

# ENERGY DEMOCRACY

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH

### AGENDA FOR THE PORTUGUESE CASE<sup>1</sup>

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#### REPOLITICIZING ENERGY

Although often presented as a technocratic exercise, the energy transition is inherently political, as it is traversed by power relations. For this reason, it opens up a space for dispute and the construction of alternatives. The genesis of energy democracy is precisely associated with the demand for a politicization of the energy transition. Energy has always been fertile ground for conflict, being ‘shaped by ongoing processes of political and social contestation’.<sup>3</sup> This can be illustrated by various movements that, in recent years, have sought to reclaim democratic control of the energy sector, envisioning and beginning to build more just and democratic energy futures.

The proposals of energy democracy start with the redefinition of energy, interpreting it as a public good and a universal right. They then move on to the redistribution of political and economic power and the assurance of social justice throughout the energy transition. Thus, ‘a democratic response to the climate emergency requires immediate resistance to fossil fuels coupled with the deployment of renewable energy systems at a pace that sustains and can be sustained by democratic governance’.<sup>4</sup> Energy democracy would thus constitute a democratic instrument mediating the energy transition, reconciling resistance against the *old* – the energy system fueled by fossil fuels – and the construction of the *new* – renewable energy systems.

#### ABSTRACT

The genesis of energy democracy is associated with the demand for a politicization of the energy transition. Its dimensions include democratic control of the energy sector, the redistribution of political and economic power, the universal right to renewable energy and social justice. Energy democracy provides a unique lens to critically assess the political, socio-economic, and environmental implications of energy transitions. Therefore, based on the Portuguese case study, an analysis grid is developed that aims to facilitate the identification and evaluation of energy democratization instruments in the national context. A research agenda around energy futures in Portugal is also advanced.

*Keywords:* energy democracy, energy democratization, Portugal, energy transition.

#### RESUMO

**DEMOCRACIA ENERGÉTICA: QUADRO CONCEPTUAL E AGENDA DE INVESTIGAÇÃO PARA O CASO PORTUGUÊS**

A génese da democracia energética está associada à reivindicação de uma politização da transição energética.



As suas dimensões incluem o controlo democrático do sector energético, a redistribuição do poder político e económico, o direito universal à energia renovável e a justiça social. A democracia energética concede uma lente original para avaliar criticamente as implicações políticas, socioeconómicas e ambientais das transições energéticas. Assim, partindo do estudo de caso português, é desenvolvida uma grelha de análise que pretende facilitar a identificação e avaliação de instrumentos de democratização energética no contexto nacional. É ainda avançada uma agenda de investigação em torno dos futuros energéticos em Portugal.

*Palavras-chave:* democracia energética, democratização energética, Portugal, transição energética.

In the United States, it was a fringe of the labor movement, integrated into the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), a global network of unions advocating for democratic control of the energy sector, alongside movements for environmental and racial justice, that first spread the idea of energy democracy. In Europe, the concept became popular within the German climate justice movement around 2012, with its dissemination mostly linked to energy cooperatives. The report *Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: Unions and the Struggle for Energy Democracy* systematized, for the first time, the strategic objectives of energy democracy.<sup>5</sup>

Firstly, to resist the dominant agenda of fossil fuel companies by uniting efforts to delegitimize the entire industry and reduce its political influence. Secondly, to reclaim the components of the energy sector that had been pri-

vatized and/or commodified for the public sphere. Thirdly, to restructure the energy system by democratizing it. This is an indispensable condition for massifying renewable energies, modernizing infrastructure, increasing energy efficiency, promoting job creation, and ensuring greater collective control.

Energy democracy is therefore necessarily multifaceted. On one hand, it is advocated by various sociopolitical movements that aspire to accomplish it, especially through changes in ownership relations and forms of energy access. On the other hand, as will be highlighted below, it is a concept that frames a rising research agenda, predominantly in the areas of social sciences and humanities.

