
Katja Mueller , Tom Morton , Rebecca Pearse , Stuart Rosewarne

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BEYOND THE COAL RUSH

Climate change makes fossil fuels unburnable, yet global coal production has almost doubled over the last twenty years. This book explores how the world can stop mining coal – the most prolific source of greenhouse gas emissions. It documents efforts at halting coal production, focussing specifically on how campaigners are trying to stop coal mining in India, Germany and Australia. Through in-depth comparative ethnography, it shows how local people are fighting to save their homes, livelihoods and environments, creating new constituencies and alliances for the transition from fossil fuels. The book relates these struggles to conflicts between global climate policy and the national coal–industrial complex. With coal’s meaning transformed from an important asset to a threat, and the coal industry declining, it charts reasons for continuing coal dependence, and how this can be overcome. It will provide a source of inspiration for energy transition for researchers in environment, sustainability and politics, as well as policymakers.

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James Goodman , Linda Connor , Devleena Ghosh , Kanchi Kohli , Jonathan Paul Marshall , Manju Menon ,

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BEYOND THE COAL RUSH

A Turning Point for Global Energy and Climate Policy?

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Foreword

Coal made the modern world, yet coal is also the key driver of climate change, the greatest ecological disruption to the planet we have known. This book seeks to explain why coal production has expanded despite the urgent reality of climate change, and highlights the pressures and possibilities for a world ‘beyond coal’. The book is especially timely as it comes at a crucial historical juncture for coal. In 2017, twenty countries announced the creation of the Powering Past Coal Alliance, which commits them to phasing out coal for power generation by 2030. Major multilateral and financial institutions such as the World Bank and Lloyd’s of London will no longer fund coal projects or are actively divesting from coal. In 2011, the International Energy Agency stated that coal consumption had to start declining from 2020 to preserve any chance of climate stability. And in 2019, the UN announced there could be no new coal-fired power stations.

Despite this international consensus, coal remains dominant for most industrial and industrialising countries. In many countries coal mining is integral to the national development project and has produced a highly durable coal–industrial complex. In some contexts advocacy for coal against renewable energy has become a vote winner and a central stake in national politics. Australian aspirations to become a fossil fuel ‘energy superpower’ directly mirror Canada’s fossil fuel export policy under the conservatives. US President Donald Trump’s defence of ‘beautiful clean coal’ in his 2018 State of the Union Address echoed Australia’s former Prime Minister Tony Abbott who in 2014 claimed ‘coal is good for humanity’. The political disruption is a sign of deep crisis for coal, and of a painful passage ahead for a new era in energy production.

Deeper understanding of this contest over the global future of coal, at this juncture, is urgently needed. The cultural meaning of coal is undergoing a dramatic transformation, and we need to understand the problems and possibilities this offers. The book offers a unique and original approach to these issues. In an interdisciplinary collaboration, it brings together anthropology, political economy

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and sociology to analyse the ‘coal rush’ and its aftermath. It reports on ethnographic research conducted in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, in Lusatia (Lausitz) in eastern Germany and on the Liverpool Plains in southeast Australia, where local people are fighting to prevent the construction of new coal mines. It tracks the emergence of a post-war ‘coal–industrial complex’ in the three countries, how it delivered a coal boom in the 2000s exactly at the time when global climate policy was gaining momentum, and then more recently how it has unravelled with the rapid shift into a new and rapidly intensifying state-renewables nexus.

As such, the book offers a unique combination of comparative multi-sited ethnographic study integrated with the political economy and sociology of coal-based energy. The book bridges the gap between climate policy and social action at local, national and transnational levels. The use of a comparative model uniquely captures a range of divergent but also parallel dynamics, allowing for common lessons and insights. The ethnographic investigations, paired with analysis of related political economy and policy conditions, offer a window onto the socio-ecological relations that are reshaping the future of coal. The multi-scale and comparative scope of this book reflects the logic of the coal conundrum, and breaks new ground in this increasingly crucial field.

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