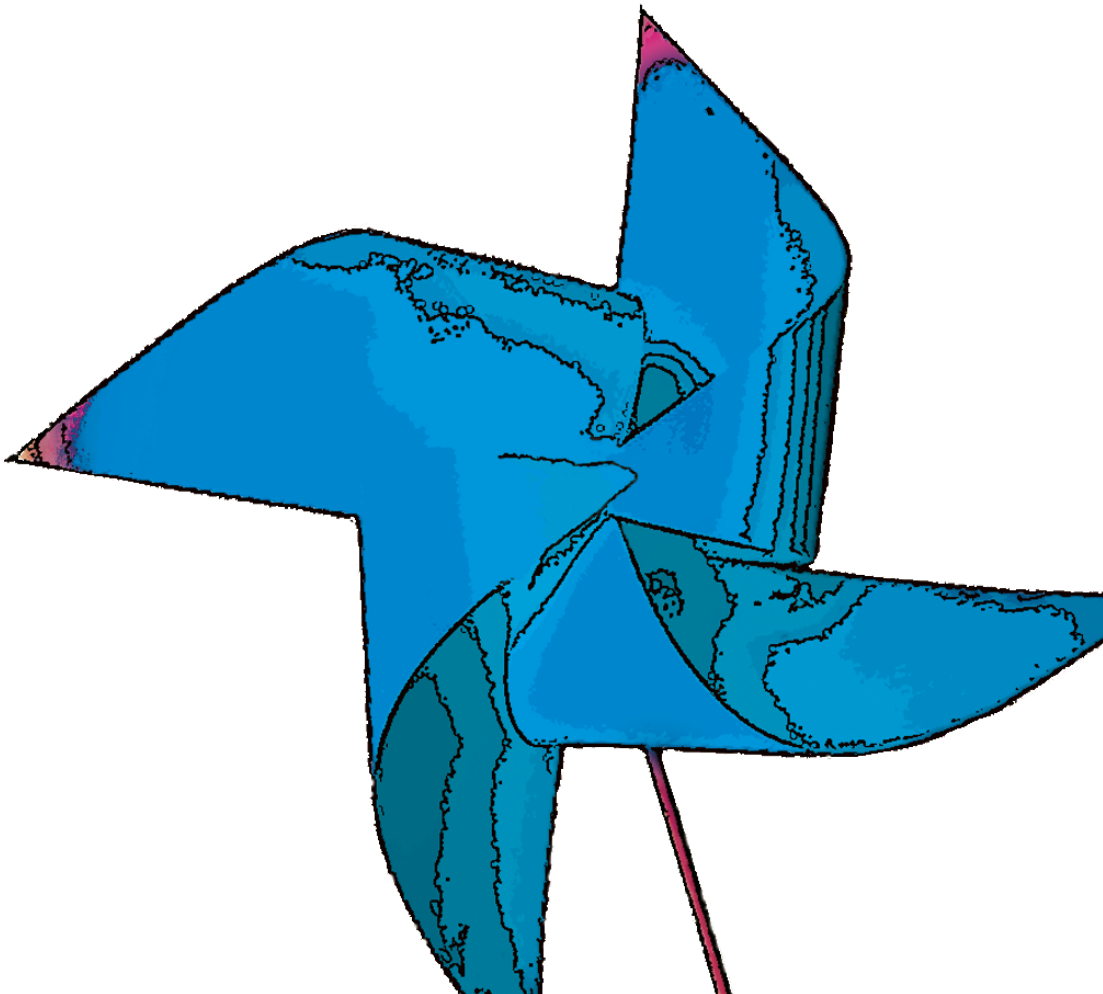


**ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG**  
BRUSSELS OFFICE

JAMES ANGEL

# **STRATEGIES OF ENERGY DEMOCRACY**





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ENERGY DEMOCRACY**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

As global temperatures rise, geopolitical conflict over notions of “energy security” intensifies and people across the world are left unable to meet basic energy needs, there appears to be an emerging global consensus on the need for “energy transition” towards low-carbon energy sources. The consensual framing of the coming energy transition as “something we can all agree on”, however, masks a highly contested political terrain.<sup>2</sup> Everywhere, struggle around energy is rife, with those invested in a revitalised “green capitalism” coming into antagonism with movements demanding emancipatory energy alternatives.

Yet too often, the energy debate is reduced to questions of science (what proportion of carbon in the atmosphere should we be pursuing?), questions of technology (what is the next techno-fix panacea to rally behind?), questions of economics (when will solar or wind be as cheap as coal?), or questions of elite management (what can the “experts” at BP/the EU/the UN do to save us?). By stripping questions of energy transition of their political content, those with power are attempting to ensure that dangerous questions are sidelined: questions about who benefits and who loses out from transition, whose voices are heard, what kinds of energy arrangements are desirable for the majority of us and which arrangements are not.

Those of us seeking to challenge the energy status quo, then, must force questions of politics – questions of conflicting interests, control and ownership, colonialism, class, gender, race; in short, questions of power – to the centre of the energy debate. It is in this context that the discourse and agenda of energy democracy has emerged. The appeal to democracy offers an explicit political claim: while our enemies seek to increase their stranglehold over power (political power, economic power and the power used to fuel our societies), we must take this power back.

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- 1 This introductory section draws heavily from Tadzio Müller’s opening speech at the Strategies of Energy Democracy workshop organized by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Brussels Office on 1–2 October 2015.
  - 2 See: Swyngedouw, E. (2010) “Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change”. *Theory Culture and Society* 27(2–3), 213–232.