In fact, the first articles in scientific journals were published from 2017 onwards, sparking a flourishing discussion around its definitions and typologies, attempts at operationalization on multiple scales, articulation with other concepts and movements, research agendas, and political action roadmaps. The proliferation of scientific research has contributed to the gradual affirmation of energy democracy, offering an original lens to critically assess the political, socio-economic, and environmental implications of energy transitions (themselves plural), by discerning the asymmetrical power relations underlying them and the mechanisms capable of (re)producing multidimensional inequalities.

Energy democracy, as a concept-discourse-movement-process-objective-research agenda, is a contested idea, making it difficult to assign an intrinsically and universally valid meaning to it. We propose to conceive it, for now, as an idea in constant motion and (re)construction, marked by geographical divisions and theoretical disagreements. Given the conceptual dispersion, energy democracy has been primarily understood through the alternative energy futures it allows to envision and

the operationalization attempts it stimulates, always contextual and rarely extrapolatable. Therefore, there are those who speak of energy democracies in the plural,<sup>6</sup> or even those who consider conceiving it as an ‘ongoing process of democratization’ and struggle for energy control, rather than a mere ‘future utopia’.<sup>7</sup>

The breadth of energy democracy allows for the coexistence of varied perspectives, from sociopolitical movements that see it as a tool to achieve systemic socioecologi-

cal transformations, demarketing liberalized energy systems and reorganizing them according to democratic principles, to renewable energy cooperatives and communities (REC).<sup>8</sup> The latter are primarily engaged in the decentralization of renewable technologies and the potential (re)appropriation of energy by citizens. Both perspectives seek support in energy democracy, which simultaneously encompasses opposition to fossil capitalism – seen as the driver of the climate crisis and (re)producer of systems of exploitation and oppression – in a struggle for social, racial, environmental, and climate justice; and the implementation of local-scale renewable energy projects, turning citizens, previously mere consumers, into owners of energy production means and decision-makers of their own energy future.

These visions do not mutually exclude each other but urge us to think about energy democracy in different geographies, scales (from global to local), and to include a multitude of actors (from the State to citizens). However, this task is complicated by the absence of a consolidated analytical framework that enables geographically anchored conceptualizations of energy democracy, or at least the identification of dimensions that allow delimiting and characterizing it in specific political, socio-economic, environmental, and necessarily energy contexts.

## MEANINGS OF ENERGY DEMOCRACY

In a mapping of the uses of energy democracy, Szulecki observes that two meanings are attributed to it: on the one hand, it denotes the normative goal of decarbonization and energy transformation; on the other hand, it describes examples of decentralized civic initiatives, mostly bottom-up.<sup>9</sup> The author then proposes to understand energy democracy as an ‘ideal political goal, in which the citizens are the recipients, stakeholders (as consumers/producers<sup>10</sup>) and accountholders of the entire energy sector policy’.<sup>11</sup> The first critical conceptual review of energy democracy, ‘a politically oriented concept’, places it somewhere between ‘the narrower and more descriptive notion of ‘community energy’ – which emphasizes scale and geographic proximity – and that of ‘energy justice’, a powerful critical tool that can be used to incorporate injustices related to class, race, gender, or spatial inequalities.<sup>12</sup>

ENERGY DEMOCRACY HAS BEEN PRIMARILY UNDERSTOOD THROUGH THE ALTERNATIVE ENERGY FUTURES IT ALLOWS TO ENVISION AND THE OPERATIONALIZATION ATTEMPTS IT STIMULATES, ALWAYS CONTEXTUAL AND RARELY EXTRAPOLATABLE.

