

## Phasing Out Coal and the Political of the Anthropocene

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„Transformations of Energy Systems – Historical Perspectives on the Anthropocene“ - Symposium of the Max Planck Society

Berlin, 20-21 February 2018

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When discussing energy systems in the Anthropocene, we hear a lot about technology, economics or ecology. This symposium has the huge merit to address also the **cultural** implications of energy transitions and the **historical** pathways leading up to it.

But, while acknowledging all these very important perspectives, one key dimension seems missing: **Politics**, or as I call it, the **Political** of the Anthropocene.

Today I would like to share with you a story that illustrate what I mean by “The Political” of the Anthropocene. The **story** is very concrete - based on many recent interactions with political leaders and civil servants at federal and state-level as well as local actors.

In autumn 2017 I was asked by the Federal Government to formulate a **participation strategy** for the coal phase out and the energy transformation in Lusatia (Lausitz).

Together with a project team at the IASS called "Co-creation and Contemporary Policy Advice" that deals with cross-sector collaboration in sustainability transformations, we began to formulate a model that could be integrated into the broad societal and political landscape.

It presented an overall **architecture** including all different political levels that would shape the (long term) regional transformation.

There are **many regions** worldwide that are faced with phasing out coal extraction: the Appalachians, say in West-Virginia, or the rust belt in France including the Lorraine region for example. Often it is a mixture of newly industrialized societies, and of automation, that has undercuts local industries. In these regions, many people feel left behind. One of the great obstacles facing any alternative to coal-mining, also in the Lausitz, is the strong sense of their historic identity, a strong sense of dignity and struggle against obstacles and difficulties. (By the way: Donald Trump's campaign surfed on the heroism of coal-miners in West-Virginia.) Let me just allude at this point that impotence is one of the most important cancers working away with democracy...

In **Germany**, the federal government came up with a big fund for the Lausitz: **1,5 billion Euros** until 2021. Another 5 billion Euros are demanded by the Länder (the states) until 2030. The Prime Ministers of Saxony and Brandenburg have issued a list with **70 projects**: a quick railway to Berlin, an initiative fostering tourism in the Lausitz and, for example, research institutes in the region...

However, for the regional transformation to succeed it can't be just about receiving money, but to get regional actors and the people interested in the issue that matter: **their future**. For them there needs

to be an immediate sense that, yes, we can have a plan. To this end we need participation in society.

So, in spite of the many conflicts, the main question for our project was: how can local communities be encouraged to take their fate in hand? And how should collaboration look like that involves regional actors in the definition of the policy problems and the formulation of future avenues?

However, in the course of our project we were increasingly confronted with the **complexity** that is characteristic for the Political of the Anthropocene. We became concretely (!) aware not only of how the coal phase is interwoven with the many technological, economic and ecological facets of the Anthropocene, but with the **limits of current political institutions**. And why public participation at local level would not be able to produce **any** efficient outcomes given these circumstances.

I will argue that in the midst of this perfect storm, public participation is not losing its importance. Rather, it must be connected to political institutions and become a kind of **operating system** for a new political architecture of regional transformations. The principles of participation in democratic decision-making and public debate should be deeply anchored in the politics of the Anthropocene.

**First** I will voice my criticism against the current political discussions in and about the Anthropocene. **Then** explain what is meant by “the political of the Anthropocene”. **Afterwards** I will show how participation could be understood in a broader way, as operating system, using the example of the coal phase out. I will **conclude** with some considerations about the knowledge-action gap and its implication for future research on energy transformations.

### 1. Critique against Objectivism and Functionalism

To ask political questions in times of the Anthropocene should be an obvious exercise. After all, people are the focus of the Anthropocene. However, rather than politics, the term Anthropocene is related to the question of the adequate modeling of earth systems. The scientifically dominant goal is the modeling of global biophysical processes according to thermodynamic principles, in which anthropogenic processes are usually exogenous forces and flows. According to many modelers, social variables do not fit into their conceptual system. As a political scientific field that strives to correct this gap, researchers in the area of **Earth System Governance** seek to integrate the functioning of politics into the biophysical models. They directly translate from scientific assertion to political change.

