The Work of Solarity

Radical system change, such as that imagined through solarity, requires honest and integral relationships to our emotions. Theorizing solarity requires a continued engagement with the types of emotional work and affective responses that these processes invoke. In other words, energy scholarship—on solarities or otherwise—must take seriously the emotional states in which people live, theorize, and enact environmental justice over the longue durée.

For many, energy transition away from oil can be threatening. It can destabilize people’s sense of identity, values, and everyday ways of life by challenging the (often unexamined) socioeconomic practices and energy resources underpinning them. Imagining—let alone building toward—a post-oil future involves deep personal and collective reckonings with our attachments to the present. And these reflections require real emotional work. In most oil-producing societies, discourses about energy transition can spark feelings of optimism and excitement about a green future, joy in community collaboration, fear and anxiety about deprivation or being made redundant in a new economy, and even anger about a loss of choice or power. Energy transition therefore requires us to engage with these interconnected and sometimes contradictory emotions—and the significant forms of affective labor this work requires.
Building a post-oil future will require more than the development of new technologies to, say, generate and store immense amounts of solar power and adapt preexisting energy grids. We will have to engage with “our” affective entanglements with resources like oil, wind, or solar in the now. We will need to contend with the ways they have historically shaped our landscapes, communities, and emotional lives. A transition to energy from the sun will demand our affective energies, our emotional labor, and intellectual and physical work. We will need to shore up ourselves and our communities with care as we continue to demand systemic change and accountability from governments while struggling with the debilitating compromises we must all make when living within petrocapitalism.

To put it another way, any possibility of a future solar community is contingent on seeding and cultivating joy. The more just, sustainable relations we might envision in solarity depend as much on the sustainability of our capacity for joy as they do the renewable power of the sun.

Transition to solarity will also require mediation. It will require a set of techniques, infrastructures, architectures, technologies, texts, images, and affects that move people and places from being out of relation with the sun into sustainable relation with the sun. In some cases, this might be a process of disintermediation, a process of removing elements that might have stood between an entity and the sun or obscured one’s connection to the sun. This would be the case, for example, in the creation of forms of open-air architecture that provide more solar exposure for bodies, for plants, and for growth. In other cases, a move toward solarity requires the introduction of new materials that refract or reflect solar emissions such that they become newly accessible for populations. Here the solar panel is a prime example—a medium that accepts solar emissions and then transforms and directs them, as the resource of energy, into the infrastructure of the grid. For yet others, it will require media that protect them from unwanted and punishing exposure to the sun’s relentless heat.
Achieving solarity will also require politics. In “Who’s Afraid of Democracy?,” Geoff Mann recounts an experience of attending a meeting in Vancouver organized by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). Involving a large number of individuals and organizations with interests in environmental and social change (including representatives from nongovernmental organizations, unions, and universities), the discussion at the event focused on the possibility of a “just transition” as part of a shift to a green economy. Mann reports that during the meeting, everyone emphasized the need for “ordinary” people to be involved in making decisions about transition. A green, just shift had to be “democratic” and “participatory,” the participants avowed. Despite this insistence—or perhaps because of it—Mann found that “by the time of the day’s closing plenary discussion, I could not shake the suspicion that confronting even the lower-intensity transitions was unlikely to involve ‘democracy.’” The main reason: the scale, speed, and intensity of change required to address the causes of climate change seemed to be unattainable via democratic practices. This seemed to Mann to be true not only through actually-existing democratic practices (i.e., voter-driven electoral politics) but also via models of deliberative democracy many of those at the CCPA event championed.

What might a politics appropriate to a transition, just or otherwise, look like? What issues are central to the processes and practices of constituting a politics of solarity? What questions should we pose to existing models of the political, including forms of radical politics, in light of the destructiveness of fossil capitalism and the promise of solarity? One possibility is a kind of solar liberalism whereby environmentalists and consumers act in the public sphere to pressure political representatives and institutions to accelerate transition to solarity by investing in the development of its infrastructures. Depending on your perspective, the politics of liberal

2. Mann, 42.
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solarity have either the advantage or the disadvantage of guaranteeing that social, political, and economic life will remain more or less unchanged, except for the energy source that powers it. Gregory Lynall reminds us that the history of solar power emits a “flexible technopolitics,” flipping from right to left, from divine right to democracy and energy justice, in accordance with distributive power, with specific geographies and modes of scientific appropriation.³

