

ISA workshop summary

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The workshop “The New Energy Geopolitics” convened as planned at the New Orleans ISA Meeting, on February 17th, 2015, with all ten scheduled participants: in addition to the PI, Andrew Lawrence (Visiting Professor, Vienna School of International Studies) and co-PI, Kathleen Hancock (Associate Professor, Colorado School of Mines) they were Tabitha M. Benney (Assistant Professor, University of Utah), Emily Meierding (Assistant Professor, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva) Jewellord Nem Singh (Lecturer, University of Sheffield), Kate J. Neville (Post-Doctoral Fellow, Duke University), Adrian Shin (Ph.D. student, University of Michigan), Benjamin Sovacool (Professor, Aarhus University), Robert Vitalis (Professor, University of Pennsylvania), and Erika Weinthal (Professor, Duke University).

The first morning session provided an overview and posed analytical questions for the remaining sessions to consider. Lawrence and Sovacool circulated in advance of the other papers a discussion paper to frame this discussion. They observed that energy-related research remains comparatively neglected in IPE scholarship, and that traditional IR approaches (such as various strands of liberalism and realism) have difficulty in explaining current transformations pertaining to energy, as well as articulating normative models for the future. They suggested that these approaches be supplemented with additional considerations: building on recent work by Hancock, they identify theoretical areas where IPE scholars should conduct further research of energy issues – (1) putting politics into policy, (2) international organizations, (3) global and regional governance, (4) community interests, (5) international structure, (6) ideas and identity and (7) inter- and intra-disciplinary research – and three issues areas for expanded research: (1) renewable energy, nuclear energy, and natural gas, (2) electricity, and (3) sovereign wealth funds. To this list they add two theories that rely upon substantially rationalist assumptions about actors and interests, and three that focus further on complexities concerning the perception and articulation of interests. The two rationalist theories are: (a) global production networks; and (b) the related ideas of enclosure, exclusion, and accumulation by dispossession. The three issues that complicate understandings of the perception and articulation of interests are: (c) the distinction between risk and uncertainty; (d) understanding geopolitics (including energy geopolitics) as a “discursive field”; and (e), contending visions of distributive justice.

The second morning session focused on questions of ownership, control, and political ecology. In his paper on the political ecology of climate change adaptation, Sovacool emphasized that much of the policy literature is currently trending toward adaptation policies, particularly in middle- and low-income contexts, and less on emissions mitigation policies: from “avoiding the unmanageable, to managing the unavoidable”. It was not yet clear whether this trend expresses a recognition of the adaptation’s greater importance, or the mitigation’s (temporary or permanent) improbability. Hancock’s paper, “Energy Regionalism: A Research Agenda,” set out to pose key analytical questions for future investigation of an under-

researched area. It focused on the importance of scale and scope in regional arrangements promoting the production and distribution of different energy types. These lend themselves to a comparative focus, posing such questions as whether these arrangements should be considered as “relation-specific assets” (RSAs), and whether a governance focus was appropriate for the subject. In his discussion of the papers, Vitalis observed that the absence of energy related discussions in IPE literature may be a problem of sociology of knowledge, as much or more than of (sub)disciplinary deficit; but if the latter, then effective arguments need to be posed explaining the ways in which energy politics matter to IPE.

The third session, on theory and methods in energy GPE, began with Vitalis’ paper, “the false geopolitics of oil”. He argued that this particular energy sector is characterized by a secular decline in basic knowledge about its basic elements over the past generation or two: near-perfect competition among suppliers and refiners, and thus a global market. If most analysts knew this, they’d have to change much of what they believe is true about “old geopolitics”—grand strategy, hegemony, and other related ideas. They work with outdated models of the industry (e.g., the majors v the independents) and of dependency (the NOCs on big oil), of OPEC, and so forth. The paper provoked a wide-ranging but inconclusive discussion about how to interpret and explain this phenomenon. For example, was it attributable to the decline of democratic public culture in the US, or to the decline of elite discourses (viz *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* OUP by David C. Engerman)?

Benney’s paper on renewable energy IPE in emerging economies, argued that the most significant barriers to the implementation of large-scale renewable energy strategies worldwide are primarily political and economic, not technological as is commonly believed. Among middle- and low-income countries, the variation in newer and cleaner energy sources varies according to the type of economic institutions – that is, the type of capitalism – prevalent in their economies. Interestingly, more active adapters are not confined to any one region, regime type, export profile or narrow income level—they include China and Vietnam in Asia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama in the Americas, and Georgia in Europe. Each institutional constellation, in turn, brings with it a distinct pattern of incentives. If it is the case that specific types of capitalism require differing forms of motivation to bring about the desired policy outcome of cleaner energy technology adoption, then current efforts to address climate change may need to adapt. Discussants agreed that the research design and problematic was promising, but argued that the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) data the paper draws upon was problematic (because it draws on only one of three mechanisms under the Kyoto Protocol, and the one generally viewed as the least effective of the three, whose related policies have since been largely superceded).

After lunch, the next session, on Trade, Finance, and Institutions, began with Neville and Weinthal’s paper on boom and bust cycles in oil, gas, and biofuels”. The paper raised questions about how successfully financial mechanisms control commodity speculation, and what domestic regulatory/institutional arrangements may more effectively mediate the economic effects of unstable revenues from volatile commodities. Following on Clapp and Helleiner’s work on financialization of agriculture and speculation in food commodity

markets, and Saylor's work on coalitional politics and the resource curse, the authors focused on how speculation and boom/bust cycles in one sector (oil) can lead to secondary and even tertiary booms and busts in other sectors (e.g., biofuels, natural gas), and what the implications of this might be for the usual institutional solutions to mitigate the negative effects of a resource boom, which might not work effectively when the volatility crosses sectors and states. The second paper of this session was Shin's, on resource booms, trade and migration. Looking at extractive industries in aggregate, including fossil fuels, it argued that an inverse relation existed between states' propensity to liberalize migration policy, and commodity prices. During resource booms, trade liberalization leads to restrictions on immigration (in such cases as the U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and Netherlands), whereas in the absence of resource booms, trade liberalization leads to more liberal immigration policy (as is evident in Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Switzerland before 1990s, and Sweden). Discussants observed that these findings cut across traditional "varieties of capitalism" boundaries, but some expressed questions about the generalizability of the findings. Others sought a more precise description of the mechanisms explaining the relation.

The final session, on energy regionalism and nationalism, began with Nem Singh's paper comparing Brazil and China as state-led energy market actors. It explored how these states build developmental capacities to transform their wealth into assets for growth. The comparison points to obvious differences in scale and scope between the countries, as well as perhaps less obvious national priorities. Discussion addressed the question of whether these cases shared more similarities with each other or with their regional neighbors. The last paper, by Meierding on new African oil/gas producers, critiqued assumptions that extractive collaboration would necessarily promote broader relations of peace among neighboring states. It served as a reminder that sectors are embedded in broader political cultures and structures, and do not necessarily share a "family resemblance" across these (an inversion of the resource curse).

The workshop ended with a discussion of the next steps toward organizing a special issue, as originally planned. It was agreed that the workshop conveners, Lawrence and Hancock, would pursue co-editing a special issue of the *Review of International Political Economy*, together with Tabitha Benney, to be submitted in 2016.