In the face of the diversity and fragmentation of the literature, and rejecting the imposition of a single definition, three core understandings of energy democracy are highlighted:

‘A *process* – which, through dispersed grassroots initiatives and a transnational social movement, is challenging the incumbents; an *outcome* of decarbonization – the more we move to a renewable and distributed system, the more the energy sector is democratized; a normative *goal* – an ideal to aspire to in an unspecified decarbonized future’.<sup>13</sup>

According to the first understanding, energy democracy would be simultaneously an ongoing process and a social movement driving it; the social movement then becoming both a product and a producer of energy democracy. In the second understanding, the terms are reversed: energy democracy would be the outcome of the change in material factors, notably the reorganization of energy systems and the gradual transition to renewable and distributed sources. In this case, technological transition would precede and enable political and social change. Finally, as a goal, energy democracy would be ‘an ideal to which communities can aspire, and a principle guiding policies and actions towards a just and democratic energy system’.<sup>14</sup> Energy democracy would be situated in a future horizon and depend on technological changes, but also on a politicization of the energy transition ‘informed by democratic ideals’.<sup>15</sup>

In a review of recent literature, the characteristics most frequently ascribed to energy democracy are systematically outlined, specifically: the inclusion of non-traditional actors – local communities, civil society organizations, and historically marginalized populations – in political processes related to energy; the transition to direct forms of citizen participation, such as prosumerism, community ownership, and cooperatives, which are deemed essential in the democratization of energy systems; and a preference for decentralized energy systems, seen as more democratic.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this diversity, there is a set of interdependent premises related to power, the economic system, social justice, energy production models, modes of ownership and control of the energy system, scales of action, and actors that allow framing energy democracy and outlining a preliminary characterization.

Firstly, it is imperative to recognize existing power structures and the opportunities and spaces of resistance available for those, such as the advocates of energy democracy, seeking to transform them.<sup>17</sup> Assuming that power relations within the framework of neoliberal capitalism are ‘profoundly anti-democratic’, any ‘emancipatory energy transition’ would require a transformation of existing power dynamics and a political strategy for its realization – ‘we need to think about building power’, emphasizes Angel – lest the effectiveness of democracy be limited.<sup>18</sup>

In the same vein, Thombs argues that democracy is a necessary but not sufficient con-

dition for a just transition, as most societies are permeated by asymmetric power relations that, in turn, shape and are shaped by energy.<sup>19</sup> The author points out that energy cannot be separated from the social processes that produce, distribute, and use it, since these are embedded in certain sociopolitical structures.<sup>20</sup> Paraphrasing Robert Cox, energy is always for someone and for some purpose;<sup>21</sup> the same holds true in the current transition towards renewable energies. Therefore, it is crucial to assess the political economy of renewable energies – who produces it, on behalf of whom, for what purpose, and for whose benefit.<sup>22</sup>

Energy democracy implies criticism of neoliberalism and the rejection of the ‘anarchy of liberalized energy markets’.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, it opposes the conversion of the capitalist model into green capitalism and the commodification of nature. Energy democracy aims to redefine the very notion of energy, interpreting it as a commons rather than a commodity, and incorporating it in a regenerative economic model rather than an extractive one, in harmony with the ecological limits of the planet.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, energy democracy recognizes how fossil fuel-based energy and economic systems – and the concentration of power and wealth associated with them – perpetuate socio-economic, racial, and gender inequalities.<sup>25</sup> In fact, movements advocating for energy democracy demand a socially just renewable energy system, steered by the public interest rather than profit, translated into universal access to energy, fair prices, and jobs with decent wages.<sup>26</sup>

In the energy transition towards renewables, the configuration of the energy production model – centralized versus decentralized – is unavoidable, as well as ownership and control of the infrastructure. Advocates of energy democracy tend to prefer decentralized models, emphasizing local scale and active citizen involvement in the management of the energy sector (organized, for example, in cooperatives or REC). In principle, decentralized production should increase democratic control of the energy infrastructure, prioritizing local socio-economic and environmental needs over profits and wealth accumulation.

