

Painful Pasts, Uncertain Futures and “Just Transition:” How Two Historic Coal Communities Contend with the New Energy Order

Abstract

Decades’ long transitions away from coalmining have left historical coal communities reeling from consequences associated with economic downturn as no comparable industry replaces the former local, coal economy. New prospects for a brighter future in a renewable energy order have materialized via the concept of “just transition,” a concept that promises to leave no one behind during the *green transition*. However, coal communities approach “just transition” and the path to a more sustainable energy order, as dictated by elites in government, without much enthusiasm. This project addresses the politics of a waning coal industry and energy transition in two historic coal regions, Eastern Kentucky, United States, and Upper Silesia, Poland. These coal regions once stood at the center of the fossil fuel energy order, as coal powered the era of industrial development and human progress. Today they face uncertain futures due to the previous protracted transition and current pressures resulting from climate mitigation policies. Through an analysis of local history, community observation, and interviews with locals, I offer a local perspective of the energy transition. Existing plans for an energy transition that emanate from elites in government and technology, neglect tangible experiences of cultural and emotional loss by locals in declining coal communities, and the social well-being that the coal industrial order ensured. I hypothesize that there is a disjuncture between state policy agendas and affected communities, resulting from policymakers’ over-emphasis of future collective benefits without an acknowledgment of previous loss. Furthermore, communities suffering from post-coal transition duress struggle with questions about social wellbeing in the oncoming, post-fossil fuel energy order but policymakers neglect to address that in their plans. The aim is to elucidate the complicated dynamics of the energy transition, in coal communities and beyond, in order to engage existing scholarship’s overly-positive, elite-technical perspectives, and suggest policy correctives.

Historic coal communities in the United States and Europe have been in decline for decades as coal production and use decreased. Decades of ongoing transition away from coalmining have left historical coal communities reeling from associated consequences such as economic downturn and socio-cultural losses. Commitments to a new, “just transition,” a term that defines leaving no one behind in fossil fuel extraction zones, as increasingly sustainable energy systems expand, are received as inauthentic in coal communities. This project addresses the tortuous politics of a descending coal industry and cleaner energy transition in Eastern Kentucky, United States, and Upper Silesia, Poland since 1980. It shines a light on the complexities of moving away from an industrial, fossil fuel energy system born in industrial modernity in two regions, but it also serves as a proxy because communities like Eastern Kentucky and Upper Silesia are microcosms of the costs and benefits associated with the transition away from an “old” energy order towards a new one that is yet to be defined. Scholarship about energy order transition too often focuses on stakeholders and policy as well as efficiency concerns but neglects actually existing experiences. However, a recent strand in cultural and environmental sociology (Hochschild 2016, Elliot 2018) delves into the role of memory, emotion, and loss in communities’ perceptions of elite, governmental initiatives. The central hypothesis of the project is that place and time specific, on-the-ground cultural, emotional

experiences of loss and decline hold answers to why government crafted energy transition policies face challenges in historic coal communities.

Managing an energy order transition is messy because it requires thinking through technical replacements of dirtier energy sources as well as the social implications of the cleaner order. Attempts to sustain the old system with new technology or truly transformative approaches to the energy order both carry significant social ramifications. An energy order affects how humans live, what they expect and understand about social progress (Beamish and Biggart 2017). The hydrocarbon economy gave rise to industrial modernity, basing human progress and social development more broadly, on continuous economic growth. As such, how can we imagine *a good life* or what constitutes social wellbeing, in a less carbon intensive energy order, if we propagate old ideas while marginalizing open discussions about what familiar things must be lost in order to make uncertain gains (Elliott 2018). Wellbeing or the *good life* in this research are understood as what arose out of industrial modernity's welfare systems, including decent salaries for relatively secure employment, prestige associated with labor that was part of larger national progress, belief in hard work as a means to increasing financial gain, as well as, time for leisure and community relations maintenance. Coal communities have endured ongoing, *ungraceful* transition away from the dirtiest hydrocarbon, losing jobs, community and cultural connection, political allegiance and the sense of their place in the larger social structure.

Regions historically dependent on coal, risk further alienation when policymakers make decisions in haste, due to simultaneous urgencies of inflation, high energy costs, and post-pandemic duress and international security issues arising from the Ukraine-Russia war. As such, under current circumstances well-meaning plans for a "just transition" that emanate from elites in government or the private sector, may at worst fall to neglect or at best continue a history of sidelining local voices. Local socio-economic problems deriving from decades of deindustrialization, ill-equipped social safety nets, and marginalization of local input leave coal communities convinced that seemingly new solutions still avoid direct attention to unique, regional problems and experiences. In addition, coal communities' expectations of human wellbeing built on industrial modernity's social structure and elite-government plans that promise that model of wellbeing within a new energy order, are both unproductive for an ecologically sound, actual "just transition."

I utilize archival and secondary materials, news coverage of regional energy transition issues, over 30 interviews with locals, and macroeconomic data to interrogate coal community lived experiences from 1980 to the present, to examine contests of a transition to a sustainable energy order as dictated by elite policymakers. Research on locally engaged publics in energy transitions acknowledges policy response by communities (Hess 2013, 2015) but under-emphasizes the emotional-cultural aspects of ongoing transition duress. Both Hochschild (2016) and Elliott (2018) underscore the importance of culture in understanding seemingly paradoxical attitudes and an exploration of how the climate crisis may force community losses for yet unclear future gains. Place-based studies of coal communities (Gaventa 1980, Bell and York 2010, Bendyk, Papajak, Lewin 2019, Gibbs 2021) demystify local perspectives on pressing issues. Research about how and why large scale, state-initiated climate crisis mitigation efforts lead to governmental animosity within some communities of the industrialized world is crucial to understanding the high stakes in an energy transition (Driscoll 2021).

Preliminary analysis points to significant distrust of politicians, particularly those at the national level. That lack of faith in politicians translates to a disconnection from partisan politics and a dismissal of politicians' communication about a variety of social policies. As such, policies

to support post-coal communities like Eastern Kentucky or Upper Silesia in an ongoing transition, like “just transition” initiatives, seem to locals as having no significant effect on the wellbeing of the region. While local community members speak of satisfaction with a healthier natural environment since reductions in coal extraction and use, they note that better-designed and executed policies, had the capacity to deliver those same ends. It appears that politically unacknowledged cultural-emotional losses of transition in the decades since 1980 do not impede local community members’ hopes for a future in a different energy order. Those hopes for a better future though feature within the context of a *green* industrialism, where the clean energy order takes the place of the dirty energy order. As such, there is agreement between elite-government plans and local community members’ expectations but community members contest government policies for governments’ lack of atonement for previous transition wrongs. The experiences also lead to locals’ assumptions about how poorly new transition policies are likely to be executed by politicians and inauthenticity in the policies’ true aims.

The goal of this research is to make sense of the paradoxes that complicate the energy transition, in coal communities and beyond, in order to engage existing scholarship’s one-sided, elite-technical, historically disengaged perspectives, and suggest policy correctives. Furthermore, the focus is on interrogating how popular standards of wellbeing and *good life* stand in the way of contending with new standards fit for a more sustainable energy order. Coal communities are one example of potential losers in the move to a more sustainable energy order and by understanding the source of contestations within a coal communities, I contribute to opportunities that address real concerns as opposed to theoretical ones. The knowledge produced in this project has the potential to aid coal communities in their efforts for recognition and lead to increasingly nuanced, engaged and more socially just energy order policy, across society.