The hope, moreover, is that energy democracy might offer new spaces for collaboration between ecological movements and movements for social, economic and workplace justice. These movements have, in the past, typically struggled to find common ground on account of different class backgrounds, diverging political traditions and, sometimes, directly conflicting agendas and interests. Our enemies play an active role in creating and exploiting these divisions, routinely pitting us against each other with a series of lies: it's jobs or the climate; fossil fuels or higher bills. Perhaps, by integrating the demand for low-carbon energy with demands for workplace democracy, affordable tariffs and just transition, the energy democracy agenda might make a start in creating a consciousness of shared struggle and mutual solidarity.





In the years that have followed the birth of the energy democracy agenda, much has been gained. The term has spread throughout the European climate justice struggle as well as some trade unions.<sup>3</sup> Discourses of energy democracy have entered the academy<sup>4</sup> and even the narratives of political parties and governments of the left.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, community-owned energy co-operatives are becoming increasingly ubiquitous: beyond the traditional strongholds of Germany (where some calculate that half of the burgeoning renewable sector is owned by co-operatives)<sup>6</sup> and Denmark (where 23% of wind comes from renewable co-operatives)<sup>7</sup>, the model is now taking off in Southern Europe and the UK.<sup>8</sup> Energy democracy is now moving beyond the local-scale as well, with interesting municipal, regional and national experiments underway.

The advent of left electoral projects across Europe now demands a rapid concretisation of the energy democracy project: with progressive policy-makers and ministers seeking new energy pathways fast, we need clear answers to difficult questions, from financing options, to new models of public management, to industrial conversion strategies. This paper aims to clarify the debates at hand, open up new questions and help take us further towards some of the answers we need.

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- 3 See Platform (2014) "Energy Beyond Neoliberalism" Soundings 59, 96-114; Sweeney, S. (2012) Resist, Reclaim, Restructure New York: University of Cornell Global Labour Institute.
  - 4 Becker, S. and Kunze, C. (2014) "Transcending community energy: collective and politically motivated projects in renewable energy (CPE) across Europe" People, Place and Polity 8(3), 180-191.
  - 5 See, for instance, UK Shadow Energy Secretary Lisa Nandy's speech to Labour Party Conference from September 2015, available at: <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/130122805099/speech-by-lisa-nandy-to-labour-party-annual>.
  - 6 Die Wende – Energie in Bürgerhand, Agentur für Erneuerbare Energien (2013). "Definition und Marktanalyse von Bürgerenergie in Deutschland" Lüneburg. Available from: [http://www.buendnis-buergerenergie.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/downloads/Studien/Studie\\_Definition\\_und\\_Marktanalyse\\_von\\_Buergerenergie\\_in\\_Deutschland\\_BBEn.pdf](http://www.buendnis-buergerenergie.de/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/Studien/Studie_Definition_und_Marktanalyse_von_Buergerenergie_in_Deutschland_BBEn.pdf)
  - 7 Haas, T. (2012) "Greening the Economy?" Available from: <http://arranca.org/ausgabe/45/greening-the-economy>
  - 8 Kunze, C. and Becker, S. (2014) Energy Democracy in Europe: A Survey and Outlook. Brussels: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. Available at: <http://rosalux-europa.info/publications/books/Energy-democracy-in-Europe/>.



# CONCEPTUALISING ENERGY DEMOCRACY<sup>9</sup>

## “ENERGY DEMOCRACY” AS A CONTESTED TERM

The origins of the concept of “energy democracy” are in the German climate justice movement. The 2012 Lausitz Climate Camp saw a number of different groups agree on the following definition:

*“Energy democracy means that everybody is ensured access to sufficient energy. Energy production must thereby neither pollute the environment nor harm people. More concretely, this means that fossil fuel resources must be left in the ground, the means of production need to be socialised and democratised, and that we must rethink our overall attitude towards energy consumption”.<sup>10</sup>*

This makes for a radical conception of energy democracy: fossil fuels left in the ground; universal access; socialised production; and transformed attitudes to consumption.

Trade Unions for Energy Democracy offer an account that is in many ways similar:

*“A trade union approach to energy democracy can be built around three broad and strategic objectives, namely the need to resist the dominant agenda of the large energy corporations and their allies; the need to reclaim to the public sphere parts of the energy economy that have been privatized or marketized; and the need to restructure the global energy system in order to massively scale up renewable and low-carbon energy, aggressively implement energy conservation, ensure job-creation and local wealth creation, and assert community and democratic control over the energy sector.”<sup>11</sup>*

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9 This section draws heavily on Conrad Kunze’s contribution to the “Strategies of Energy Democracy” workshop organised by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Brussels Office on 1-2 October 2015.

10 Quote from Klimacamp.info on the website of the Büro für eine demokratische Energiewende, see: [www.energie-demokratie.de](http://www.energie-demokratie.de)

11 Sweeney, S. (2012) Resist, Reclaim, Restructure New York: University of Cornell Global Labour Institute, p. 31.

Again, this offers a strong progressive agenda: an oppositional approach to marketisation and privatisation; community and democratic control; ambitious low-carbon investment. While the climate justice account invokes a need for rethinking consumption attitudes – perhaps implying ideas of de-growth – the TUED conception calls for job-creation and local wealth creation, invoking a Keynesian agenda more naturally compatible with a conventional pro-growth stance.