This seemingly objectivist state of affairs hinders the discussion about the Political of the Anthropocene. Epistemic ambiguities, societal controversies and ethical doubts have no place in most complex models. Instead, a rather crude set of categories seems to dominate the debate. For example, the term "humanity" has become common, instead of recognizing the diversity in which some actors gain influence, while others lose their habitats. This crude sensorium is also reflected in political conclusions, for example the conclusion that **climate engineering technologies** are necessary to carve out a space for political action in the midst of rapid climate change. But, there is usually no public debate on whether one can really wish to use these technologies.

So in my eyes a vicious circle is emerging: Technoscientific objectivism and political functionalism are mutually dependent. Even before the collapse of mother Earth, the political of the Anthropocene disappears, and thus the possibility for a sustainable society to emerge.

## 2. The Political of the Anthropocene

If, however, the continuation of the earth system depends on human action, political questions should become central: Who or what is affected by the shared experience of a human age (and who or what does it not concern)? What kind of collectives are emerging? What kind of knowledge do they rely on? And how to give shape to the democratic and stable formation of a political will?

With the German political philosopher Hannah Arendt and her term “the Political”, “das Politische”, one can interpret this current conditions and search for pathways of action... meaning: conceiving of new institutional arrangements adequate for the complexity that characterizes politics in the Anthropocene.

“**The Political**” describes a determinate public space, a forum, an agora, in which different perspectives on political matters are negotiated and hopefully aligned. And precisely these deliberations and the working out of a viable path together produces societal cohesion. It gives people some an avenue, some means by which they can take control of the situation and shape their futures.

But, beyond the notion of public deliberation, “The Political” also signifies a broadened understanding of politics. According to Arendt, it entails political matters (i.e. policies), political orders (i.e. polities) and political action (i.e. politics).

With Hannah Arendt, one can state that the sub-aspects of the political, that is, political matters, orders, and actions, are interrelated. How does the political order which is, for instance, currently determined by the Paris Agreement and the SDGs, suggest a certain course of action or prioritize certain matters?

It is clear, I would argue, that the **demos** or democratic collectives have changed.

**Specifically, the political** today is characterized by spatial and temporal broadening of horizons:

- **In terms of space**, decisions at global level affect people beyond borders of nation-states and particularly regions and local communities. Climate Change seems to be an issue that can only be worked on at international level but in reality the changes have to happen at regional and local levels.

At the same time responsibility of policies is not adequately shared across political sectors at all political level (different ministries have different interests: the ministry of the economy, of the environment and so on). But **complex political matters** can only be tackled collectively – and if the matter is really at the center of decision-making processes. Which means from the perspective of the common good....

- **In terms of time**, political decisions and path dependencies affect generations who don't have a say in contemporary polities. Already Thomas Jefferson once made the point that we are far too much governed by the dead hand of the past. This is much more true today in the age of the Anthropocene. It's the question of intergenerational justice.

These three points signifies an enormous challenge for the design of democratic institutions.

To me it seems that we need to **explicate the political characteristics of the Anthropocene**. And to inquire which institutional arrangements can give adequately shape to the political.

Let me conclude this part of my presentation by mentioning that it is of fundamental importance to acknowledge the linguistic power that is involved in introducing a terminology. Defining a term for "our time", like the Anthropocene for instance, is a deeply **political act**. Along these lines, I would like plea for the Political as a new kind of politics for todays state of the earth.

### 3. The Coal-Phase Out and The Quest for New Institutional Formats

One stage that broadly addresses the political of the Anthropocene are the UNFCCC climate negotiations. It represents an institutional format where human interests in the broadest sense of the word are negotiated.

It was at the COP negotiations last year in Bonn, that the coal-phase out gained momentum. An international alliance, consisting of Canada and the UK, put pressure on the major coal producers Germany and Australia to a move towards a consistent energy turnaround.

Also nationally, at least in Germany, an enormous internal political pressure is developing. However, there is also a **lot of confusion**. In the wake of the Trump regime, but also during the transition of the German federal government, the coal phase out seems an issue to decide between populism, capitalism and sustainability.

In Germany, the international and national pressure is currently forcing politicians to fundamentally rethink the processes in the energy transition. At the national level, namely between the ministries, there is an emerging consensus that, especially in East German regions, a completely new energy policy is needed.

On a closer look, however, especially at the regional level, there are also conflicting perspectives of the matter at stake. Is it about jobs, the development of innovative business locations or regional identity? Or even national identity?