However, some authors have warned against the dangers of romanticizing communities and the local scale, problematizing their main vulnerabilities and potential detrimental effects. Using the example of cooperatives, these may prioritize member incomes over the public good.<sup>27</sup> In a liberalized energy market in which competitive dynamics prevail, they may accentuate the lack of coordination; conversely, the threat of large private companies seizing decentralized projects should not be underestimated. There is also the anticipated risk of replicating inequalities, as joining a cooperative may require initial investments unaffordable for certain segments of the population.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, ‘local control is no panacea’.<sup>29</sup> On one hand, decentralization fosters various forms of democracy (deliberative, associative, and material); on the other hand, the presumption of intrinsic superiority of decentralized systems overlooks the multiple scales at which justice and democracy, as well as inequalities (of class, race, and gender), operate.<sup>30</sup> The nominal inclusion of previously underrepresented groups in decision-

-making processes does not automatically ensure a transfer of power, as power asymmetries may persist within communities and internal exclusion mechanisms.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the actors and spaces of energy democratization are not limited to communities and the local scale. One should take note, in particular, of campaigns for the (re)municipalization of energy services and the role of public companies. If committed to social and labor justice objectives, these entities offer several advantages: they are governed by the public interest, employ more local workers, and can ensure the construction, operation, and maintenance of renewable energy infrastructure.<sup>32</sup>

At the national level, the role of governments in the energy transition stands out, especially in the swift and massive dissemination of renewable energies, which will involve reclaiming planning instruments.<sup>33</sup> Issues of coordination, redistribution, and investment, associated with the power of the State, are also relevant:

‘State institutions are deeply embedded within social relations of domination and oppression, from capitalism to colonialism to patriarchy. As such, the State will often frustrate endeavours towards emancipatory change. Yet, the State is no mere instrument of the ruling class: while it is structurally biased towards the reproduction of the status quo, struggle from within and outside the State can shift its form and function’.<sup>34</sup>

In this sense, State planning will be essential to replicate and expand energy democracy beyond a micro scale, effectively transforming the entire energy sector.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, challenges that transcend national borders, such as the climate crisis, the

CHALLENGES THAT TRANSCEND NATIONAL BORDERS, SUCH AS THE CLIMATE CRISIS, THE PROTECTION OF GLOBAL COMMON GOODS, THE ENERGY TRANSITION, AND THE DISMANTLING OF THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY, REQUIRE A RADICAL RESTRUCTURING OF THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY.

protection of global Commons, the energy transition, and the dismantling of the fossil fuel industry, require a radical restructuring of the global political economy. In Fairchild’s view, for energy democracy to be truly transformative, it must inspire a global movement.

The author argues that the fossil fuel-based economic system is global, so its opponents

should build a countermovement that operates on the same scale.<sup>36</sup>

In short, democratic energy futures will likely consist of a mix of renewable technologies, ownership structures, and actors, and will require the compatibility, through political coordination on multiple scales, of centralized and decentralized production models. While production models and modes of ownership and control (from cooperatives and RECs to municipal or national public enterprises) are contested, the consensus is that political and economic power must be removed from the control of fossil fuel companies and transferred to the collective sphere.

## **ENERGY DEMOCRACY AND ITS CONTEXTS**

Since the Industrial Revolution, energy has been a field of political contention par excellence. The unequal distribution of finite reserves of fossil fuels has determined its geopolitical and economic significance. Indeed, the capitalist system is inexorably dependent on virtually unlimited energy production, given its vocation for wealth accumulation. Over the past two centuries, the expansion of capital has been umbilically linked to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, earning it the designation in the field of political ecology as fossil capital.<sup>37</sup>

Energy, from raw material to final consumption, is therefore inherently political. The difference introduced by energy democracy is not only the recognition of energy as a political object but, above all, its redefinition: from a commodity in the capitalist system, it becomes a potential tool for democratization in the socioecological transition, reshaping its role in the pursuit of equally renewed political, socio-economic, and environmental goals. Thus, energy serves as the substrate for a broader democratization project. It is the starting point, or even a necessary condition, for political and socio-economic democratization as well.