There is no guarantee that the discourse of energy democracy will retain progressive political content. The Conservative Party in Britain, for example, have talked of the need to decentralise energy production to deliver “power to the people”.<sup>12</sup> There is, in fact, an emerging neoliberal agenda for distributed low-carbon transition, breaking up large monopolies to facilitate increased market competition. The key actors, here, are financially comfortable individual households and communities, with smaller-scale private sector partners profiting. While energy co-operatives are encouraged, little attention is given to barriers to participation on account of pre-existing inequalities of wealth and social capital. A progressive politics of energy democracy is, of course, not counterposed to small-scale distributed ownership. However, in contrast to the neoliberal vision, a progressive agenda foregrounds universal access and socialised control, in opposition to market relations.

In sum, “energy democracy”, like all concepts, is contested and flexible. We must remain attentive to the threat of neoliberal co-optation and struggle to retain radical political content.

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<sup>12</sup> Speech by David Cameron hosted by Greenpeace in December 2007. Available at <http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/599729>.



## ALTERNATIVES TO ENERGY DEMOCRACY

Energy democracy is not the only term being used to articulate political claims towards an emancipatory energy transition. A key shortcoming of the current discourse is its limited traction in the global south. Global Justice Now, a UK-based NGO, use the term “energy justice”, seeing this as more resonant with the narratives of their southern allies. In Catalonia and Latin America, the favoured term is “energy sovereignty”, which offers a clearer rejection of imperialism and colonialism. Some academics and UK campaign group Platform have developed the idea of “energy commons”, betraying a desire for collectivised, participatory control in opposition to both privatisation and top-down statism.

The co-existence of energy democracy alongside a multitude of alternative concepts is not, necessarily, a problem. Rather, it is best for movements to define whatever terms are most useful to meeting their political goals, under the conditions they operate within. European groups demanding energy democracy must, however, act in solidarity with those on the frontline of fossil fuel colonialism in the global south. We must, then, do all we can to guard against energy democracy becoming a Eurocentric political project and to ensure that the political claims made under the banner of energy democracy are resonant with the needs and interests of struggles elsewhere.



# CONCRETISING ENERGY DEMOCRACY

Energy democracy in action has traditionally been located at the small-scale through community renewable energy co-operatives. However, more recent years have opened up new possibilities for energy democracy at the municipal and national level. This section gives an overview of these different options for enacting energy democracy.

## ENERGY CO-OPERATIVES

Energy co-operatives are companies governed by their members: individuals who invest in the co-op to fund new renewable energy production, or (less commonly) consumers who buy power from the co-op. Energy generated is usually sold back to the national grid, although the possibility for local energy markets is now opening up. In countries where community energy has flourished, this has largely been due to “Feed In Tariffs” (FITs): subsidies to offer co-operatives a generous rate for the energy they sell to the grid. This is certainly true of the community renewable renaissance in Germany, yet these subsidies will be cut by 2017, leaving the future of Germany’s “Energiewende” in doubt.

Energy co-operatives are rapidly multiplying across the globe, allowing millions of people to become active producers of the energy they use. One problem, though, is the accessibility of this model beyond privileged middle-class investors. Membership of a co-op is usually dependent upon a minimum financial buy-in. Thus, a key factor determining the progressive potential of the co-operative model is the rate at which the minimum buy-in is set: while some require a buy-in of hundreds of Euros, co-operatives are free to set this as low as they deem desirable. In practice, the need to attract sufficient capital often means that the minimum buy-in remains substantial. Furthermore, even with a low buy-in, only those able to make large-scale investments can expect a meaningful return.



Co-operatives are still, in a sense, a form of private control: while co-operatives often decide to re-invest substantial proportions of their revenues in social and environmental causes and the local economy, the remaining revenue is distributed as profit to individual members. On such grounds, Berliner Energietisch – a campaign for participatory public ownership of energy in Berlin – decided not to incorporate the preference of some Berlin activists for partial co-operative ownership of the city’s distribution grid, instead opting for full ownership by the local state.

Still, co-operatives remain one important alternative to corporate control. One fruitful area for further exploration is the potential for partnerships between the state and co-operatives. Scotland recently established a state body, Community Energy Scotland (CES), to provide cheap loans to communities seeking to develop renewable co-operatives, giving co-operatives a source of capital that facilitates a lower buy-in rate, promising increased accessibility. CES supported 302 projects in 2012 alone, with Scotland aiming to produce 100% of its energy renewably by 2020.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Kunze, C. and Becker, S. (2014) Energy Democracy in Europe: A Survey and Outlook. Brussels: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. Available at: <http://rosalux-europa.info/publications/books/Energy-democracy-in-Europe/>.



## RE-MUNICIPALISATION

Cities are now emerging as key actors in building energy democracy. Germany provides an inspiring example: following mass privatisation in the 1990s, 60 new non-profit municipally owned supply companies (Stadtwerke) were established between 2007 and 2012, with over 190 distribution grid concessions returning to municipal hands.<sup>14</sup>

The return to municipal control, however, does not guarantee a substantially different model to privatisation. Rather, social movements must organise to push the re-municipalisation drive in a more radical, democratic direction. This was recently attempted by the Berliner Energietisch campaign, which forced (and narrowly lost) a city-wide referendum on their demands for the re-municipalisation of the electricity distribution grid and the creation of a new Stadtwerk to invest in 100% renewable energy, offered at affordable prices, under participatory democratic control. The Energietisch had a number of proposals for the democratisation of municipal control:

1. a board of directors comprised of 1/3rd politicians, 1/3rd workers, and 1/3rd elected citizens;
2. annual neighbourhood assemblies to discuss, critique and advise on the company's progress;
3. an independent ombudsman to convey citizen's concerns;
4. a default obligation of total transparency.

