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Localizing the Global History of Coal: Looking Backwards and Thinking Forwards

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Coal mining is an international industry in terms of extraction, production chains, and environmental effects; research on coal mining should also foster transnational research connections. Energy policies, extraction technologies, the movements of coal and of mining labor, and the ecological effects of mining and burning coal all inherently cross and transcend national borders.

Nevertheless, the contingencies and particularities on the local level – of social arrangements, cultural norms, and regional administration – shape international, transnational, and global phenomenon. The international researcher can tease out these various strands: what is global in a local case? Or what processes localize the impact of the global?

Shimizu Taku and Mark Pendleton’s papers give us a sense of how comparative research and bringing questions developed in relation to one situation to another one shape new histories of coal mining. In both cases, these researchers give us a sense of how stories about coal mining are created and negotiated, and how our shifting understandings of what constitutes such categories as “industrial labor,” “archive,” “technology,” “health” (industrial or ecological) and more influence the questions we ask and the answers we formulate.

For example, what does it mean to expand our understanding of “industrial labor” to include the communities that support extraction work around a coal mine? Or what new knowledge is created when we recognize the limits of documentary archival sources and begin to integrate testimonies and even a researcher’s sensual experience in a coal mine? What kinds of other technologies can we think of – not just of extraction, but also social and political technologies – that we must consider to frame our stories?

Many thinkers have pointed out the expansive potential of the term “technology.” Michel Foucault has influenced Western scholars to think about “technologies,” ranging from technologies of production to technologies of signification, power, and of the self.⁽⁹⁾ But even before Foucault, Japanese philosopher Miki Kiyoshi wrote in 1938: “Technology is the act of making things. The common essence of technology is to make things, whatever they may be, whether they are tools, machines, mental and bodily forms, social systems or ideas.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The historical subfield of histories of technology is currently one of the most dynamic subsets of the field of history, and this scholarship often invites researchers to think about the socially constituted aspects of technology. As an example from Japanese studies, Aaron Stephen Moore’s recent book *Constructing East Asia* traces not only technological innovation in the applied sciences, but also wartime Japan’s “technological imaginary” – “the ways that different groups invested the term ‘technology’ (*gijutsu*) with ideological meaning and vision.” In doing so,



(9) Michel Foucault. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (Tavistock, 1988)

(10) Quoted in Aaron Stephen Moore’s. *Constructing East Asia: Technology, Ideology, and Empire in Japan’s Wartime Era 1931-1945* (Stanford UP, 2013), 11.

Moore could understand modernization not as “an abstract, universal force for progress,” but as something bound up in colonial technologies of expansion and rule.⁽¹¹⁾ That is to say that “technology” – and ideas about technology – are never neutral, but always embedded in social, economic, and power relationships.

To think globally of local histories may also get us beyond the framework often imposed by national histories. Yes, nation-states often defined many economic, political, and social boundaries for coal mining labor. But emphasizing the nation as a category to contain these histories can also obscure the inherently global set of challenges facing energy, industrial labor, and the environment, which are ongoing. It can create romantic nationalist narratives, which do little to help us work through such challenges. How can the way we record and pass down stories of coal mining labor and experience be honest to our history, and also be accountable to our shared present and future?

In particular, I think that histories that try to understand the longer processes by which technology or labor transferred or social arrangements developed can help us work through some of the habits of commemoration. This may be particularly effective to avoid a nostalgic construction of an artificially static and actually historically specific configuration of work or community.

I share Mark Pendleton’s concern for understanding the role of coal mining as an industry in the larger scholarly consensus emerging about the “Anthropocene.” Some scholars have even argued that, rather than the more general Anthropocene, we need to specifically consider the effects of the “Capitalocene.” Andreas Malm has traced the rise of what he dubbed “Fossil Capital” and argued that the industrial turn toward coal had as much to do with subordinating labor as it did with striving to harness energy.⁽¹²⁾

This process of subordinating labor is an uneven one, and scholar Kathryn Yusoff has critiqued Malm’s work for focusing only on the industrialists at the center of carbon extraction. A British industrialist manufacturing textiles with extracted and burned coal in the early 19th century may not have been aware of “global warming,” as Malm noted, but he knew and simply did not care about the slave labor that made the cotton available.⁽¹³⁾ That is to say that much of the recent anxiety about the Anthropocene actually dismisses the various communities and even civilizations already historically decimated “under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism.”⁽¹⁴⁾

In his paper, Pendleton refers to the writer Amitav Ghosh’s work, *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh’s title evokes historian Kenneth Pomeranz’s 2000 book, *The Great Divergence*, in which he analyzed the processes by which Western Europe and the New World emerged as centers of “progress” as defined by technological prowess and economic power in the 19th century; the answer for Pomeranz was linked with Western Europe’s turn from wood to coal as a source of energy.

However, one of the ironies wrought by industrial, capitalist modernization that Ghosh points out in *The Great Derangement* is that climate change is turning our modern ideas about progress and the futurism of technology on its head: “The Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; it is they who confront most directly what Thoreau called ‘vast, Titanic, inhuman nature.’”⁽¹⁵⁾ Environmental justice activism and scholarship has long pointed out the strong correlation between poorer communities and the siting of toxic industries and dumps. In many cases, the correlation also indicates a racist logic at work.⁽¹⁶⁾ What unites these cases may also be a trend to site near places already considered “backward,” and in cases when pollution becomes a community issue, those residents’ very image of “backward-

(11) Aaron Stephen Moore’s. *Constructing East Asia: Technology, Ideology, and Empire in Japan’s Wartime Era 1931-1945* (Stanford UP, 2013)

(12) Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (Verso, 2016)

(13) Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 15-16.

(14) Yusoff, xiii

(15) Amitov Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*. (U of Chicago Press, 2016)

(16) Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities* (NYU Press, 2014)

ness” can also limit how far their voices carry, and how worthy they are considered of protection, particularly if their demands would require curtailing “modernizing” industrial activity.⁽¹⁷⁾

In this context, it seems that our histories of coal mining must look simultaneously backward and also forward to puzzle out the various technologies – and stories told about those technologies – that contribute to our shared, global issues.

(17) Angelo Raffaele Ippolito and Bruno Andreas Walther illustrate a very poignant case of the city of polluting industries in Taranto, which were welcomed in the hopes that they would drag the city out of its agrarian backwardness and make the city modern. Angelo Raffaele Ippolito and Bruno Andreas Walther, “Contaminated Morals: the Struggle of Industrial Pollution in a Southern Italian City” *Toxic News*. February 21, 2019. https://toxicnews.org/2019/02/21/contaminated-morals-the-struggle-of-industrial-pollution-in-a-southern-italian-city/#_ftn1