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Politicizing Coal Burning

Phaseout Policies from Cheap Signals to Emergent Norms and North–South Contention

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After generations as one of the primary sources of electricity generation across much of Europe and North America, since about 2013 coal burning has more recently emerged as among the most contentious areas of energy and climate change policy in the much-discussed, but little-practiced, national- and global-scale energy transitions. Energy policymakers tend to prefer stable, longer-term policies and planning to regulate electricity generation (and some aspects of pricing). However, accelerating climate change impacts, the increasing urgency of climate action, incremental increases in many public sector greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction goals, several changes in fossil gas and electricity generation prices and markets, and a growing inclination of civil society actors to target coal burning explicitly have combined to push an increasing number of jurisdictions, firms, and multilateral organizations to phase out supports for existing or future coal generation, and/or to announce a specific deadline by which coal burning is to be eliminated and banned.

Efforts to explicitly politicize coal burning, and thereby disrupt energy policymaking and energy investment markets, to achieve phaseouts of coal burning are, in some spaces, leading to a set of increasingly stabilized policy norms associated with phasing out and permanently ending or banning coal burning. As coal phaseout dates become common – or "normed" – in some jurisdictions and organizations, contention about coal and other fossil fuel policies shifts debates, discourses, and activism in local and transnational energy and climate politics. In short, the establishment and proliferation of coal phaseout discourses and policy norms also shape growing backlash politics and contention in reaction to coal phaseout demands in domestic and transnational politics.

This chapter brings together three intersecting discussions and developments. First are the set of questions at the center of this volume around policy stability and politicization posed by Paterson, Tobin, and VanDeveer (2022). Second is the relatively sudden appearance and transnational diffusion/proliferation of coal

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phaseout policy demands since about 2015, including announcements and (sometimes) enactments by various public and private sector organizations at multiple levels of authoritative scale from the global to local (Adekoya et al. 2023; Jakob and Steckel 2022; Misik and Pracharova 2023; Ohlendorf et al. 2022; Rentier et al. 2019; VanDeveer and Boersma 2022; Vinichenko et al. 2023). Third is the long-standing social science literature on norms and normative change in comparative, transnational, and global politics (see, e.g., Finnemore 1996; March and Olsen 1989; Mitchell and Carpenter 2019; Nadelman 1990; O'Neill et al. 2004; VanDeveer 1997). The guiding question posed here is as follows: What can we learn about the policy stability and politicization dynamics, and about comparative and transnational normative change, through an exploration of transnational coal phaseout politics between 2013 and 2024? This analysis largely sets aside earlier national coal phasedowns and phaseouts in countries such as the UK and the Netherlands, which took place in different political and social contexts and were driven by a number of different causal factors. Put bluntly, it was not coal burning and the resulting contributions to global climate change at which Margaret Thatcher's considerable discursive and policymaking powers were aimed.

As the title suggests, as declared coal phaseout policy norms gained popularity in the 2010s, often pushed by climate activist organizations, the early adopters were often states which had already mostly phased out the coal sector for non-climate change reasons, or which had never actually used much coal in electricity production. These declarations might be seen as "cheap signals" of climate change leadership or climate virtue. But as coal phaseout enters domestic and transnational politics and begins to impact more coal-dependent societies and economies, politics becomes considerably more contentious and normatively complex and fraught.

The chapter's six sections proceed as follows: First is a brief summary of some major aspects of coal's history as both a major source of energy and a major source of fractious national and transnational politics that is at the heart of the chapter. In the second and third sections, I turn to discussions of coal politics at United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and then to a short explanation of the usual content of coal phaseout policy norms. Here, we see the push by climate change mitigation activists, experts, and organizational leaders to explicitly politicize the burning of coal and demand date-certain deadlines for the cessation of coal burning and the financing of coal mining and coal burning facilities. The fourth and fifth sections explore the emergence of a set of coal phaseout norms in domestic and transnational politics and the increasing contestation or repoliticization of these emerging norms, respectively. The chapter concludes by drawing out four sets of implications for

coal and fossil fuel phaseout advocates and skeptics, for understanding antagonisms between stability and politicization and for comparative environmental, energy, and climate change politics.