Campaigners in the UK have recently focused on the potential for municipal pension funds in financing energy democracy. Currently, municipal state employees' pension funds are heavily invested in the fossil fuel industry. If municipalities were to divest from fossil fuels and re-invest in new renewable capacity, they could generate enough energy to power the whole of Scotland.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Hall, D. van Nieker, S. Nguyen, J. and Thomas, S. (2013) "Energy Liberalisation, Privatisation and Public Ownership" London: Public Services International Research Unit.

15 Platform, 350.org, Community Reinvest, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Earth Scotland (2015) "Local government pensions, fossil fuels and the transition to a new economy". Available at [http://gofossilfree.org/uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/08/Council\\_Pensions\\_Divest-Reinvest\\_briefing.pdf](http://gofossilfree.org/uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/08/Council_Pensions_Divest-Reinvest_briefing.pdf).



## CENTRAL STATE OWNERSHIP

It seems unlikely that the transition to energy democracy can take place at the local or municipal scale alone. There is a need for large-scale co-ordination, re-distribution and investment and, at present, the central state is the only set of institutions that can facilitate this. Uruguay's left government is pursuing ambitious investment in wind power, aiming to provide 38% of production from wind by 2017 and, ultimately to achieve 100% renewable provision.<sup>16</sup> Most of this new investment has come from Uruguay's state-owned utility company, with this "energy revolution" ensuring almost universal energy access. Uruguay's public utility has real popular support; grassroots protest has repeatedly mobilised in support of the company and against privatisation. While there is much to celebrate here, Uruguay's case should not be idealised. The renewable technology being installed is being imported from foreign private companies. Meanwhile, there is little in the way of democratic participation in the company's governance.

Platform have looked at the role state institutions might play in building energy democracy in the UK. According to their calculations, if North Sea oil had been taxed at a rate equivalent to Norway's regime, £74 billion would have been accrued between 2002 and 2008; enough to finance a plethora of ambitious social and environmental measures. Platform suggest a state-planned phase-out of North Sea oil, via a tax regime geared towards leaving two-thirds of remaining reserves in the ground while extracting the remaining oil slowly over a period of years.<sup>17</sup> Further, Platform suggest the establishment of one or more publicly owned companies to invest in new offshore wind capacity.

Cause for caution, however, comes from the recent case of Greenpeace's campaign against Swedish state-owned utility Vattenfall's plans to expand lignite coal mining in Germany. Greenpeace were able to gain leverage from Vattenfall's status as a state-owned company, galvanising public pressure in Sweden in response to the polluting investments of the company they own. This proved sufficient to push politicians into legislating to stop Vattenfall's plans to expand their lignite operations. In response, Vattenfall announced that while they themselves would not expand their operations, they would sell on the new mines they had built. Owing to a Swedish bylaw stipulating that

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16 Parks, K. (2015) "Uruguay Spends \$2.6 Billion to Become South America Wind Leader". Available from: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-06-17/uruguay-spends-2-6-billion-to-become-south-america-wind-leader>

17 Platform (2014) "The Secret Figures Behind North Sea Oil". Available at: <http://platformlondon.org/scotland/>



public enterprises must act solely on the basis of commercial concerns, the state was powerless to stop the company they owned acting against their will. Further cause for concern comes from the case of South Africa's state-owned utility Eskom, which has recently responded to electricity crisis with a wave of indiscriminate cut-offs, depriving millions of energy access.

Is there a danger that once state utilities reach a certain size, they become too powerful for the state to control? How can an ethos of participatory democracy be retained within the large-scale operations of the state? How can state-owned companies, operating under current market conditions, act to prioritise social or environmental ends? If state companies refuse to maximise commercial success, do they stand a chance of competing? The implication seems to be that for state-owned companies to flourish in the way we would like, at the least, market conditions will have to change. More fundamentally, public enterprise under capitalism will always be limited: so long as state-processes are embedded in social relations premised on competitive accumulation, they will be hard pressed to deliver on social and environmental goals. As such, we arrive at the conclusion recently emphasised publically by Naomi Klein: the low-carbon transition we need is simply not going to happen without a fundamental transformation of capitalist social relations.



# PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Neoliberalism has penetrated all aspects of our societies, shaping our social institutions, our individual and collective behaviours and our identities around the interests of capital. Our public institutions are increasingly run as businesses, staffed and managed by people trained as corporate leaders.

Ioannis Margaris, Vice Chairman of the Greek state-owned electricity distribution grid operating company, has described how Syriza, once in power, found that they had inherited a set of institutions with deeply engrained organisational cultures of neoliberal new public management. This is a system of public administration based on top-down bureaucracy, incentives and targets; strict hierarchies; and a marketised vision of service-provision based on “consumer choice”, cost-effectiveness and economic efficiency. Yet the left lacks its own sophisticated theories of public management, leaving Syriza without ideas or mechanisms for institutional change.

The corporatisation of public services is a generalised trend and has time and again lead to problems for the left. The wave of re-nationalisations in Venezuela and Bolivia, for instance, have seen mixed results and, in some cases, dire messes. This, according to researcher Daniel Chavez, is largely due to a failure to shift the culture of institutions away from new public management, once the state takes control.