A second possibility is a revolutionary transformation of fossil capitalism. In this scenario, the apparatus of the state is seized by the party of the organized underclass, and directed toward dismantling the inegalitarian and environmentally destructive infrastructures and relations of fossil capitalism and systematically replacing these with egalitarian and environmentally just infrastructures and relations of solarity. A “climate Leninism” of this sort would certainly be transformative in at least some respects.⁴ However, there are strong historical reasons to be wary of the concentrated power of the sovereign state and its necropolitical, environmentally destructive effects, even in cases in which this power is exerted with socialist intention.⁵ The case for the centralized authority of the state as the political instrument for achieving solarity is further complicated by the fact that, in the present conjuncture, governments that have shown themselves willing to exert the power of the state to enforce radical social and economic change tend to tilt to the right, not to the left.

A third possibility is a more decentralized, iterative, and combinatorial politics that invests the possibility of solarity in democratically controlled local initiatives that develop and maintain sustainable, just, and responsible energy infrastructures. Such strategies are ori-

This entry comes to you from a village in northern Togo, where a storm has knocked out the new and skeletal but otherwise reliable electricity grid. The proprietor of the local cyber café allows members of the community to use his solar-powered sockets to charge laptops and phones. He is called “le maire de Farendé” as a tribute to his fairness and generosity. Most people in Farendé farm, cook, and clean using solar power harvested the old-fashioned way, but the solar panels are a welcome source for those whose labor and entertainment draw on electricity. Whether or not the grid in Farendé is humming along, the cyber mayor offers power free of charge and on a shared basis with other members of the community.

Although conceivably produced by the very same factories using the very same minerals extracted from the very same mines, a solar panel in Farendé and a solar panel in Berkeley offer different lessons to our energy justice praxis. To be sure, neither is “absolved” of its production via capitalist arrangements of labor, resources, and power—like all commodities, solar panels are materializations of capitalist productive relations rather than their kryptonite. Yet, only the panels in Farendé permit us to identify the forms of solar power we want and help us to determine how to put them in place. They are a starting point, one among many, for a revolutionary political project of solarity.

quire confronting the challenge of scale. Capitalist globalization and fossil fuels have generated a material condition in which the scale of our primary economic systems—extraction, agriculture and food, manufacturing, communication and transportation, services and finance, logistics and security—far exceeds the comprehension and jurisdiction of governments and their citizens.

Liberal political theory has no answer to scale. It falters and stammers in the face of it. Liberalism’s core political tenets (autonomy, property, and security of the individual) and its chief political instrument (deregulated markets and private investment regimes) derive from a smaller time and a different set of political problems. Its impetus predated the scaling up of fossil fuel dependencies, the normalization of transnational corporations, and today’s globalized population pressures. But we, unlike our predecessors, confront not simply the threat of the Machiavellian magistrate but rather new menacing hyperobjects (e.g., global warming, the global wealth gap, transnational racial capitalism) that resulted from choices made long ago and that defy the old political calculi to solve them. To these, liberalism has no answer; it has no tools to respond.

Yet many of us hang on to the little gestures of agency that liberalism offers. In the limited field in which we operate as individuals, solar praxes do indeed proliferate today: locavorism, PV rooftops, organic markets, veganism, composting, the biking commute. These small acts against things as they are give the late liberal subject a small voice of protest against fossil capital and the second nature we inhabit, an opportunity to gesture toward an imagined life after oil. And as long as we live in this political body, we will believe that each pull of a product off the grocery store shelf and each morning commute can send a meaningful signal, a little shiver, off to markets, to neighbors, and to policy makers about the content of our values. Mystified, we will yet hang on to the hope that we nudge Earth toward sustainability.

Solarity in the age of global warming (if it is to carry forward the project of democracy) requires something different, something to meet scale with scale, something to level this uneven playing field
that is so overdetermined by a centuries’-long alliance between aggregated wealth and the fossil fuel industries. In other words, for solarity to punch in the same weight class, it must scale up. We all know what that means, that it can only mean one thing: solidarity. To get there, to inch toward solarity, means purging the libertarian fantasy that each of us matters prior to and apart from our relations—that there is no “we,” that our relations do not matter. Solarity means asserting that we matter only by relation.
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