5.1 From Black Diamonds and the Big Smoke to Planet Killer

Humans have been burning coal for thousands of years, across continents and within ancient empires associated with China, Greece, Rome, and Aztec histories – to name only a few. But it is Industrial Age expansion – with the advent and rapid proliferation of coal-fired steam engines and coal-fired power plants (first erected in London in the 1880s) – that cements coal as a major industrial energy source from the late nineteenth century, throughout the twentieth century, and into the early twenty-first century. Throughout much of this period, it was labor rights, labor movements, and worker health and safety that often dominated national politics in states with large coal reserves and significant coal mining and coal burning. Mitchell's (2013) work argues that coal's fueling of industrialization and huge labor unions is a centrally important driver of democratization in industrial societies. Another illustration of coal's central importance can be found in the fact that today's European Union has its origins in the 1951 European Coal and Steel Community, whose early priorities included more housing for coal miners (Merry 1955).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, environmental movements and environmental policies – especially those focused on air pollution and its risks to human health, ecological/nature protection, and architectural and aesthetic damage – began to reframe coal burning as a source of dangerous and expensive pollution-induced harms. Just as it is difficult to explore varieties of capitalism, comparative labor rights, and labor movements – or the comparative histories of socialism and socialist states – without reference to coal mining and coal burning, so too is it unlikely that comparative histories of European and North American environmental movements and policymaking could ignore coal.

Since 2015, as climate change accelerates and consensus about the needs to act to mitigate climate change stabilized, we see another dramatic shift toward framing coal burning as "bad" and "unjust" from the global to local scale (Boersma and VanDeveer 2016a, 2016b; Jakob et al. 2020; Selin and VanDeveer 2025; VanDeveer and Boersma 2022). Coal is now often framed by environmental advocates as the worst or most dangerous fossil fuel, because it is the most carbon-intensive fossil fuel and also the fossil fuel that often produces the most visible, local damage to human and ecological health.

From the early 2000s, pro-coal rhetoric about "clean coal" and "wars on coal" emerged alongside a politics of "coal phaseout" demands and announced policies. Civil society actors have demanded that public and private actors phase out coal

burning and ban it – and divest entirely from coal-related investments. Two prominent examples of such activism are the Climate Action Network's several years of anti-coal burning advocacy, including as part of their "Fossil of the Day" awards at UNFCCC COPs,[1] and the many environmental organizations and anti-coal burning campaigns supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, including the Bloomberg Global Coal Countdown.[2] Across most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states, coal is increasingly framed in political discourse as the worst offender in climate change politics.

Many public sector actors at national, provincial, and municipal scales have either declared themselves "coal-free" or publicly announced deadlines/dates by which coal will no longer be burned in their jurisdictions. Many private and multilateral financial institutions have announced they will no longer fund or invest in coal burning facilities. These shifts have several empirical and discursive origins, including the failure (through at least 2024) to reverse global growth in GHG emissions and the frustration and anger about this fact among most climate change activists and scientists, in combination with ethics and justice-related aspects of contemporary climate change discourses and the increased price competition from renewable energy (VanDeveer and Boersma 2022).

5.2 Coal and the COPs

One place to identify and explore shifting discursive and policy norms related to coal burning is in public debates, state and non-state actors' position statements, and negotiated UNFCCC documents around the annual UNFCCC COPs. While environmental and climate activists and scientific analyses long focused attention on coal's contributions to climate change and the need to reduce GHG emissions from coal in some countries' domestic politics since the 1990s, the transnational normative shifts related to coal burning became much more apparent in the run-up to the 2015 UNFCCC climate change accord negotiations at COP21 in Paris. While the early 2000s saw "clean coal" exhibits and other explicit attempts to frame coal as an energy source that could be made climate-friendly, coal emerged as a priority target of decarbonization activists in the 2010s. The 2015 Paris Agreement – hailed by many as a political success in global climate change politics (Dimitrov 2016) because of a host of institutional advances achieved in the negotiations – makes no mention of the need to curb, much less phase out, coal or any other fossil fuels. Subsequent analysis about the more ambitious mitigation policies required to achieve the Paris Accord's goal of limiting global warming to 2.0°C or 1.5°C

[1] See Climate Action Networks' "Fossil of the Day" webpage: https://climatenetwork.org/resource_type/fossil-of-the-day/.

