

The Coloniality inside Energy (and Energy Transitions)

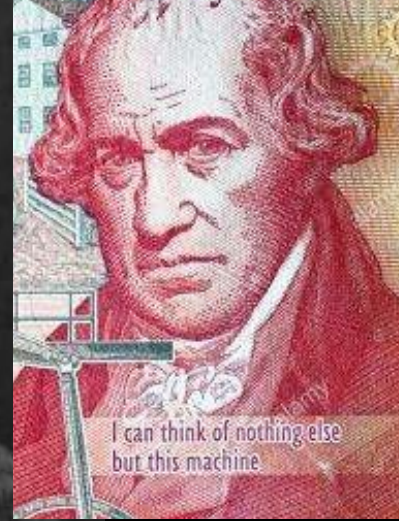
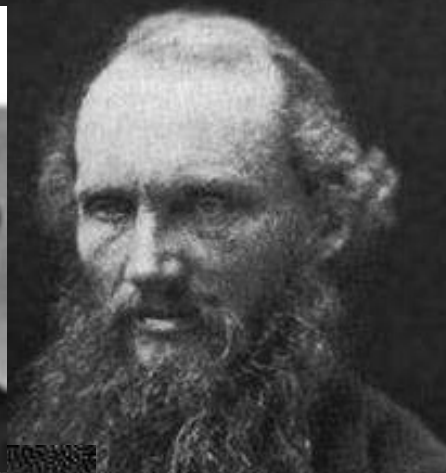
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What does it mean to say
that coloniality is *inside*
energy?

... and *inside* energy
transitions?

First, remember that energy
has a *birthday* ...

... and that
energy's
parents are
colonialist.



... or, if
you prefer,
imperialist.

Second, remember that energy is not a *thing* about which there is a set of justified true *beliefs*.
(Richard Feynman.)

There *are* indeed truths about energy, most notably formulated in the 19th-century First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics.

... but energy is perhaps better conceived of as a *relationship* “of difference that tends to eliminate itself,” a “*gradient* across which there is a tendency to even out and dissipate.”

Terrence Deacon

Since the 19th century, this energy has been above all a set of *enactments* of these relationships in the world landscape on an increasingly unconstrained scale ...

... in the form of an indefinitely
expandable set of **conversion** processes.

