reflection of anthropologists, I suggest that they are also central for analysing power and inequality in polarised contexts such as those involving shale gas activities.

Full-scale hydraulic fracturing has not yet started in Lancashire but like the developments in the USA, Australia and across Europe, it has been highly contested (Lis and Stasik, 2017; Rijke et al., 2016; Willow et al., 2014). These cases provide useful examples of how various actors in the same locations imagine and live toward the future in different ways. In such contexts, power relationships and resistance take shape not only in the homogeneous time of the site's daily time regime but also in the complex realm of the politics of time where political forms

and effects are generated in anticipation of extraction (Adams et al., 2009; Weszkalnys, 2014).

Close attention to the politics of time helps us to understand the political and economic integration of various temporalities to the exclusion of others. In this article, I argue that for shale gas development to be successful, the disjunctive temporalities of the state, markets and science need to coalesce in a powerful mode of anticipation marked by the generative forces of speculation about future possibilities, as well as a drive for scientific knowledge and the uncertainty implicated in it. I also reconstruct the various historicities that resonate with different actors' conceptions of time, which impart a particular vision of the past onto images of desired futures.

Different actors, active in the same context in Lancashire, may espouse diverging attitudes towards time. These diverging senses of and dispositions towards time are an important aspect of people's rationalities, affects and actions. A more thorough understanding of differing ideas about time and future is essential for comprehending what exactly they mean by security, sustainable development (Persoon and van Est, 2000) and common good – a set of goals that all sides claim they want to advance. Throughout the present article, then, such differing notions of time, as employed by various actors in the shale gas debate in Lancashire, are defined and analysed.

The analysis in this article is informed by over two years of ethnographic and participatory research into shale gas in Lancashire conducted between 2015 and 2018, as well as semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders and shale gas experts. During fieldwork, I attended the meetings and events of the local planning authorities, public inquiry hearings, protests, the events of the local anti- and pro-fracking groups and national regulatory agencies. I also conducted participant observation at the entrance to the PNR site at different stages of the construction process. Cuadrilla was approached for interviews but

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