[2] For the Bloomberg Global Coal Countdown, see https://bloombergcoalcountdown.com/.

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regularly demonstrated the need for a fairly rapid phaseout of coal burning, along with steep curbs in consumption of other fossil fuels (see, e.g., Friedlingstein et al. 2022; Vinichenko et al. 2023).

At COP23, in Bonn in 2017, the UK and Canadian governments launched a multistakeholder initiative called the Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA) that initially included twenty-seven state, subnational, and non-state actors endorsing phasing out (thermal) coal burning for electricity production globally by 2050 (Blondeel et al. 2020). Individual members of the Alliance can set their own phaseout date, before 2050. In only a month, membership had grown to fifty public and private sector organizations. PPCA has continued to grow in membership and ambition through COP28 in Dubai, where the United States announced that it would join the Alliance. Importantly, many early joiners had little or no coal in their energy portfolios when they announced the expected dates by which they would be coal-free. Examples include the UK, Sweden, California, and Oregon, for example. One might characterize the messages being sent by most of these early joiners as "cheap signals" (as the chapter title suggests). But evidence suggests that more authoritative policy norms are emerging as more coal-dependent actors – especially states – announce their membership. Such examples include Indonesia, Poland, and the United States, all of which had endorsed "Powering Past Coal" by 2023. As often happens with normative change over time, more actors begin to take more concerted policy action when the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences essentially point in the same direction (VanDeveer and Boersma 2022; Blondeel et al. 2020; Green 2018a). As more coal-dependent actors sign on, the "politics" is likely to get harder even as the anti-coal burning policy norms stabilize. As the norm becomes more influential, established, and authoritative, opposition by impacted local, national, and transnational actors also seems likely to intensify among the "holdouts" or opponents of planned coal phaseouts.

At COP26, in Glasgow in 2021, numerous state and non-state actors pushed for the formal declaration to include mention of the need to phase out coal. In the end, the declaration noted the need to "phase down" coal consumption, but no deadlines or rates of decline were included. Van Asselt and Green (2023: 2) argue "that the developments at and surrounding COP26 show that [anti-fossil fuel norms] are increasingly being adopted and institutionalized." The very public disagreements among states and among civil society actors at COP28 in Dubai in 2023, around what language to use in relation to fossil fuels, illustrate that as such norms gain influence globally, they provoke more opposition across scales from global to local.

As domestic and transnational coal politics change, environmental justice and injustice discourses and activism have added a moral weight – and increasingly morally charged and contested discourses – to both domestic and transnational coal phaseout politics over the last decade. It must be clear, however, that virtually all of

these developments in policymaking debates and discourses remain highly contested once the norm and its related discourses move beyond the sending of cheap signals. COP28 illustrated that demands for phaseout goals and deadlines for coal and other fossil fuels continue to shape politics at the COPs, but that opposition to such a phaseout goal among most fossil fuel-producing states continues to keep phaseout language out of official multilateral declarations at the conclusion of each COP. UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Simon Stiell noted, in his closing speech at COP28, that "[w]hilst we didn't turn the page on the fossil fuel era in Dubai, this outcome is the beginning of the end."[3] This was his assessment of states' negotiators leaving out calls to "phase out" coal and other fossil fuels but including references to phase down coal and transition away from fossil fuels in a just manner.