Syriza have now made a start on creating the kind of cultural change we need, introducing some elementary changes such as combating fragmentation by including people from all departments in decision-making and exploring new horizontal management structures. Yet, in the words of Ioannis Margaritis: "You can feel the resistance inside state institutions because this changes the power relations."

This raises some urgent prerogatives for crafting energy democracy. We need to develop systems of public management that allow progressives to run utilities in collaborative, democratic and effective ways, once the public takes control. We need to create new programmes of training to school a new generation of public administrators as true public servants, not corporate CEOs. We need to engage with the nitty-gritty details of what it takes to run public enterprises: from hiring processes, to systems of evaluation and the formation of egalitarian and co-operative workplace relations.

# ENERGY POVERTY

While energy access has long been recognised as a key struggle for justice in the global south, recent years have left millions across Europe without access to the basic levels of energy necessary for a dignified life. Energy poverty is driven by a number of immediate causes, most obviously rising bills, falling incomes and poor quality housing. Underpinning these direct factors are the impacts of market liberalisation and privatisation, a) on energy prices, which allow corporations to profit from soaring bills and b) on the housing market, which leave many of us at the mercy of profiteering landlords, uninterested in their tenants health or welfare. Compounding this, are the implications of austerity measures on wages and welfare provision.

The scale of the problem across three different European contexts is outlined below.

> **Spain and Catalonia:** 17% of people in Spain now struggle to pay for basic services: electricity, gas and water.<sup>18</sup> In 2012, power companies cut off energy access to 1.4 million Spanish households.<sup>19</sup> In Catalonia, the price of electricity is 27.6% of the EU average, with prices doubling over the last decade.<sup>20</sup> Over 50% of people's bills in Catalonia has nothing to do with consumption: energy companies have passed on the costs of compensation for earthquakes caused by natural gas storage to consumers, who are also footing the bill for the recent privatisation of the region's water.<sup>21</sup>

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18 Asociacion de Ciencias Ambientales (2014) "7 millones de ciudadanos tienen dificultades para pagar las facturas de energia" Available from: <http://www.cienciasambientales.org.es/index.php/noticias/331-7-millones-de-ciudadanos-tienen-dificultades-para-pagar-las-facturas-de-energia-.html>

19 Vidales, R. (2013) Las eléctricas cortaron la luz de 1,4 millones de viviendas en 2012. Available from: [http://sociedad.elpais.com/sociedad/2013/11/25/actualidad/1385413127\\_290093.html](http://sociedad.elpais.com/sociedad/2013/11/25/actualidad/1385413127_290093.html).

20 La asociacion de los consumidores de energia (2014) "Precios Europeos de la Energia" Available from: <http://www.rankia.com/foros/economia/temas/2277825-comparativa-europea-precios-energia-espanoles-no-merecemos-esto>.

21 Aigua es vida (n.d.) El Que El Rebut De L'aigua No Explica. Available from: [https://plataformaiguaesvida.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/rebut\\_aigua\\_a4.jpg](https://plataformaiguaesvida.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/rebut_aigua_a4.jpg).

> **UK:** Around 10,000 people die every winter due to cold homes. Meanwhile, the Big Six energy companies who have a 90% monopoly over the UK energy sector, increased their profits tenfold between 2007 and 2013.<sup>22</sup> 4 million UK households are in debt to their energy supplier,<sup>23</sup> and 4.7 million people have their electricity supply cut off every few months.<sup>24</sup> To get round their obligation not to disconnect “vulnerable” people, UK energy companies force around 600,000 customers onto prepayment meters in 2013;<sup>25</sup> 100,000 UK households had their homes broken into last year by their energy supplier to install a meter.<sup>26</sup> Once on a prepayment meter, if you cannot afford to top up, you are cut off.

> **Bulgaria:** Bulgaria has one of the highest rates of poverty in Europe.<sup>27</sup> While there is no legally agreed definition of energy poverty in Bulgaria, a recent government study estimated that around 61% of households are affected.<sup>28</sup> Bills have soared since privatisation, with disconnections commonplace, exacerbating already high levels of poverty in Bulgaria.

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22 Competition and Markets Authority (2015) “Energy Market Investigation” Available from: [https://assets.digital.cabinet-office.gov.uk/media/55070c2040f0b613e6000015/Profitability\\_of\\_retail\\_energy\\_supply.pdf](https://assets.digital.cabinet-office.gov.uk/media/55070c2040f0b613e6000015/Profitability_of_retail_energy_supply.pdf)

23 Christie, S. (2014) “Four million households in debt to energy suppliers”. London: The Telegraph. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/household-bills/10781753/Four-million-households-in-debt-to-energy-suppliers.html>.

24 Anonymous author (2015) “Fuel poverty leaves millions without energy”. Available from: <http://moneyfacts.co.uk/news/gas-and-electricity/fuel-poverty-leaves-millions-without-energy/>.

25 Vyas, D. (2015) “Prepayment meter customers should not be charged a premium”. Utility Week. Available from: <http://utilityweek.co.uk/news/prepayment-meter-customers-should-not-be-charged-a-premium/1131082#ViZt7X6rSUK>.

26 Read, S. (2014) “Households are being left in the cold by prepayment meters”. London: The Independent. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/money/spend-save/simon-read-households-are-being-left-in-the-cold-by-prepayment-meters-9817524.html>.

