

The local experiencing of climate change and just coal transition in the contested landscape of the Turów mining and power complex, Lower Silesia

Project Idea and Assumptions

In an “overheated world,” a term used by anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen¹ to describe not only the rising temperature of the planet but also the dizzying speed at which change occurs today, there is a growing conviction about the urgent need for universities to engage in developing strategies of prevention and survival in the face of the climate and socio-ecological crisis. Practicing public humanities, we assume that knowledge, theories, and research results produced locally and on micro-scales play an important role in shaping global circulations of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences.

Although the world has reached a certain consensus regarding the necessity of implementing decarbonization policies and developing low-emission infrastructure, this process unfolds in many different ways across the globe. There is little knowledge about its actual conditions and trajectories. Even less is known about the grassroots, social ways in which both the climate crisis and the socio-cultural, environmental, and economic transformations associated with decarbonization and transition are understood and experienced.

The idea of empirically studying local experiences of the climate crisis and the early stages of energy transition around the Turów mine and power plant in the municipality of Bogatynia in Lower Silesia emerged in 2021. Since that time, Dr. hab. Katarzyna Majbroda, Professor at the University of Wrocław, has carried out anthropological research around the Turów complex, observing the lives of residents in the face of transition. The start of anthropological field work within the project in 2025 was motivated by the need to expand social theory so that it includes issues connected to the climate crisis and to develop comprehensive research that would take into account the socio-cultural consequences of the political and economic processes surrounding fossil fuel extraction. National energy policy has vast social-environmental, climatic, economic-political, material, technological, and cultural impacts, and for this reason there is a need to study its effects on small, cross-border localities such as Turów. Energy transition is not only an economic, technological, and environmental process but also a deeply social and cultural one that requires thorough study and description.

The main goal of the project is to investigate and analyze how the local community living in and near the Turów Basin in the municipality of Bogatynia understands the climate crisis and experiences coal transition, and to provide an anthropological diagnosis of local ways of developing survival strategies and imagining the future within grassroots processes running parallel to planned decarbonization and just transition.

The Turów mine and power plant have been crucial elements of the cultural landscape of Lower Silesia for over 60 years. They create a contested landscape: an anthropogenic landscape

¹ T.H. Eriksen (2016), *Overheating. An Anthropology of Accelerated Change*, London: Pluto Press.

transformed by human activity, and a disrupted one—resulting from high CO₂ emissions, air pollution, soil contamination, water shortages, and a post-industrial environment. Today it is an experimental zone in many senses—a kind of laboratory for testing and verifying the assumptions of energy transition, but also a major challenge for local communities as well as national and European decision-makers. Turów, like a lens, brings together conflicting interests, differing perspectives, and various ways of forming social-cultural, environmental, economic, material, and political hierarchies. The project will analyze the conditions and contexts of energy transition and the mechanisms through which discursive dichotomies—such as ecology/economy, nature/technology, local/global—are taken for granted in academic and public discourse. It will also problematize categories such as well-being, health, security, sustainable development, and just energy transition.

The project is conducted in the municipality of Bogatynia in Lower Silesia, geographically located at the Tripoint, in Upper Lusatia, on the border of Poland (Lower Silesia), the Czech Republic (Liberec Region), and Germany (Saxony). It is a unique part of Poland: a contested cross-border landscape with significant potential for just transition. Under EU and national decarbonization policies, the area around the Turów complex has been included in global efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions as much as possible. The locality of this complex process intersects with the global and European politics of the Green Deal, the goals of climate neutrality and zero emissions by 2050, and international strategies to prevent or mitigate the effects of the climate crisis. The research area, which expands as further stages of the project unfold, therefore takes on a transnational dimension, broadening the geopolitical and cultural context of the analyses and diagnoses regarding the early stages of the energy transition in Lower Silesia.

Communities living in areas of fossil fuel and resource extraction are often perceived as victims exploited by capitalist systems of development and modernization — so-called “affected communities.” Meanwhile, empirical research shows that the relations and processes occurring in areas subjected to industrialization during the expansion of extractive industries (on both macro- and micro-scales) are much more complex and ambiguous. Aware of how transformation processes are entangled in power relations and political-economic dependencies, we see conflict as a conceptual trap that arises when a researcher too quickly defines sides. Local communities have highly diverse narratives about their experiences and evaluations of the dynamics of regional change. Our aim is to collect these narratives and reveal their non-obvious multiplicity, along with the tensions that emerge in the areas neighboring the Turów energy-mining complex.

Applying an anthropological perspective supported by theories from social sciences and humanities allows us to recognize the different positions and expectations of many actors regarding the region’s transformative future. Our interlocutors include former residents of Wigancice Żytawskie and Rybarzowice; residents of Bogatynia, Zgorzelec, Jasna Góra, Opolno-Zdrój, Wyszków, and surrounding villages; employees of the mine and power plant; small business owners; larger regional stakeholders; members of NGOs; municipal officials; heritage conservators; activists; and local cultural workers. The project aims to examine and describe grassroots perspectives and local experiences of the energy transition in Lower Silesia.

An important aspect of our research is the question of what just transition means and in what political-economic and socio-environmental realities it can be implemented.

We listen to the stories of particular people whose experiences materialize in narratives of industrial development, displacement and resettlement caused by the expansion of extractive industries, multi-species coexistence, fears and concerns, hopes and expectations related to decarbonization and “life after coal.” We examine what “life on coal” looks like, how the local community has woven lignite into identity processes and cultural heritage over the years, how they live in the vicinity of the mine and power plant, how they experience environmental change and the emergence of energy landscapes. We study how various actors of transition (administrators, policymakers, activists, NGO representatives, local leaders) anticipate the region’s future, what relationships they build, and what survival strategies they develop in the face of decarbonization. We assume that energy transition and the often conflicting discourses surrounding it must be brought into public consciousness. The debate on decarbonization should include grassroots perspectives as well as local knowledges and lived experience, because this transition is also a social and cultural transformation toward a more just world and a more ecologically responsible future.