5.3 Politicizing Coal Burning: Demanding and (Sometimes) Achieving Coal Phaseout Policies

What newly emergent policy norms can we identify across actor types, sectors, and scales? Coal has nearly always been political in some way, but who was politicizing it, and why, has varied substantially across time and space. Over 150 years, many countries' industrialization, political development, and labor histories are inseparable from coal burning and coal mining (Freese 2003; Malm 2016a; Mitchell 2013; Paxman 2022). By the last decades of the twentieth century, coal's substantial contributions to air pollution – and the negative ecological, aesthetic, and labor and public health impacts of such pollution – often placed the emissions from coal burning in the pantheon of domestic and transnational environmental discourses, politics, and environmental policymaking. For several decades, such politics focused on the emissions from coal burning, with environmental policymaking focusing on mitigating particulate and toxic emissions, or "scrubbing" sulfur dioxide emissions, and so on. Burning coal to generate electricity (and/or heat) was, for a while, assumed to continue.[4]

But more recent climate change and environmental justice activism politicizes coal *burning* itself, in conjunction with the resulting GHG, toxic, and particulate emissions and local and global inequities and injustices associated with impacts on people and communities. This politicization was/is explicitly linked to frustration, fear, and anger about the slow pace of GHG reductions and the inadequate outcomes of decades of policymaking (Anderson et al. 2020; Karlsson and Gelik 2020; Stoddard et al. 2021), the influence-peddling/corruption associated with coal

[3] See the UNFCCC website: https://unfccc.int/news/cop28-agreement-signals-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-fossil-fuel-era

[4] While coal burning is used for several industrial purposes, and for home/local heating, most coal phase-out politics is primarily concerned with burning coal for electricity production.

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and other fossil sectors, and the notion that "we are running out of time" (de Moor 2023) – to name only a few themes embedded in anti-coal activism.

Recent work on the comparative politics of coal and energy policy, and the transnational and international politics of coal and energy policy, demonstrates dynamic combinations of transnational discourses and policy ideas and norms in complex interaction with highly diverse political and policymaking outcomes (VanDeveer and Boersma 2022; Jakob and Steckel 2022). Only a few years ago, it was possible to suggest that scholarship on global climate change politics and governance had paid little attention to emerging "global moral norms" (Green 2018a). Since then, however, numerous academic treatments of coal phaseouts movements, anti-fossil fuel activism, and multilateral agreements began to regularly characterize these policy ideas as emergent anti-coal or anti-fossil fuels norms and to discuss their proliferation (Blondeel et al. 2019; Green 2018b; van Asselt and Green 2023). Generally speaking, this literature agrees that norms are standards of behavior expected of certain actors – standards associated with a moral justification and/or the logic of appropriateness of particularly behaviors (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; March and Olson 1989). Such scholarship also frequently borrows the concepts of "norm entrepreneurs" or "norm champions" – concepts denoting organizational and individual leaders or agents who knowingly seek to champion normative change – from norms scholarship, as well.

The individuals and organizations who founded and helped to build (and fund) the PPCA illustrate the importance of such entrepreneurial champions. In reference to public, private, and civil society actors' inclination to set and announce particular courses of action, or "policies" governing their own and possibly others' behaviors over time, the term "policy norm" is often used. Such literature and my ongoing research examine the discourses and demands of anti-coal and anti-fossil fuel activists, organizations, and social movements – and the emergent and growing set of enacted policies by public and private organizations – to specify a set of emergent policy norms.

I identify four major coal phaseout norms that appear most common among activist demands in transnational and comparative anti-coal politics, and the resulting announced phaseout policy initiatives by public sector actors and private financial institutions:

1. Ban/end the construction of new coal burning facilities.
2. Ban/end the financing of new coal burning facilities.
3. Publicly declare the goal of phasing out coal burning and stipulate a deadline by which it must occur.
4. Enact some type of official policy and periodic public reporting process to allow tracking of progress toward the phaseout goal.

Importantly, these policies – or policy norms – can be pursued by public, private, or civil society organizations and various levels of scale. So, for example, national or subnational public sector jurisdictions may pursue some or all of these – as can financial services firms, energy corporations, or energy-producing nonprofits. Importantly, bans on coal mining and coal exports – as with bans of oil and gas exploration and extraction – are often debated or demanded by some civil society actors but seem to be less commonly enacted to date. Lastly, note that the fourth policy norm on the list above is less a statement of a new policy norm and more of an implementation norm that helps make the policy declarations more credible and trackable over time.

