

REVERSING THE ‘RESOURCE CURSE’?

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Political economic arrangements based on extractivism have become increasingly contested because of the intensifying socio-ecological crisis. Growing concerns about environmental impacts of mining and use of fossil-fuels intermingle with concerns about the unequal, often racialized, displacements of local culture and livelihood that extractivism causes. The advocacy and development of alternative political economic arrangements with less adverse ecological impacts has added to the pressure on existing extractivist models. The global energy transition has sharpened the critique of fossil fuel dependence, intensifying focus on the destructive impacts of extraction through the supply chain to combustion. While the growing momentum to switch from fossil fuels to renewables is markedly uneven across different cities, regions and countries, debate about ‘just transitions’ has become increasingly widespread. Pursuing post-fossil fuel alternatives creates impetus for ‘green new deals’, socialised ‘energy democracy’, and other ‘de-growth’ transformations.

This special theme issue of *JAPE* on ‘reversing the resource curse?’ explores some of these recent challenges to extractivism. Its primary, but not exclusive, focus is on Australia where the challenges have gained increasing political economic prominence and urgency. As this special issue was being finalised, Australia’s new ALP Government became embroiled in trying to handle a national energy crisis. Responding to sky-rocketing global gas and coal prices driven by the international sanctions on Russia, the Australian energy regulator imposed a price cap to protect electricity consumers. In response, the privatised fossil fuel generators,

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pursuing their own commercial interests, decided to cut supply to the grid. The regulator then had to commandeer generators to continue supply, with yet-to-be-determined taxpayer compensation at the global rate of return. Although the underlying cause of the crisis was continued national dependence on coal and gas for electricity, the Government doubled-down, rather than learn from the lessons of fossil fuel dependency. The new Resources Minister's first act was to approve a new gasfield in Western Australia, Woodside's Scarborough-Pluto project, likely to emit 1.4 billion tonnes in emissions – triple Australia's annual figure for emissions (Hare 2022). Soon after, the Minister joined her conservative NSW State Government counterpart in advocating for progress with a major new gas project in NSW, the Santos' Narrabri project (Crowe and Foley 2022).

Contemporary developments like these highlight the need to consider arguments about the 'resource curse' that have been of international concern for many decades. Is the notion of a 'resource curse' appropriate for conceptualising the contradictions and challenges? Does it help to illuminate the fossil fuel sector's continuing stranglehold on policy and on our collective future? What other perspectives can be used to explain how and why 'zombie' coal, gas and oil remain dominant, even though forced onto the defensive – and potentially into abeyance – by climate change and the emergence of much cheaper renewable energy? Clearly, critical analysis of extractivism must focus on the state, not only on capital's lust for resources.

This special theme issue of *JAPE* casts a wide net. It considers different viewpoints and, in addition to its focus on Australia, there are articles on India, Mozambique and New Caledonia. Most of the articles take a contemporary approach, while others are historical, and all engage with urgent questions of democracy and development. Together, they point to the dynamics of contesting extractivism and the political economic implications for transformation beyond the current malaise. As co-editors of this special issue, we thank the contributors, referees and *JAPE* editorial staff for enabling us to gather these perspectives together.

References

- Hare (2022) 'The ultra-polluting Scarborough-Pluto gas project could blow through Labor's climate target – and it just got the green light', *The Conversation*, 3 June.
- Crowe, D. and Foley, M. (2022) 'NSW will need Narrabri gas, federal resources minister says', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June.