In my view, decision making towards new pathways for an energy transition is undermined by an inadequate operational system. The request by the German government to shape a regional participatory process was thwarted by diverging logics of political institutions at the federal and subordinate level. A logic that always produces the **smallest common denominator**.

#### 4. Participation as operating system

These questions take me back to the initial story about a model for the coal phase out in the Lausitz: In the course of our engagement with many key actors in different ministries at Land and particular federal level it turned out that while they all sense a window of opportunity, they are deeply caught their respective institutional logics. The lack of cooperation and coordination between these actors has produces a huge lack of political orientation in the region.

How to react?

How to give shape to institutional arrangements and operational systems that are able to produce the **biggest common denominators**? Arrangements that address the spatial and temporal shift that I have mentioned before.

How to give shape to a participatory process that addresses the Political of the Anthropocene in the broadest sense?

There are different strands of hope. The new Saxonian prime minister (a young man of around 40) began his term at the end of 2017 by travelling the country to meet citizens, and by reaching out to economic and academic actors to gather the ideas for how to transform or innovate in the region's energy sectors. The regional CDU, his party, seeks to carve out a path that gives way to entrepreneurial innovation. Also the Brandenburg (governed by left parties) recently began to show increasing initiative to push for a coal phase out and mobilized academic research. And to complicate the matter, energy companies and citizen initiatives also communicate their vision of a collaborative path out of the coal industry. Hence, also on this regional plane there a plethora of actors and visions is emerging.

In that context, a cross-cutting arena was created by both the government of both Länder to convene regional organizations and citizens as a way of rethinking the region's future. It is called "Zukunftswerkstatt Lausitz", funded by Saxonia, Brandenburg and the federal state, and seeks to gather conflicting perspectives and to forge a shared pathway for the coal-phase out.

So far the regional process is completely disconnected from the government. The outcomes would not be taken up by them.

But given a certain interest of the State Chancelleries of Saxonia and Brandenburg in a cross-cutting and coordinating arena, we re-formulated our model more concretely according to a situation where imposing an overall architecture is no longer possible (see TABLE).

For the political shaping of structural change in Lusatia, we argue that a mixed situation of different, partly conflictual problem perceptions and horizons of expectation co-predetermine which solution paths are realistic.

In order to benefit from the heterogeneity of the consultations to open new perspectives and at the same time coordinate different sectors and government level we came up with this model.

While a political steering committee (as a coordinating arena) would oversee the regional transformation, we would act as a **consultation office**. Our task would be to gather and cross-pollinate regional concerns, local knowledge, scientific findings and political structures and opportunities. Instead of having public participation on the regional level only, we seek to contribute to a shift in the arrangements of politics by enabling a dialogue between decision makers and the affected communities.

And thus establish participation as an operating system among different sectors and political levels.

## 5. The Knowledge-Action Gap

What does my story imply for **future research agendas**?

In brief, we should collectively reflect about the Political of the Anthropocene. At the IASS we recently started to do so by focusing on the question:

*Knowledge and Democratic Governance in the Anthropocene:*

What are the conditions for successful sustainability transformations?

Let me conclude with a glimpse on my own perspective. In the Anthropocene the **ethical** dimension of the Political (and its implications for knowledge) is rarely addressed. The usual short-circuit, in which scientific findings are used to deduce political objectives, when for example a geological fact becomes an immediate basis for action, undermines the conditions for successful transformations.

If we want to make change possible, we need to make sure that societal developments do not lead to more of the same. To this end it is important to problematize the knowledge base of politics together with regional publics, and federal and national institutions.

If we want to narrow the gap between scientific knowledge and concrete action, we need to expand and transform the understanding of science itself. Verifiable facts may – as the political processes around the Paris Agreement and the SDGs demonstrate – open up and close avenues for action, but facts alone do not automatically lead to politically and ethically viable instructions. We need to link curiosity-driven transformation research with action-oriented transformative research.

And integrate three central modes of action and the resulting forms of knowledge: Exploration (systems knowledge), understanding (orientation knowledge) and facilitation (transformation knowledge/transformational expertise).

**Experimentation spaces** like at the IASS are needed not only to recognize the relationship between knowledge and (value-based) action, but also to make constructive use of this relationship. By acting as a **navigator** between diverse and often controversial knowledge claims, such spaces help policymakers and society at large to make better decisions.