5.4 Norm Making and Proliferation: Politicizing Coal Burning and Stabilizing Bans and Phaseout Deadlines

While previous sections summarize the changing coal politics and discourses in UNFCCC COPs since 2015, coal phaseout norm stabilization and proliferation are perhaps most apparent in public policies announced at the national level, among a growing set of subnational public actors, and among multilateral and private financial institutions. While normative changes associated with coal burning are far from universal, they are happening in many places and spaces, across local to global scales.

By early 2024, Beyond Fossil Fuels lists twenty-three European states with declared coal phaseout policies,[5] including three that have become "coal-free" since the 2015 Paris Agreement, thirteen with coal phaseout deadlines of 2030 or earlier, and seven with announced deadlines after 2030. Their data include another ten countries that historically had little or no coal in their electricity generation mix. In Europe, coal phaseout and coal-free declarations began with states using little or no coal but have moved over time to include more states in Central, Eastern, and Southeast Europe where significant coal burning continues. The coal phaseout norm is spreading. Furthermore, while the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the accompanying energy price spikes raised concerns about Europeans' commitments to climate change policies and renewable energy promotion, 2023 saw record levels of renewable energy and dramatic declines in European coal consumption. Ember (2024) found that coal power generation fell by more than 25 percent and European GHG emissions from the power sector fell by 19 percent. The report noted that "Europe's coal phaseout gathers pace" as about 20 percent of Europe's coal plants are set to close in 2024 and 2025, especially in Germany, Italy, Poland, Greece, and Spain. Coal power generation was cut by about half between 2016 and

[5] See Beyond Fossil Fuels' "Europe's Coal Exit" webpage: https://beyondfossilfuels.org/europes-coal-exit/.

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2023. Given the increasingly ambitious GHG reductions goals expected by EU institutions and most member states, coal's decline in much of Europe seems likely to continue. Given that the Russian invasion of Ukraine generated urgent needs to move away from Russian natural gas among several countries with ready access to coal, the continued phasedown and phaseout policies and trends remain notable.

US coal consumption has been declining rapidly since the early 2000s, with at least ten states becoming "coal-free" by 2023. To be clear, a host of causal factors are driving coal consumption declines in the United States and Europe (VanDeveer and Boersma 2022), including market and pricing dynamics, as well as environmental and climate change movements, policies, and litigation. US and European coal politics illustrate complex combinations of moral responsibility, domestic political dynamics, and the importance of the changing economic prices related to coal burning and lower-carbon energy sources (VanDeveer and Boersma 2022). But in many respects, it has been easier (and common) for North American and European governments to talk the talk of coal phasedowns or phaseouts – and of GHG reductions and global responsibilities, more generally – than it has been for them to walk the walk of more significant domestic policy action and implementation.

Nevertheless shifts away from coal burning and toward more renewable energy (and some additional natural gas) continue. By 2024, the PPCA included almost sixty states, with about half of those located outside of Europe. The Alliance lists dozens more subnational governments and large corporations who also joined. Outside of Europe, the steepest declines in coal burning by late 2023 were in the United States, Chile, and Israel (Jaeger 2023). All three joined the PPCA as domestic declines in coal burning accelerated. At least five Latin American states where coal is currently burned to generate electricity also joined the Alliance in recent years. This suggests that coal phaseout norms are becoming increasingly common across the Western hemisphere.

But the growing influence of an emerging set of policy norms should not be mistaken for current or future universal consensus. In fact, the growing impact of coal phaseout norms seems likely to continue to engender substantially more coal-related contention. Despite seemingly constant climate policy debates, the International Energy Agency estimates that global GHG emissions hit a record high in 2023 (Twidale 2024) and the US Energy Information Agency estimates that China and India will account for about two-thirds of global coal consumption between 2022 and 2050 (US EIA 2024). As more states phase out coal burning, or foreclose the option of building a coal sector, the "holdouts" seem likely to receive more attention and political and economic pressure. Such holdouts might be large coal consumption states or large coal mining and coal exporting states (such as Australia). Also, after current coal burning states announce a coal phaseout

deadline in international venues, as Vietnam and Bulgaria have done, political contention often shifts to domestic and international actors involved in implementing such goals (Do and Burke 2023; Spasic 2024). The road ahead for coal phase-out declarations and implementation seems unlikely to be linear, depoliticized, or lacking in contention (Medzhidova 2022; Muttitt et al. 2023).

