

## Reflexions on the Summer School „Post-Carbon Futures: Cities, Industries and Energies in Central Europe“

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During the Summer School, we touched upon different angles of our energy system(s), their manifestation in the past and their entanglements in the present. As a result, it became obvious to me that these entanglements are consolidating and shaping possible energy future(s).

But the question is which energy future (based on sustainable renewable solutions or a solely “green” technological energy future without any further considerations about structural changes) is possible within the remaining system of capital exploitation, who has access to it (the global north or as well the global south?) and for whom is it affordable. And I take this as a major insight: We live in times of „capitalist realism“ (Fisher 2009: 6); we are more likely to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. And I agree with the argument of Newell and Paterson that the capitalist market economy and its attached logic brought us to this point of severe environmental crisis (Newell and Paterson 2010: 7,9).

And within capitalism’s ideology of growth and surplus production, I doubt that a *just transition* can occur. By saying this, I, however, don’t want to reduce all the efforts of politicians, scientists, activists, the broader civil society who are deeply engaged with conceptualisations of a sustainable and, at the same time, equal and socially just energy transformation. During the Summer School, we dealt a good amount of time with past or slowly expiring energy systems (e.g. coal and nuclear energy) to see the energy conditions and foundations and how to transform them. We’ve visited the “Energiepark Dieselstraße” and witnessed thoughtful considerations concerning cutting energy emissions regarding the energy supply for district heating. They seemed to be deeply engaged in finding solutions to produce heat and electricity from renewable energy sources. And still, according to a report from the German Federal Ministry for Energy and the Environment, BMWI, it is 70% of fossil-fueled energy that goes into the district heating system (BMWI, 23/03/2021). For sure, transformations need time, and even despite good ideas and developments, time is needed to embed

and cultivate new energy systems. But capitalism's need for growth and energy doesn't slow down because we need more time to transform.

I also found the same ambiguity in the talk of Ralf Wehrspohn, a physics professor at Halle-Wittenberg University, who is engaged in envisioning a different energy future. He emphasised that all technologies and scientific knowledge is available to shape a just post-fossil energy future, but that the concrete path how to deploy it within society (or maybe convince society?) is missing. It appears as a social scientist's task to envision and conceptualise this implementation. But how to predict a just sustainable future while our way of being is still based on resource exploitation and consumerism? Extraction for lithium was presented to us as one of the possible alternatives for the global north. However, while there might be sustainable ways to extract lithium, at the moment, it is extracted – amongst other regions – in the global south, e.g. in the tri-border region Peru, Bolivia and Argentina on indigenous land. Lithium extraction has problematic social (land deprivation/grabbing from indigenous people) and environmental consequences (e.g. water and soil contamination).

My argument that a socially just future based on non-exploitative energy production is difficult to envision might be too simplifying. Indeed, the capitalist mode of production not only means value generation, but it is also a way of thinking about resources, societies achievements and good life, including questions about which goods and availabilities should be regarded as necessary. However, engaging with natural and social science as well other actors plans and visions for sustainable energy future makes me aware of contradictions inherent in those transformation attempts: As long as capitalist modes of production and consumption are taken as the only frame of reference, those projects seem hardly possible to realise. Thus I think, there is a danger that people's livelihoods might be destroyed and turned inhabitable by floods and droughts, extreme temperatures and water shortages before we understand that an economic system based on everlasting growth can't create a just renewable future, despite all the good intentions and available technologies.

## References

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist 'Realism. Is there no Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.

Newell, Peter and Mathew Paterson. 2010. *Climate Capitalism. Global Warming and the Transformation of the Global Economy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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