27 See [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:At-risk\\_of\\_poverty\\_or\\_social\\_exclusion\\_rate,\\_2012\\_and\\_2013.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:At-risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_rate,_2012_and_2013.png)

28 Kornazheva, J. (2015) Ivan Ivanov: Energy Exchange in Bulgaria must be no later than the beginning of 2016. Available from: <http://bnr.bg/post/100549034/ivan-ivanov-energiina-borsa-v-bulgaria-trabva-da-ima-nai-kasno-do-nachaloto-na-2016-godina>

## FIGHTING ENERGY POVERTY

Each of these European contexts has seen strong social movement organising in response to the gravity of the situation. In Catalonia, the Alliance Against Fuel Poverty is a network led by those on the frontline of energy injustice. They have used a variety of tactics, from taking individual cases to the ombudsman to the occupation of energy company headquarters to demand action. The campaign recently collected 150,000 signatures in under three months in favour of their popular initiative law, which demanded that the municipality put a stop to housing evictions and stop indiscriminate cut-offs of basic services, with the onus on the utility company to prove that you cannot pay, reversing the current situation. Through generating grassroots pressure, the campaign successfully persuaded the municipality to adopt their law. The campaign is now pushing for transparency on the municipality's data on cut-offs and for a study on the implementation of public models of energy provision.

In the UK, Fuel Poverty Action work in solidarity with pensioners, disabled people, migrants, mothers and others struggling with cold homes. The group use a diversity of tactics, combining practical casework on people's urgent needs with protest and media commentary. FPA have created an "Energy Bill of Rights" that a number of groups internationally have backed, proposing a number of rights from the right to the energy we need to keep warm, to energy that doesn't harm the environment and to an energy system run democratically, in our interests.<sup>29</sup> Pressure generated by FPA has recently lead to an investigation of the UK energy market on account of routine mischarging and poor service provision.

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29 Fuel Poverty Action (2015) Energy Bill of Rights [Online] Available from: <http://www.fuelpovertyaction.org.uk/home-alternative/energy-bill-of-rights-2/>.

In Bulgaria, rising electricity bills were the trigger of a spontaneous national uprising in 2013 that saw protests across 30 cities eventually bring down the government. While the new government have begun to implement a €500million energy efficiency programme, people remain unsatisfied, seeing this as a move to undermine support for the more radical demand of the protest: a return to public ownership.

Activists agree that the language of energy or fuel poverty is problematic, de-politicising the issue by casting people as passive victims as opposed to political actors in struggle against injustice. Across Europe, governments and corporations have used energy poverty as a justification for continued fossil fuel extraction and attacks on renewable energy, repeating the lie that the costs of renewable energy is to blame.

Yet this has also proved a highly productive area to organise around. In both Catalonia and the UK, activists had previously struggled to mobilise broad movements around issues of climate justice and energy democracy. Framing campaigns around energy poverty ensured a connection with people's immediate material realities and struggles, galvanising diverse grassroots alliances and helping raise consciousness of the problems of privatisation and the need to shift power.



# TRADE UNIONS AND JUST TRANSITION

The formation of the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy network – an international alliance of unions pushing a progressive vision of democratised low-carbon transition – is a laudable step forward for the integration of progressive ecological and labour politics.<sup>30</sup> However, most of Europe’s major trade unions remain ambiguous and, sometimes, openly oppositional towards low-carbon transition.

One notable exception in this regard is the case of the labour movement in South Africa. Since 2008, South Africa has been hit by severe electricity crisis, blighted by constant shortages, black-outs and disconnections. Following typical neoliberal *shock doctrine* logic, state and capital have endeavoured not to let this crisis go to waste, seeing an opportunity to open up new markets, encouraging new private investment in coal and nuclear, as well as renewables.

In response, several South African trade unions have fashioned a united programme of resistance. A recent attempt by the state to increase energy tariffs by 25% was successfully blocked by movement pressure. This trade union coalition operates under the banner of “one million climate jobs”, demanding generous public investment in new jobs in low-carbon sectors. Support for this demand attracted a 100,000-strong petition, which the state refused to act upon. Since the tragic 2012 Marikana massacre, in which 34 striking mineworkers were shot, mining unions have come to refuse to defend jobs in dangerous extractive industries, instead demanding the transition to better, safer jobs in clean industry.

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30 See <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/>.



Yet for South African activist and researcher Brian Ashley, the just transition agenda must become more concrete: without definitive answers to the questions of how this transition can be financed and how industrial sectors can be converted, we will struggle to move beyond sloganeering. Our plan must be for decent jobs: union hostility to the just transition agenda is unsurprising, given that renewable sector jobs are often precarious, poorly paid and un-unionised.

We must not avoid difficult questions here. Several studies have shown the ecological benefits promised by a shorter working week.<sup>31</sup> Further, the shift towards participatory democratic control of energy and other resources demands increased time: few of us have the time to take part in complex decision-making when we spend so much of our lives at work. We should not forget the relations of alienation and exploitation at the heart of the labour process; emancipatory politics should not end at the call for “more jobs”. And important feminist scholarship prompts us to re-consider the value of the vital unpaid labour – historically gendered as “women’s work” – of domestic labour and caring for each other. While these broader questions of work, care and time complicate the task at hand, we cannot afford to sideline these debates in the formulation of our energy democracy agenda.

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31 Coote, A. Franklin, J. Simms, A. (2010) “21 Hours” London: New Economics Foundation. Available at: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/21-hours>.