The Obama and Biden US presidential administrations, together with influential EU and EU member state officials, used their traditionally substantial leverage over World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies to push these organizations and other multilateral development banks to curtail coal financing. Since 2013, the World Bank officially has a moratorium on directly financing coal burning power plants, and more recently it supports "fair energy transitions" and the PPCA, for example. Critics note, however, that loopholes in such policies still allow some of its partners and intermediaries to fund some coal projects (Willis and Indri 2023). In the decade following the World Bank's declared moratorium, the multilateral and private finance sector changed substantially where coal financing is concerned. A 2023 report by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (Trivedi and Srivastava 2023: 4) found that "over 200 significant financial institutions have established coal exclusion policies, with divestment momentum away from coal accelerating in the last two years." This number includes eighty-seven banks, fifty-one insurers and reinsurers, thirty-six asset management firms, and twenty-seven export credit agencies, multilateral development banks, and development finance institutions. While just over half of the institutions are based in Europe, the others are from the Asia-Pacific region, North America, Africa, and Latin America. Almost a quarter strengthened their coal export policies in 2021 or 2022. The report is filled with evidence and language about the growing "momentum" in favor of coal exclusion policies.

However, 2024 brought evidence of some major financial firms "flip-flopping" or "retreating" from their coal exclusion and other climate change action commitments (Gelles 2024; Sorkin et al. 2024). A combination of political backlash against such commitments in many US states and the Republican Party and concerns about investor lawsuits related to such firms' fiduciary responsibilities seems to be driving these changes among some North American financial services corporations. Also of concern to climate activists and researchers are the various ways that financial institutions continue to help raise money for coal, oil, and gas investments even after announcing restrictive policies – as happens when they participate in corporate bond markets, for example. One report estimated that European banks, most with restrictive fossil fuel policies related to their direct investments, helped fossil fuel firms raise more than EUR 1 trillion on such bond markets from 2016 to 2023 (Ambrose 2023) – that is, *after* the 2015 UNFCCC climate summit in Paris.

The flip-flopping recently seen among financial institutions' coal-specific and/or broader fossil fuel policies serves as a clear reminder that normative change rarely occurs in a simple, singular, linear, or inevitable path. The more long-standing set of energy policy debates that illustrates this point can be seen around nuclear energy phaseout policies, where Germany and Sweden have played host to several flip-flops in policy and/or controversial delays in phaseout implementation (Johnson 2023; Maquire 2023). Subsequent governments may bring different views into power, or subsequent events (like energy price spikes or war) can certainly result in phaseout schedules or commitments – or existing bans being reversed. In Sweden, a new conservative government (after 2022) seeks to reverse the nuclear phaseout planned since the 1980s, while in Germany, national leaders have struggled and sometimes delayed various plans and implementation goals as they seek to implement planned phaseouts of both coal burning and nuclear power.

5.5 Politicizing and Contesting Phaseouts and Financing Bans

As coal phaseout norms have proliferated across states, multilateral and transnational political fora, and multilateral and multinational financial institutions, a host of actors and arguments that critique, contest, and oppose coal phaseout policy norms have emerged in discourses and political action from local to global scale. Objections to and grievances about coal phaseout policies commonly invoke justice and injustice – particularly three forms of justice common in climate change politics and research: distributional, procedural, and recognitional (Newell et al. 2021; Zimm et al. 2024).

