

Introduction to the HELSUS Global South Encounters, ‘The political economy of energy provisioning and profiteering nexus in South Africa: The case of Emalahleni – the coal city / Witbank, South Africa’

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1. Welcome to the HELSUS Global South Encounters with me Franklin Obeng-Odoom, Currently Associate Professor of Sustainability Science with Global Development Studies as the Chair.
2. If you would like to stay connected between the Encounters, I would like to draw your attention to our new Twitter Account, LinkedIn Account, and *Just Ecological Political Economy: the HELSUS Global South Blog*, links to which you can see in the chat box.
3. Global ecological polycrises have been linked to growth, degrowth, extractivism, and poverty.
4. How to analyse all these issues simultaneously is no easy matter.
5. South Africa further complicates the story. Its record of shocking social and spatial inequalities and complex relationship with Russia raise questions about unequal socio-economic relations and unsustainable development.
6. South Africa’s economy is centred on coal extraction and extractivism.
7. Indeed, so central is coal to energy and industry that Ben Fine and Zavareh Rustomjee and other political economists would describe a Minerals-Energy Complex¹.
8. Since Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine and the West’s hail of sanctions on Russia, the demand for South African coal has spiked, according to some reports, by at least 40%²
9. A social media campaign contends that coal originally meant to fuel power in South Africa is now drained to the West.

¹ Fine B and Rustomjee Z, 1996, *The Political Economy of South Africa: From Minerals-Energy Complex to Industrialisation*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

²Reid H and Banya N, 2022, ‘Europe imports more South African coal as Russian ban looms’, *Reuters*, June 15; Ginindza B, 2022, ‘SA’s Coal Exports have increased by more than 700% since Russia and Ukraine War’, *IOL*, November 10.

10. So, behind all the criticisms of the African National Congress as incompetent and Eskom, the state power company, as inefficient or an incompetent state monopolist³, lies a deeper story: Western ecological imperialism, the control of Southern energy resources for Western comfort⁴.
11. This narrative is contested⁵. Much of the exported coal cannot be turned to energy anyway because of broken Eskom equipment and power stations. Eskom itself confirms that it receives its needed supplies of coal. In any case, revenue from coal exports could help to finance energy production in South Africa.
12. This specific coal question may be the focus of debate, but the place of what University of Johannesburg researchers call 'energy racism', inequality and its ramifications is settled.
13. Black people, regarded in Frantz Fanon's terms as *The Wretched of the Earth*, historically laboured for the production of electricity which only powered the comfort of the minority White population who disproportionately make up what Thorstein Veblen once called, 'the leisure class'.
14. Even today, power cuts and load shedding are experienced more frequently in Black townships, a painful reminder that the ANC continues to operate an apartheid system that was never meant to include Black people in the distribution of electricity and energy more widely⁶.
15. It is literally that black and white. The title of Morley Nkosi's book so aptly reflects the historical and contemporary realities: 'Black Workers; White Supervisors'.
16. There is, of course, a bit more nuance and a whole range of intersectional multiple identities in between, within, and across this structure, this continuing socio-spatial apartheid: from African migrants to Asian and coloured South Africans complete this collage.

³ *The Economist*, 2022, 'Why the lights are going out again in South Africa', *The Economist*, online, June 29

⁴ *Citizen Reporter*, 2023, 'Coal exports can't be blamed for Eskom's load shedding, says Minerals Council', *The Citizen*, January 20.

⁵ *Citizen Reporter*, 2023, 'Coal exports can't be blamed for Eskom's load shedding, says Minerals Council', *The Citizen*, January 20. Theobald S, 2023, 'What's behind the campaign against coal exports?' *Intellidex*, January 23.

⁶ Maggott, T., Mbatha, S., Ceruti, C., Moyo, L., Mporo, A., Ngwane, T., Shezi, C., & Sinwell, L. (2022). *Energy Racism Report: The electricity crisis and the working class in South Africa*. Centre for Sociological Research and Practice (CSRP), University of Johannesburg: Johannesburg

17. What is incomplete is what to do about how all these forces of social, spatial, and economic stratification have metastasized into what Black South Africans have called 'ecological apartheid'⁷.
18. Black people have been protesting both white capital and black state power, as detailed in Sethulego Matebesi's book, *Civil Strife against Local Governance: Dynamics of community protests in contemporary South Africa*
19. Radicals face threats, black protestors are gunned down by both white and black power, as the Marikana Massacre carried out by the South African police Service illustrates⁸.
20. What can Witbank, South Africa's major coal town, teach us about ecological crisis, 'Resource Wars, Cities, and Sustainability'?
21. Professor Thulisile Ncamsile Mphambukeli, our speaker today, will help us to address the question.
22. Professor Mphambukeli is the first black woman to obtain a PhD in urban and regional planning in South Africa.
23. A well-known activist, planner, and scholar, she has been critical of both state centric and market-based explanations and solutions to South Africa's spatial and socio-ecological crisis.
24. Professor Mphambukeli's preferred approach seems to be a particular type of community-based framework, community-based work.
25. And yet, currently the Head of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, at the University of Johannesburg, in South Africa, Professor Thulisile splits her time between local and global commitments, deepening local engagements and strengthening global alliances.
26. Clearly Professor Mphambukeli recognises that the challenge is both local and global, indeed, her entry, 'Apartheid', in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies* makes the point.
27. But how can her preferred grassroots approach address such a 'glocal' problem?

7 Mphambukeli T.N. and Matamanda A, 2022, 'Climate apartheid, city planning, and the marginalised in African cities', *Just Ecological Political Economy: The HELSUS Global South Blog*, October 11.

⁸ Benya A, 2015, 'The invisible hands: women in Marikana', *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 42, no. 146, pp. 545-560.

28. Are there some articles of faith in the alternative championed by Professor Thulisile who, it must be said, also holds a postgraduate degree in theology from the Faith Bible College?

29. A certain amount of optimism is necessary to overcome the gravity of South Africa's ecological apartheid and energy racism, but is a local-based approach sufficient?

30. To address these questions, Professor Thulisile Mphambukeli joins us from South Africa.

31. Welcome, Professor Thuli. The microphone is yours.