Call for papers (please circulate)

Early encounters with coal: Retrieving views from below

The rise of coal and steam-power in the nineteenth century is now widely recognised as an epochal historical event. It put the world-economy on a path to large-scale, climate-shattering combustion of fossil fuels. While these trajectories have been intensely studied in recent scholarship, we know far less about how coal and steam were perceived from subaltern positions. How did people react to this novel fuel and the technologies it animated when they slammed into their lives? Did they admire or fear them, wish to escape and eliminate them, or rather emulate and acquire their powers? Through what cultural filters were coal and steam viewed when each first began to take hold? While the stories of early coal and steam have been told from the perspective of inventors, manufacturers, merchants, colonial administrators and other agents of their dissemination, the voices from the other side have yet to be heard: colonised people; workers in mines and ports, on fields, boats and railroads; those who were dispossessed and displaced by the onrush of the first fossil economy. Most of these voices will inevitably be lost to the historical record. Some, however, might be retrieved by studying sources spanning a spectrum from oral traditions and folk songs via travelogues and popular science magazines to pamphlets and novels, to mention only some. We need to examine technologies of extraction as well as use, and thus set the histories of mining and supply alongside those of trade and consumption. A more focused effort to reconstruct the variety and tensions of early encounters with coal, especially as seen from below, is, we believe, not only possible but potentially valuable. It might illuminate creatively the power relations of fossil-fuelled development, potentials for resistance, tendencies of accommodation and embrace and many other aspects of the historical process.

For this workshop we invite contributions about encounters with coal anywhere in the world, up until the Second World War. Building on the recent emergence of literatures examining the development of coal technologies in radically different environments and regions – Asia, the Middle East, South America as well as Britain and Europe – we ask how the histories of those who dug, wrought, fired and laboured for coal and steam can be enriched by the perspectives of historical industrial psychology, environmental history, science and technology studies, history of technology and conceptual history of energy, folklore, religious studies, gender and sexuality in industrial history/history of technology, socioeconomic history, labour history, anthropology, ecocriticism, history of urban environment/pollution, colonial/empire history, rural change and industrialization, energy humanities, maritime history, infrastructural history.

We invite proposed contributions for a hybrid workshop to be held in Cambridge and online on 13-14 December, with 300 word abstracts due on 29 August, accepted contributors informed on 12 September and draft papers (up to 8,000 words) to be circulated by Friday 2 December.

Timeline
Proposed abstracts due: Monday 29 August 2022 (sent by email to Richard Staley <raws1@cam.ac.uk> with the subject line: Early encounters with coal abstract)
Programme circulated: Monday 12 September
Draft papers to be circulated: Friday 2 December
Workshop: Tuesday and Wednesday 13 and 14 December (with a meeting held in Cambridge for those able to attend in person and hybrid participation online for those more distant).

Amr Ahmed, Andreas Malm, Simon Schaffer, Richard Staley