Local- and national-scale critics of coal phaseout policies commonly embed their concerns in distributional justice concerns, focusing of the costs borne by coal sector workers, families, local communities, and coal-dependent regions and the need for substantial compensation and interventionist policies (Bang et al. 2022; Busch et al. 2023; Jakob et al. 2020; Steckel and Jakob 2022; Wong et al. 2022). Such politics can be easily identified at the local and state/provincial levels in coal mining regions of the United States, Spain, and Germany, for example, but research demonstrates such justice-related concerns and debates are quite similar across the Global North/South binary (Busch et al. 2023).[6] Because more coal phaseouts have been achieved in parts of the Global North, this literature draws heavily on those cases. Nevertheless, coal-dependent regions of states like China, India, South Africa, and Indonesia seem likely to face similar challenges if national and global governance increasingly prioritizes decarbonization policies. In many respects, how these objections are articulated and addressed (or mostly ignored) in

[6] See also Bernstein and Hoffmann's discussion of just transitions, this volume.

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provincial and national politics might be expected to mirror comparative politics dynamics and research around other issues combining domestic material interests and moral arguments/imperatives.

What levels of support for displaced workers and local and regional economic damages should be borne by the larger society via state and non-state organizations? Few advocates for local- and national-scale justice want to emulate the violence and economic and social injustices meted out by the UK's Thatcher government on miners and mining families, trade unions, communities, and regions. Drawing lessons from this era, Paterson's (2024) challenging question asks, "can you destroy the power base for fossil fuels without creating massive injustice?" The economic, ecological, social, cultural, and political legacies of many former UK and US coal mining regions pose a host of complex justice questions for such communities around the world if coal is to be rapidly phased out, and fossil gas and oil are soon to follow. It should be noted, however, that the ecological and human and community health costs of continued coal burning and other fossil fuel infrastructures are also rife with distributional justice concerns, including highly racialized fossil fuel burdens in the United States (Donaghy et al. 2023).

Global- or transnational-scale critiques of coal phaseout policies invoke a complex mix of procedural and distributional concerns. Procedural justice concerns are often related to the principle of sovereign authority and/or to contemporary decolonial discourses and critiques (Biddau et al. 2024; Brown and Speigel 2019; Feffer 2023; Hamouchene 2022; Malm 2016b; van Ryneveld and Islar 2023). Among the paradoxes in these debates and scholarship is that colonial power often drove substantial portions of fossil fuel system and construction across parts of the Global South, while contemporary concerns about growing "green" or renewable energy "colonialism" are increasingly expressed. The use of power and influence by European and North American states in both bilateral relations and multilateral fora increasingly appears as a chief concern, whether such influence is being exercised in UNFCCC processes (often by states who have yet to phase out coal and/or have rather poor decarbonization records at home) or in multilateral development banks and private sector financial institutions. In other words, the growing pressure – or "incentives" – for states in the Global South to phase out coal increasingly engenders all of the same concerns associated with the exercise of power in many areas of global governance and international organizations. Such concerns often note the substantial fraction of historical GHG emissions sourced in the Global North and the generally quite slow pace of such countries' domestic decarbonization at home.

An additional critique focuses on the aggregate amount of financial assistance available, whether one looks to current and historical pledges made within UNFCCC processes or the total amount of financial assistance available in various multilateral and private financial institutions for the alleviation of energy poverty

and the expansion of reliable and adequate electricity in the Global South. Are states and societies in India and South Africa expected to bear most or all of the costs of slowing, reducing, and eventually ending coal mining and coal burning?

5.6 Whither Coal and Politicized Fossil Fuel Infrastructures?

To conclude, I focus discussion on four sets of implications of contemporary coal phaseout politics: for advocates of more substantial climate change mitigation policies; for skeptics of many aspects of globalized prohibitions in climate change politics; for the stability and politicization debates at the center of this volume; and for the potential benefits of more systematic comparative politics within globally and transnationally framed research.

