

N6 – Research network ‘Globalisation, Inequality and Sustainability in Long-Term Perspective’

Energy and the low countries: energy transitions in historical perspective

We are currently facing a drastic transformation towards new, renewable sources of energy that reduce CO2 emissions. As pressing this transformation is, the challenges are equally immense. But energy transitions are, of course, nothing new. This session is devoted to new research with pertaining to energy transitions in the low countries, in particular focusing on new forms and sources of energy (gas, coal, nuclear energy), how they were introduced, and how they were perceived in relation to the socio-economic challenges of the day. In this session we are focusing on the following questions: what has driven the use of new forms of energy in the past? Which societal actors were important in these transitions? And how were certain environmental and socio-economic risks perceived (pollution, dependencies)? And if indeed this was the case, to what extent were environmental problems balanced against economic interests? Furthermore, it is also noteworthy to see the persistent use or rearguard fight of certain “older” forms of energy, think of the slow and painful decline of coal in the 20th century. It is thus evident that energy transitions are not simply driven by technological questions and developments. They intersect with societal organization and are also shaped by the socio-cultural perceptions. Some forms of energy (the use of nuclear energy, the use of coal) have attracted major societal debate in the past. All papers devote attention to reconstructing these debates as they unfolded in the 19th-20th century in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Henk-Jan Dekker & Antoine Missemer (both CNRS, CIRED)

Experiencing the Resource Curse: Dutch Economists and the Discovery of Natural Gas Reserves, 1959-1977

In energy economics, the resource curse refers to negative macroeconomic and structural consequences of a natural resource boom: it tends to reduce incentives to increase productivity, does not encourage industrial diversification, and provokes currency appreciation leading to competitiveness issues in all sectors. The literature has invoked resource curse to explain why developed countries with abundant natural resources tended to experience strong deindustrialization in the 1970s and 1980s and why developing countries struggled – and still struggle – to profit from abundant natural resources.

A synonym of the resource curse that we commonly find in the literature is the term Dutch disease, coined in 1977 by The Economist, to refer to the developments of the Dutch economy following the discovery of substantial natural gas reserves in 1959. Commentators controversially ascribed changes to the Dutch economy in the following decades to this resource boom.

Until now, there has been little to no research on how Dutch economists reacted to this impactful discovery in the 1960s. This paper aims to fill this gap by studying key publications and archival sources from major Dutch economists such as Jan Tinbergen, Pieter de Wolff, and Roefie Hueting, or lesser known ones, many of whom worked for leading economic institutions like the Central Planning Agency (CPB) and the Statistics Agency (CBS).

After depicting the economic and theoretical context of the 1950s in the Netherlands, by emphasizing the successful post-war policy of coal-based industrialization, which revolved around keeping wages lower than elsewhere in Western Europe to create competitiveness, we explore and analyze the initial reactions of economists to resource discovery in the early 1960s. At the time, competition with other abundant resources and the expectation of cheap nuclear energy led to the belief that gas reserves needed to be depleted quickly, with little thought for future generations. Debates about the competition of the struggling European coal sector in competition with cheap American coal crucially influenced energy debates as well. Finally, we examine the more advanced and lasting reactions to the gas boom after the Dutch economy exhibited symptoms that could be ascribed to the resource curse, in the early 1970s. In addition to historicizing the concept of resource curse, this inquiry sheds new light on enduring controversies about the existence and multifaceted character of the Dutch disease, still today.

(This paper is part of the ERC StG ETRANHET project, hosted by CNRS, CIRED)

Robrecht Declercq (GU)

Energy transitions: sustainability and environmental history in Belgium (1800-2000)

This paper is making an overview on energy transitions in Belgium using a long term perspective. Belgium makes an interesting case study. As an early industrialiser, societal welfare and economic growth are historically rooted in the use of fossil fuels (coal), present in the soil. The country was a pioneer in the use of fossil fuels and later new forms of energy production like nuclear energy. Remarkably, the use of coal was also persistent throughout the twentieth century. In order to understand energy transitions in the historical perspective, the paper forwards attaches importance to future visions of scarcity and abundance in order to understand the renewal and change of certain energy regimes. The first use of coal corresponded with shortage of firewood. But the paper also highlights that the continued use of coal was also driven by forgotten anxieties in energy shortages surfacing already in the 19th century, as the country experienced a coal anxiety similar as in England. Gloomy future projections about energy after World War II further enmeshed Belgium in the use of fossil fuels. In that context, in addition, nuclear energy seemed to hold much promise, as the future use of it was linked to the availability of colonial sources of fuel (uranium from the Congo). Another moment of scarcity that informed the change of the energy regime was the oil crisis of 1973. The paper therefore focuses on the ideas, plans and implications of energy transitions and energy regimes in Belgium. More generally the paper connects

these discussions and visions of scarcity and abundance to the most important socio-economic questions of the day, like the organization of work, economic organization, interest groups, discussions on public versus private, the mapping of public space and dependencies abroad.

Ben Gales (RUG)

The renaissance of coal

At the end of June 1985, burglars 'moved' bags packed with documents from the Ministry of Economic affairs in The Hague, the Netherlands. The Queen's Commissioner in the province of North Brabant, the illustrious politician Van Agt, made public almost instantaneously that minutes of secret conversations had been stolen, discussing one or two new nuclear plants. A week later, the minister of the department, Van Aardenne, however claimed that the conversations had only envisaged the expansion of coal-fired electricity plants in the provinces Limburg and Brabant. A selection of the papers was then published and analysed in *Bluff!*, a journal representing, amongst others, the anti-nuclear movement. The papers dealt with nuclear plants and coal fired electricity plants and a reconstruction or liberalisation of the national electricity industry and the prices the so-called giant consumers had to pay for their electricity. In short, overall supply of energy was the topic. In that context, coal was given a major role.

The affair was just a moment in the renaissance of coal, which had started years before. This is, at first sight, odd, as in December 1965 a socialist minister of Economic Affairs, Den Uyl, announced the imminent end of coal mining in Southern-Limburg and therefore in the Netherlands. It is rarely realised that this was not the beginning of the end of Dutch coal use. After a dip, domestic coal consumption rose almost to the level of the golden years of the coal mining industry. In the talk, I want to show how disputed the exit from coalmining was and why society started to burn coal again with some enthusiasm. The 'movers' claimed to have unearthed a complot in *Bluff!*, the 'anti-gas track'. Why, indeed, did natural gas become a tainted energy carrier, except in the milieu of activists, and, moreover, a tainted kind of energy in the natural gas country par excellence: the Netherlands?