1830s

Electricity \rightarrow mechanical force

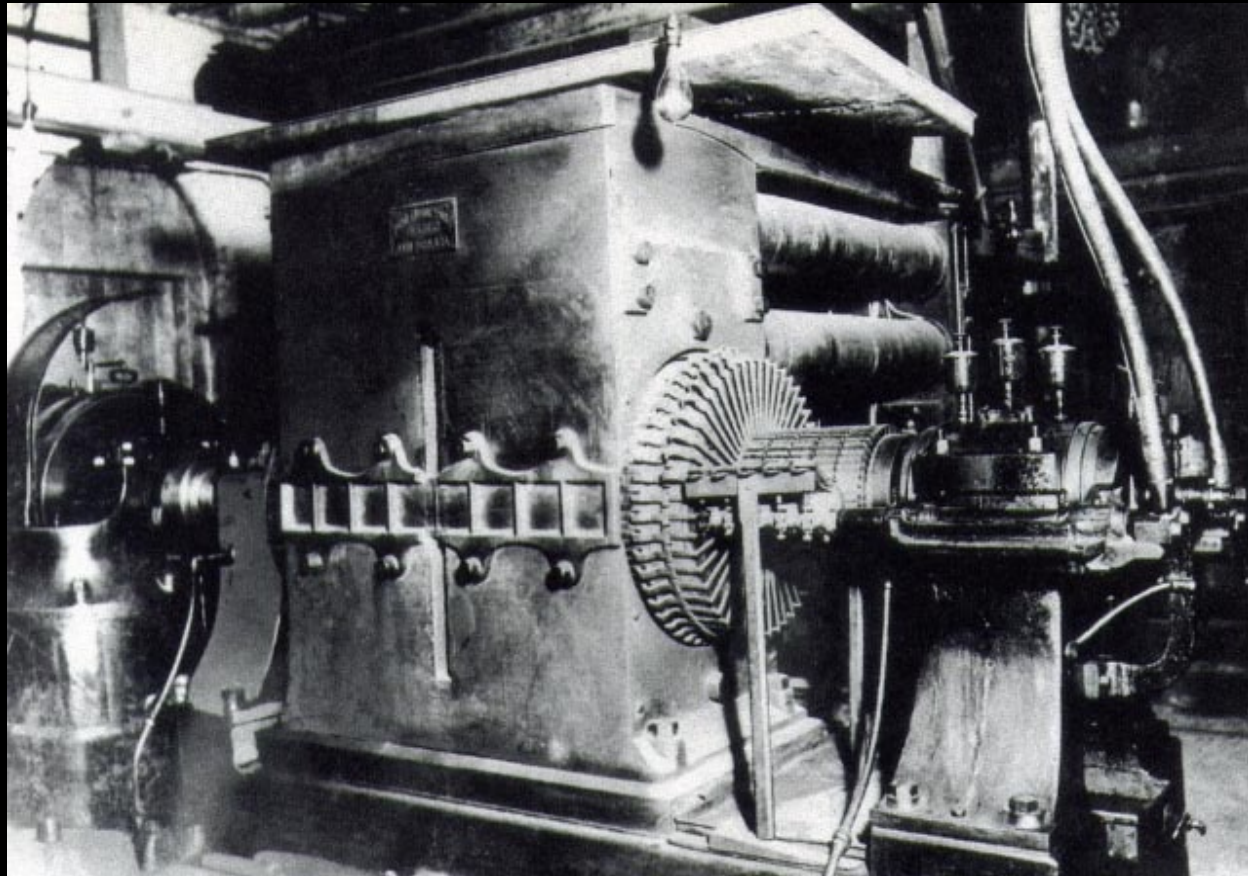
1840s

“The mechanical *equivalent* of heat.”



1867-1882

Mechanical force → electricity

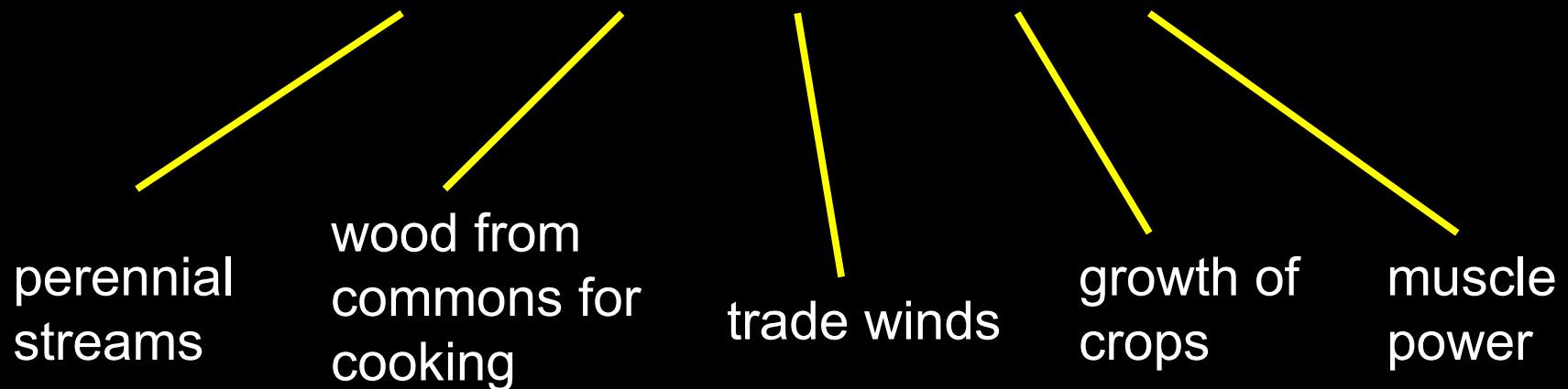


A gigantic capitalist “moral economy” of enacted equivalences

thermonuclear → electromagnetic →
→ biochemical → thermal →
→ mechanical → electric →
→ electromagnetic → kinetic →

A territorial **hierarchy** in which “little energies” linked to subsistence or earlier capitalisms can be politically subordinated to the higher “Big Energy” of thermodynamics and industrial mechanization ...