For climate change mitigation policy advocates, the "success" (from their perspective) of coal phaseout policy and goal proliferation – and of increasing implementation of many of those policies – serves as a model for discursive and material strategies aimed at other fossil fuel decarbonization goals. These goals include phaseouts for internal combustion engines, for diesel trains/rail, for the expansion of natural gas infrastructures, for the reduction and phasing out of natural gas burning for electricity production, and for more general anti-fossil goals/norms. In the medium term, coal phaseout activists seek to increasingly isolate and target the small number of states which now constitute the vast majority of global coal burning. More recent climate change-related prohibition movements focusing on a coal elimination treaty (Burke and Fishel 2020), leaving fossil fuels in the ground and advancing anti-fossil fuel norms (Newell and Simms 2020), and efforts seeking geoengineering non-use agreements (Biermann et al. 2022; Gupta et al. 2024; VanDeveer et al. 2024) all seek to explicitly politicize areas of global climate policy and governance as a means to establish and promulgate climate change-related global prohibition regimes.

For coal phaseout skeptics and opponents, the political dynamics explored here suggest the continued use of combinations of material and discursive power to shape anti-fossil fuel politics generally. For such actors, (re)politicizing anti-fossil fuels norms and their implementation via existing organizations and material constraints seems likely to focus on distributional, procedural, and distributive justice concerns. These actors will remain reluctant to prioritize climate change above issues of local and global poverty alleviation, representational and procedural priorities within global governance, and a host of concrete outcomes related to the need to mitigate and eliminate energy poverty, food insecurity, and other areas of human insecurity. In this way, climate change and energy policies will continue to be critiqued as an "arena" of global-, national-, and local-scale policymaking that must focus on economic, social, and global justice and the institution of transnational power and influence – not solely or primarily on climate change per se.

Coal phaseout politics teach us about the antagonisms between stability and (re) politicization. First, while coal has long been framed in highly politicized ways in national and international politics and policymaking, it takes concerted and sustained effort by diverse sets of agents to politicize burning it and to reframe politics around phasing out its use entirely – and banning the financing and burning of coal for electricity generation. Such agents have, in many domestic, transnational, and interstate fora, critiqued and politicized burning it at all, as well as related issues like financing coal infrastructures of all kinds and mining, transporting, and exporting it. Interestingly, it seems likely that some depoliticized developments and discourses, such as those associated with the price of renewable energy and the co-benefits of coal phaseouts, afforded opportunities to politicize coal burning.

In seeking to phase out and permanently ban coal burning, many advocates seek to move from one stable set of norms and policies to another. But this is not a case of simply moving from one stable set of policies and associated expectations to another stable state, via a short period of politicizing policy, governance, and outcomes. Instead, phaseout policies have been the subject of substantial local-scale critique in coal mining communities and coal mining national polities, as well as the subject of explicitly normative and ideological critique of "imposing" coal phaseouts across North/South or colonial/decolonial lines. Stabilizing new policy norms associated with phasing out and permanently banning coal burning attracts the attention of agents who object to the new norms by invoking both distributive and procedural justice arguments. In fact, the cross-scale politics of justice may invite more complex, iterated politicization, given the essentially contested nature of various forms of justice. The implication here being that many agents can make and deploy different and conflicting claims of justice and injustice.

Lastly, for comparative and international environmental, climate, and energy politics scholarship, it also suggests the need for a more systematic comparative politics of coal mining, investment, exports, imports, and coal phaseouts. What domestic and transnational factors make coal phaseout policies more/less likely to be enacted? And what causal factors result in effective implementation, or political backlash or rollback of such policies? Such research can draw on the growing comparative environmental politics scholarship (Sowers et al. 2023; Steinberg and VanDeveer 2012) – as can work on the comparative politics of climate change and green energy backlash and policy rollbacks. So far, there appear to be few examples of state rollbacks of coal phaseout policies. As noted in this chapter, however, that is not true of private sector financial institutions. As similar "phasedown" and/or "phaseout" political demands and policy dynamics develop around natural gas – whether or not to continue to invest in expanded gas infrastructures of all kinds or whether to pledge phasedowns and/or phaseouts by particular dates – what is needed is a more robust comparative politics research agenda examining

anti-fossil fuel activism and decarbonization policymaking more broadly across states and other jurisdictions, and across civil society and private sector organizations. The politics and governance of energy transitions and decarbonization pathways seem quite unlikely to produce stable, linear, and uncontested policies over time and across scales, jurisdictions, and sectors.

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