# OUTLOOK: STATE, POWER, POLITICS

*“The alternative to the demand “What’s your alternative?” is to counter it with questions such as “alternative for whom?” “alternative to what?”, and to replace it wherever possible with the question “Whose side are you on?”*

Larry Lohmann, researcher at The Corner House<sup>32</sup>

This paper has re-visited a number of questions that have, for some time, been at the heart of the energy democracy debate: questions of narrative, scale, ownership, finance, jobs. This return to familiar ground has, hopefully, proved illuminating, charting the progress that has been made in recent years, introducing new layers of complexity and opening up new questions and possibilities.

Yet we should not lose sight of the provocation that opened our discussion: energy transition must be *politicised*. Perhaps the most important questions to be asking, at this point, are questions of organisation, strategy and power. In short, and bearing in mind the suggestion of Larry Lohmann offered above: who currently calls the shots over energy transition, how might existing power relations be transformed in our favour and who, we might add, are we referring to in this assumption of a unified “our” or “we” of a movement for energy democracy?

For Syriza’s Ioannis Margaritis, recent months demonstrate that power no longer operates, primarily, at the traditional level of the nation state but, rather, at the international stage. When Syriza introduced capital controls in a bid to re-assert national sovereignty, Greece’s social institutions began to collapse. Our globalised capitalist economy places the basic necessities of life – from food, to energy and money – in the hands of unaccountable and unelected supranational bodies, whether transnational corporations and financial institutions or their political proxies, in this instance embodied by the Troika. With Greece’s social fabric at breaking point, transnational capital had a decisive bargaining chip to bring to the negotiating table.

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32 Lohmann, L. (2014) “An Alternative to “Alternatives”” Dorset: The Cornerhouse. Available at: <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/alternative-alternatives>.

What implications, then, for energy democracy? We cannot abandon the nation state, on account of the large-scale co-ordination, redistribution and investment this can facilitate. Yet the new state institutions of energy democracy we want threaten the power of transnational capital and, hence, will inevitably be met with strong resistance. How can we avoid replicating the Greek experience? Across Latin America, governments of the left have successfully resisted neoliberal rule; while we must acknowledge the limitations and contradictions of Latin America's left turn, the case of Uruguay explored earlier makes plain the progressive potential. Here, the electoral success of the left has depended upon the mobilisation of strong grassroots support; this, then, is the task in Europe. To make a start on doing so, a sophisticated understanding of how transnational power now operates will be essential.

We must also ask what kind of social institutions can be crafted at the local, municipal or regional level, which might make a start on liberating us from our dependence on transnational processes. Accordingly, the formation of spaces of energy democracy at scales beneath the nation state becomes all the more important. The case of Berlin's recent struggle for participatory municipal energy transition can prove illuminating here, offering us a concrete understanding of how municipal energy governance could be transformed along the lines of sustainability, social justice and radical democracy.

The Energietisch campaign helps us to imagine transformed and democratised state institutions. Neoliberalism has seen an erosion of spaces for politics: spaces where conflicting interests can encounter each other; where competing visions of social organisation can be voiced. Instead, neoliberalism forces the illusion of consensual agreement: "we all agree that austerity, privatisation and liberalisation are necessary," we are told; "so let's leave it to our business-schooled expert managers to get on with their jobs".<sup>33</sup> To craft energy democracy, new spaces of politics must be forced open: the Energietisch vision of elected governors and neighbourhood assemblies offers us one proposal for how this might be done.

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33 See: Swyngedouw, E. (2010) "Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change". *Theory Culture and Society* 27(2-3), 213-232.

Yet, Berlin also presents cause for caution. The Energietisch won 83% of the popular vote in the referendum it forced on its demands. But the referendum failed to reach voter quorum, owing to the local state's decision to undermine the campaign by moving the date of the referendum away from the national election to an isolated later day. The institutions of the local state – like those of the national state and institutions of transnational governance – are deeply embedded within dominant power relations and, hence, are likely to do all they can to oppose radical change.

In short, at whatever scale we choose to operate in the struggle for energy democracy – as with all endeavours towards transformative change – the odds will be stacked against us. Neoliberalism has seen power relations at all political levels become more deeply entrenched than ever before. Yet the perpetuation of the status quo requires the widespread belief in the lie that these power relations are fixed, stable and permanent. Power, in fact, is dynamic, contest and in flux. Through struggle, it can be transformed, as demonstrated by the gains made for people against domination and oppression throughout history.

How then, can we build movements for energy democracy that wield the social power necessary to re-write the rules of the game? Firstly, we must develop a coherent and viable vision for work and just transition. This is old news; the question, at this point, is what has and has not worked in this regard and what we can do differently. Energy poverty is one immediate frontline that must be engaged with. The experiences in the UK, Catalonia and Bulgaria demonstrate the potential for novel political alliances in mobilising around this issue, offering the chance for solidarity between students and pensioners, migrants and the unemployed, social justice activists and environmentalists. Meanwhile, the climate justice movement is finally rebuilding itself after the post-Copenhagen hangover, learning from its previous mistake of investing all its hope in the corporate-dominated UN processes. A concrete yet radical vision for energy democracy can help this rejuvenated global movement navigate its road through Paris and beyond.