In this sense, *energy democracy* might be interpreted merely as the culmination of this broader process of political and socio-economic democratization. This would mean that energy democracy would only be discernible and legitimate as a result, downplaying the preceding stages of its construction. There would be, therefore, no isolated manifestations of energy democracy within the framework of fossil capitalism.

This understanding might be overly simplistic, as it fails to take into account the prior and indispensable process of *energy democratization*. Energy democracy can be understood as a future goal whose construction starts in present through a process of progressive sociopolitical institutionalization.

This process unfolds simultaneously at multiple scales – local, regional, national, and international – and may involve multiple actors, from communities to the State. The temporal horizons, speeds, and viability of energy democratization are indeterminable in the abstract, as this process is influenced by the geographical, political, socio-economic, cultural, and environmental contexts in which it takes place.

Establishing a universal, ultimate, and all-encompassing definition of energy democracy may be premature not only because its construction is ongoing but also due to the distinct contexts in which democratization processes occur. It is vital to consider the varieties of democracy and the objective differences between socio-economic and political systems. Energy democracy, if accomplished, will necessarily be plural, reflecting the unique features of each democratization process.

While acknowledging this plurality, there is also a need to clarify the dimensions that allow the delimitation and characterization of energy democracy in specific contexts. Using the case study of Portugal, this article shall develop an analytical framework aimed at facilitating the identification and assessment of energy democratization instruments in the country. This exercise is particularly relevant given the increasing decen-

tralization of renewable electricity production – deemed by the European Commission and the Portuguese government the main means of citizen participation in the energy transition and, consequently, as a condition for a just transition.

Numerous actors and initiatives incorporate energy democracy into their discourse and action, contributing to its flexibility and growing popularity, but also to a conceptual dilution and dispersion that render it susceptible to co-optation and distortion attempts. Thus, the dimensions presented here – democratic control of the energy sector, redistribution of political and economic power, universal right to renewable energy, and social justice – can serve as reference points throughout the energy democratization process. On the one hand, the breadth of this delineation allows for distinguishing the diversity of typologies emerging in the field; on the other hand, it is circumscribed enough to avoid misunderstandings in recognizing energy democratization instruments, thwarting potential attempts at misappropriation.

While it is assumed that democracy and democratization are not autonomous spheres of analysis, it is considered that energy democratization can be partially grasped through its instruments, i.e., conduits that contribute to strengthening the dimensions of energy democracy. More specifically, energy democratization unfolds into two interdependent

ENERGY DEMOCRATIZATION UNFOLDS INTO TWO INTERDEPENDENT STRATEGIES: RESISTANCE TO FOSSIL CAPITALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE ENERGY FUTURES.

strategies: resistance to fossil capitalism and the construction of alternative energy futures. Each of them involves the use of a wide range of instruments, requiring action within democratically elected political institutions and beyond them, in a hybrid of

representative democracy and direct democracy, prompting a dynamic of co-construction in multiple directions along power hierarchies. Both strategies rely on collective mobilization and organization, as well as dialogue and alliance-building with other deeply rooted sociopolitical movements (labor movement, climate justice, social justice) with whom energy democracy shares a common agenda. In processes of energy democratization, the role of citizens is not limited to individual and atomized participation, for example, as prosumers – indeed this might ultimately result in the expansion of private ownership of energy production means.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, their involvement extends beyond the domestic sphere, bringing them closer to the community and the public space. Citizens can be involved, for instance, in local communities and other movements, cooperatives, associations, unions, or political parties. Their actions are focused on spaces such as learning institutions, workplaces, and places of residence. Repertoires of collective action may include protests and demonstrations, campaigns, civil disobedience, assemblies (residents, workers, consumers), as well as pressure on political institutions, candidacies for political office, and also the creation of collective projects around renewable energy.

