Carbonscapes and beyond

- Conceptualizing the instability of oil landscapes

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Abstract

Geographers and other critical social scientists have recently been engaged in analysing the intricate interweaving of energy systems on the one hand and socio-spatial structures on the other. A common argument has been that the spatial embeddedness of energy systems in material landscapes creates path dependencies locking in carbon-based practices. These 'carbonscapes', as we label them, are typically observed as material artefacts such as suburbs, pipelines and extraction sites, and are consequently understood as inherently stable and highly resistant to change. In this paper we argue that the stability and permanence of carbonscapes are typically exaggerated, at times even reproducing the industry narrative of the inevitability of oil.

As an alternative pathway to transition, we present and illustrate a framework for assessing the instabilities of landscapes created by oil. The framework develops multidimensional conceptions of spatiality, drawing on Assemblage theory and Global Production Networks, illustrated with reference to interrelated components in the commodity chain of a large international oil company. By a multi-sited empirical analysis from the headquarters in Norway, to the remote coastlines of Sulawesi and the barren prairies of Alberta, we briefly show how Carbonscapes as assemblages are prone to instability and change.