Imagining a Postpetroleum Arctic

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As tensions mount across the Arctic concerning the utilization of natural resources and the implications for ecologies and their social connectedness, we bring attention to how futures beyond the (potential) extraction period are considered. What does the future hold if one looks beyond the extraction period of nonrenewable resources, and how do these questions of where we are heading inform local perspectives and debates about viable future options today?

In June 2010, in the town of Svolvær in the Lofoten Islands, the Norwegian Ministry for the Environment held a hearing on the report to be produced for the revision of the ecosystem-based management plan for the Barents and Lofoten seas. Amidst scientists, bureaucrats, NGO delegates, and politicians, a local fisherman stood up and stated that he could not support the results presented on the simulations of how an oil spill would spread outside Lofoten, Vesterålen, and Senja, areas where potential petroleum development is heavily in dispute (Dale 2011; Kristoffersen 2014). He referred to his two decades at sea and claimed that the models employed were not adequate to give an account of the extremely complex and unpredictable currents surrounding the islands, stating that the potential for a much larger spill and pollution scenario was highly probable. In the discussion that followed, a representative of DNV-GL, the consulting firm providing the model, acknowledged that even though the model was the most sophisticated one ever used for these kinds of sea conditions, the currents were impossible to reproduce in a computer model. Nevertheless, the model became a part of the knowledge basis upon which decisions were to be made, and the fisherman's concerns were left as a mere addendum to the hearing statement.

This brief insight from our field notes highlights the power that different knowledge practices and ontologies hold in decision-making processes. In particular, it shows how practice-based knowledge of complex ecologies is treated in what Michel Foucault identified as processes of inclusion and exclusion. These processes are formed within a power/knowledge nexus in which the technoscientific knowledge tradition holds a hegemonic position that, in turn, is reconstituted according to the needs of the state through specific policy tools in order to secure the national population. Other knowledge practices, knowledges that indeed may have value when seeking transitional and adaptational changes as we enter a postcarbon era, are disregarded as a consequence.

Experiences like these in Lofoten have led us to focus on how local communities seek to secure themselves, with reference to governmentality studies and a broadened ontological concept of security (Dale 2011, 74–79). We believe that this focus may bring to light a multitude of potential futures, well beyond the potential extraction period. In the process, grounded perspectives may inform national policies, which are especially relevant to how an oil-dependent country like Norway can secure itself in a postpetroleum future. In Lofoten, there are both opponents of and advocates for petroleum development. What they all share is a deep reluctance to "trade fish for oil," a simplistic but to-the-point slogan often used to describe local sentiments on the issue of short-term, oil-based development and a long-term relationship with the seascapes of Lofoten. This tension reflects a dynamic in which the considerations, perceptions, and expectations around the choices we make today depend on future imaginaries—what can or will happen when the oil has been extracted in Lofoten—of a possible meaningful future after petroleum (Kristoffersen and Dale 2014).

How, then, can a postpetroleum perspective inform the relationship between resources and their temporalities, including the transitions to a future without fossil fuels that unavoidably will come? Natural resources are not stable categories, but reflect how societies place value on their usage in time and space, often reflecting particular narratives, visions, and knowledges (Bridge 2009). The concept of postpetroleum might reveal the ways in which resources are relevant not only prior to and during, but also after their depletion. It might highlight the ways in which states' and local communities' tendency to capitalize on resources also shapes future trajectories. Different from the concept of peak oil, which frames the depletion of oil resources as problematic due to their absence in the future, postpetroleum speaks to the continued presence of the resource long after its depletion (or, for that matter, its being kept in the ground as stranded assets). Although it is physically gone, its effects will potentially still be significant in terms of the continued presence of social, cultural, and economic relations and structures built in the petroleum era (Kristoffersen 2014, 55). Thus, an analytics of postpetroleum requires a critical stance toward the way future imaginaries are intended to sustain or even expand petroleum production. Instead of preparing for the necessary transition, sustained petroleum development might limit the many ways that postcarbon futures can be initiated and established.

A postpetroleum perspective calls into question the relative power of industries and alerts analysts to the fact that the extractive industries have not only environmental impacts, but also social, political, and cultural effects on a timescale that far exceeds the extraction period. The extraction of nonrenewable resources may secure populations economically and politically, but as the term *peak oil* reminds us, there must be a recognition of the need for local and regional communities to build a robust social and political framework that can withstand, if not anticipate, the transitions that will follow the depletion of nonrenewable resources. Thus, contrary to mainstream predictions concerning the potential for green-energy growth in the near future (amplifying the need for carbon energy in the short term), the postpetroleum perspective invites us to consider more carefully whether today's knowledges, practices, and policies create a path toward continued dependency—and thus a complete depletion of carbon resources—or not.

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