Research Team

The research team, led by Dr. hab. Katarzyna Majbroda, Professor at the University of Wrocław, includes:

- Dr. hab. Paweł Klint, Professor at UWr (Institute of History),
- Dr. hab. Dorota Kołodziejczyk, Professor at UWr (Institute of English Studies),
- Dr. hab. Jacek Schindler (Institute of Cultural Studies).

The project’s dominant cognitive-research perspective, grounded in qualitative methods of socio-cultural anthropology, is complemented by theories, analytical categories, and research tools from political economy, literary studies, environmental studies, ecocriticism, environmental humanities, archival studies, regional history, the history of industrialization, critical cultural studies, public humanities, and citizen science.

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Theoretical Inspirations

The leading discipline of our research is socio-cultural anthropology (including its subfields: the anthropology of the future, environmental anthropology, anthropology of energy², and the anthropology of resource extraction).³ We imagine anthropology as a lens that allows us to discern and understand new dimensions of energy transition and to describe its trajectories, frictions, shifting scales, and complex dynamics. We hope that applying anthropological tools will contribute to reshaping the debate on energy transition and reorienting it onto less obvious paths. The project also draws theoretical inspiration from political economy (Polanyi),⁴ environmental humanities and environmental studies, multisited ethnography (George Marcus),⁵ multisituated ethnography (Kaushik Sunder Rajan),⁶ the ethnography of late industrialism (Kim Fortun),⁷ and the ethnography of global connections (Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing),⁸ STS.⁹

The multispecies coexistence of humans, coal, technology, and the environment poses challenges for our analytical and research endeavors. We view the intertwined socio-economic, technological-environmental, and material-political infrastructures observed in the formation of certain discourses and the (de)stabilization of social practices in the face of climate crisis and decarbonization as emergent more-than-social assemblages. Drawing on selected concepts and analytical categories from posthumanism, new materialisms, science and technology studies, and trans-relational ethnography, we attempt to tease these assemblages apart in search of their causes and patterns of connection, and to weave them into configurations not yet attempted.

Geopolitical and economic threads in the research are grounded in political economy, critical studies of capitalism and postsocialism, and post-dependency studies. In studying the early stages of the energy transition in Lower Silesia, we remain aware of epistemological pitfalls and open to the unforeseen: new research threads, theoretical inspirations, analytical categories, and useful tools that will clarify themselves as our engagement with the field deepens.

Methodological Assumptions

The project is grounded in qualitative research methodology, combining various methods and techniques. Navigating the terrain of local and global connections, different scales and

² D. Boyer, *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene*, Durham–London: Duke University Press. Lolum T., Abram S., N. Ortar (eds.) (2021), *Ethnographies of Power: A Political Anthropology of Energy*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

³ A. Hornborg (2019), *Nature, Society and Justice in the Anthropocene. Unraveling the Money- Energy Technology Complex*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ K. Polanyi (2001), *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press

⁵ G. Marcus (1995), *Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography*, „Annual Review of Anthropology” 24, p. 95-117.

⁶ K. Sunder Rajan (2021), *Multisituated: Ethnography as Diasporic Praxis*, Duke: Duke University Press.

⁷ K. Fortun (2012), *Ethnography in Late Industrialism*, „Cultural Anthropology” 27/3, p. 446-464.

⁸ A. Lowenhaupt Tsing (2024), *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁹ S. Jasanoff (2004). *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*, London–New York: Routledge.

temporalities, following people, biographies, histories, the deposit, industrial infrastructure, environmental changes, and landscape transformations, we draw on multisited ethnography. To avoid overlooking the perspectives of various actors involved in transformation, we also turn to multisited ethnography. Because our research takes place within a complex temporal framework, we incorporate historical and comparative methods. We conduct interviews, participate in local events, and accompany our collaborators in their daily lives, in both routine and festive situations.

In our laboratory-like mode of work, we do not assume that the field consists of fixed, closed domains that we uncover and name as we increase our presence. We recognize that the connections among people, energy, technology, matter, and the environment that we observe are deeply relational. This does not lead us to treat the technical and industrial as natural or nondiscursive, nor to place the environment within technological frameworks, but rather to open ourselves cognitively to the inevitable interdependencies and relationships among these domains. Their meanings are not assumed a priori but take shape during conversations, observed practices, and their juxtaposition with archival sources, political discourses, cultural texts, and strategic documents concerning industrial and economic development, energy security, decarbonization, zero emissions, and sustainable development. Our readiness to shift conceptual frameworks and epistemological perspectives, and to question divisions between dynamic situations and static contexts, economic and ecological spheres, public and private, and local and global, allows us to “reweave” the field anew and to challenge established hierarchies, dominant narratives, and stabilized, media-circulated visions of reality.

An essential assumption of the project is the epistemological and ethical commitment to inclusivity and to shifting the research perspective in such a way as to avoid practicing “epistemological extractivism” (Linda Martín Alcoff).¹⁰ Instead, we aim to co-create multiple and inclusive epistemologies. This perspective entails abandoning the practice of extracting knowledge and social experience in the way late capitalism extracts raw materials and exploits natural resources, and instead fostering epistemologies of social inclusion and critical attentiveness that regard the knowledge and experiences of people and communities outside academia as a resource that not only strengthens and grounds academic knowledge but also reorients it toward new issues and areas.

¹⁰ L. Martín Alcoff, *Extractivist Epistemologies*, w: *Decentralizing Knowledges. Essays on Distributed Agency*, eds. L. R. Medina, S. Harding, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2025, p. 31-61.