Finally, while the prospects of the European left's electoral turn hangs in the balance, neoliberalism's stranglehold over mainstream debate seems, finally, to be broken. From Greece's resounding "Oxi!", to the remarkable success of the Spanish left in this year's municipal elections and the surprise victory of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK Labour Party's recent leadership race, a new window of opportunity has opened. In response, we must develop strategies that build power both within and beyond the state and formal politics. This means offering our support to electoral endeavours that open up new political possibilities, while at the same time refusing co-optation, retaining independence and prioritising the mobilisation of strong, grassroots movements that will keep pushing for energy democracy, irrespective of electoral fortune.



# APPENDIX: BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

On 1–2 October 2015, the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Brussels Office hosted a workshop on *Strategies of Energy Democracy*. Drawing together researchers, activists and policy-makers, the workshop provided a space for discussion and the sharing of knowledge and experience. This report brings together common issues, themes and questions emerging from the workshop.

The workshop was divided into six sections, which each saw a number of expert contributions:

## **Part 1: Energy democracy, electricity crisis and alternatives**

- Conrad Kunze, a researcher at the Center for Environmental Research UFZ, Leipzig, began by introducing the concept of energy democracy including its history, its diverging definitions and its multiple different practical implementations.
- Brian Ashley from the Alternative Information Development Centre, Cape Town, followed with an overview of trade union activism for energy democracy and climate jobs in response to electricity crisis in South Africa.

## **Part 2: Experiences with alternative politics of energy democracy**

- Ioannis Margaritis, Vice Chairman of the Hellenic Electricity Distribution Network Operator and member of Syriza, shared his experiences of the challenges of implementing energy democracy at the nation state level in Greece.
- Maria Campuzano, an activist from Xarxa per la sobirania energitica, Barcelona, followed with her experiences of organising against energy poverty and privatisation at the municipal level.

### **Part 3: Socialising municipal energy utilities and suppliers**

- Stefan Taschner, an activist from Berliner Energietisch, described this campaign's struggle for participatory democratic control of municipally owned renewable energy, focusing on the democratic mechanisms proposed.
- James Angel, a researcher on energy democracy and alternatives to energy sector privatisation at King's College London, responded with reflections from his fieldwork with Berliner Energietisch, focusing on the approach this campaign took to the state.

### **Part 4: Energy poverty and struggles for just access to energy**

- Laura Hill, an activist from Fuel Poverty Action in the UK, described the severe problem of energy poverty in the UK and her experiences of struggle in solidarity with those on the frontline of this injustice.
- Georgi Medarov from New Left Perspectives, Bulgaria, spoke of the alarming levels of energy poverty in Bulgaria, the wave of protests against rising electricity prices that toppled the Bulgarian government in 2013 and the political aftermath of this uprising.

### **Part 5: Control over energy production and distribution**

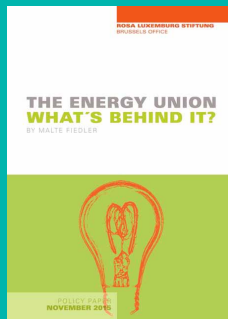
- Mika Minio-Paluello, an activist and researcher from Platform, a London-based anti-oil campaign group, shared their research on different options for building energy democracy in Britain.

### **Part 6: Democratic control of state owned energy utilities**

- Daniel Chavez, researcher with the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, further developed the theme of the state with a presentation on the merits and limitations of state-owned utilities in Latin America, with a particular focus on Uruguay's public investment in wind energy.
- Gunnar Lund, policy advisor for Greenpeace Sweden, described Greenpeace's campaign against state-owned utility Vattenfall and the lessons for the future of state-owned utilities.

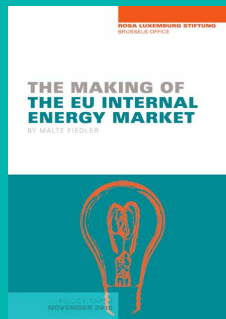


# MORE PUBLICATIONS



## **The Energy Union: what's behind it? Policy Paper**

Malte Fiedler, November 2015  
Available in English.



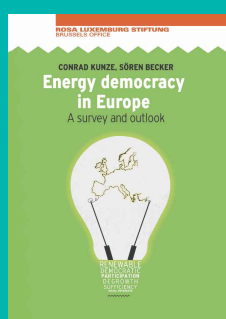
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## **Energiedemokratie in Europa. Bestandsaufnahme und Ausblick**

Conrad Kunze and Sören Becker, June 2014  
Available in English and German.



The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally operating, left non-profit organisation for civic education affiliated with Germany's 'Die Linke' (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social and political processes and developments worldwide.

The context in which we work is the growing multiple crisis of our current political and economic system. In cooperation with other progressive organizations around the globe, we work on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development. Our international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programmes, and projects conducted together with partner institutions.

In order to be able to mentor and coordinate these various projects, the foundation has established 17 regional offices around the world. The Brussels Office opened its door in 2008. Its main task is to connect left and progressive movements, activists and scholars from Europe and world regions.

**We work in favour of a more just world system based on international solidarity.**

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This report clarifies the state of existing debates on Energy Democracy with the aim of opening up new questions and possibilities, while paving the way towards a clearer direction of travel. Moving forward, it is argued, will require a careful consideration of questions of politics and power. Who currently calls the shots over energy transition? How might existing power relations be transformed in our favour? And who are we referring to in an assumption of a unified “our” or “we” of a movement for energy democracy? By offering a start on answering such questions – and by summarising existing discussions around narrative, scale, ownership, finance, energy poverty and just transition – this report should serve as a resource for activists and scholars interested in crafting socially just and democratic low-carbon energy transitions.