Thermodynamic energy



... a hierarchy incorporating the colonialist disposition of the associated accumulations of thermodynamic waste.

... and connected with the
permissions and prohibitions of
orthodox economic practice ...

“An *economic* point of view
formed the root of
thermodynamics ... Economic
and physical ideas grew up
together, sharing a common
context.”

Theodore Porter
UCLA

... the waste to be overseen and cleaned up by growing numbers of the usual suspects ...



... or simply
absorbed by
them ...

EVICTED FOR CARBON CREDITS

NORWAY, SWEDEN, AND FINLAND DISPLACE UGANDAN
FARMERS FOR CARBON TRADING



... or by the hard-working earth itself.

These processes are not themselves
beliefs nor “narratives.”

Nor did “beliefs about energy” come first and other practices follow.

Rather, violence and supposedly “peaceful” concepts and narratives evolved *together*, as different aspects of a single earthly process.



Therefore it is not the case that we have a “non-material” or “discursive” or “epistemic” colonialism on **one** side and a “material,” “power-laden,” “governance-oriented” or “lifeworld” colonialism on the **other**. These divisions are in some ways *themselves* colonialist.



To recapitulate, energy
is not an object “out
there” about which we
have beliefs, but rather
is part of what
Elizabeth Povinelli
(borrowing from some
of Wittgenstein’s last
writings) calls ...

“... an ‘axial hinge’ on which turns an entire apparatus of practical and propositional knowledge about the world, rather than a set of propositions about the state of the world ... ”

“One moves out
of one *space* and
into another, from
one kind of
physics into
another, from one
metaphysics into
another.”

“The equivalence of [heat
and mechanical energy]
was not suspected by
people in the 18th century;
the notion that a horse
pulling a treadmill and a
coal fire heating a lime
kiln were in some sense
doing the same thing
would have appeared
absurd to them.”

Joel Mokyr
Northwestern University

Povinelli calls the new space the “scarred region between life and nonlife” of the “carbon imaginary.” We might equally refer to the “energy imaginary.”

Summing up:

Energy *itself* reproduces and naturalizes a colonial, racist, violent organization of earthly relations. It is *itself* one of the “ancestral catastrophes that ... keep arriving out of the ground of colonialism and racism” – part of that past which is “ahead of us.”

This understanding helps “ground environmental damage in the colonial sphere rather than in the biosphere.”

And it helps sidestep the temptation to say that climatic crisis can be addressed by “keeping energy” and merely tinkering with the interventions “**associated with**” energy projects so that there is more **distributive justice** as well as **a different kind of extractivism**. Because energy *itself* is colonialist, you can’t get rid of coloniality by “including anticolonialism” or “climate justice” *in* energy plans.



บริษัทโรงแยกก๊าซฮบเอา
ก็ตีบวกกำไร มสลิ มรู้แล้ว
ว่ายิบทุกคันรับพิชชอ
บ้าน



A last parting strategic question:

How to bring all this into
dialogue with a colonialist
environmentalism that
remains stubbornly unaware
of its own colonialism ...

“What we really need to do is make the leap straight to renewable energy ... Banks, asset managers and insurance companies ... can drive change ... 350 is the most important number in the world ... I don’t understand the reasoning behind these attacks ... ”

Bill McKibben, 350.org

“We don’t have time to argue about social justice. If we don’t solve climate change, Black lives don’t matter. If we don’t solve climate change now, LGBTQ [people] don’t matter. If we don’t solve climate change right now, ... the #MeToo movement doesn’t matter.”

Jonathan Logan, Extinction Rebellion



KEEP
CALM
AND
DECOLONIZE