It is worth noting that democratization instruments are not limited to the so-called civil



society. That might ultimately limit its scope, keeping it on the margins and therefore away from the spheres of power. For energy democracy to be institutionalized, the democratization process cannot do without the power dynamics emanating from the central State, local authorities and public bodies, public companies, and political parties.

Judging by the attempts to operationalize energy democracy that are beginning to emerge in the field, cooperatives, REC, or other collective initiatives related to renewable energy would, in theory, be privileged instruments for energy democratization. However, given the risks of romanticizing the ‘local’ and the ‘community’, as several authors warn, their effective contribution to strengthening the dimensions of energy democracy should be assessed by considering a set of markers. Indeed, each dimension – democratic control of the energy sector, redistribution of political and economic power, universal right to renewable energy, social justice – must include criteria that, on the one hand, consolidate the delimitation of energy democracy and, on the other, assess whether certain initiatives to decentralize the production of renewable electricity are truly instruments of energy democratization.

The development of these indicators starts from premises that reflect certain expectations regarding the configuration and results of energy democratization instruments. These premises concern acceptable and desirable forms of ownership and control in an energy democratization process, actors who have legitimacy to conduct them, the degree of democraticity and inclusion of decisions, the improvement of citizens’ material conditions, and the fight against socioeconomic inequalities.

Therefore, democratic forms of ownership and control are all those that enable public and/or collective ownership and control of renewable electricity production, transportation, and distribution infrastructure (e.g., cooperatives, associations, public companies) and, consequently, allow the transfer of power to the public and/or collective sphere, i.e., to political subjects considered legitimate, such as collectively organized citizens and their democratically elected representatives. Retrieving the first strategic objective of energy democracy, it is imperative to resist the dominant agenda of fossil fuel companies and gradually reduce their political influence, which implies progressively removing them from the energy system. Instead, cooperation between/with actors such as local communities and citizens’ movements, cooperatives, associations, unions, local authorities and public bodies, political parties, sociopolitical and environmental movements should be favored, as this may facilitate the incorporation of energy democracy into their agendas.

Moreover, democratic and inclusive decision-making processes, i.e., those that allow the redistribution of political and economic power, require active participation of citizens and communities in decision-making processes. This can translate into direct involvement in the management of renewable energies (through cooperatives and REC, for example) or the ability to demand accountability from their representatives for decisions regarding collective energy futures (e.g., the location, size, and ownership

of renewable energy projects or legitimate uses of that energy).

On the other hand, energy democratization instruments should yield improvements in the material conditions inherent in the universal right to renewable energy, conceived as access to essential energy services that should include at least renewable electricity for various domestic uses at a fair price and the increase in energy efficiency and self-sufficiency. They should also contribute to tackling socioeconomic inequalities with a view to the eradication of energy poverty, the creation of jobs in the energy transition, and a reduction in territorial asymmetries.

Below are the criteria that integrate the four dimensions of energy democracy and that, together, constitute an analytical framework that can be applied to identify and assess energy democratization instruments in Portugal, specifically regarding decentralized production of renewable electricity. This matrix will allow testing potential examples of energy democratization instruments, particularly initiatives in Portugal that self-identify as ‘Renewable Energy Communities’, or even exposing attempts to co-opt energy democracy. Note that these markers are not absolute or definitive. As the energy transition progresses, it may be necessary to supplement this list with new elements that express the specificities of the energy democratization process in Portugal.

Democratic control of the energy sector:

- Type of ownership and control adopted.
- Identification of the types of democracy (participatory, associative, and material) in action. Questions can be raised, such as: Are there elected bodies responsible for all decision-making, or do decisions mostly result from collective deliberation? Are decisions made by majority or unanimity?
- Scope of the right to vote, determining on what occasions it applies and who can vote.

Redistribution of political and economic power:

- Presence of fossil fuel companies and/or private renewable energy companies.
- Cooperative relationships between/with specific actors (local communities and informal groups of citizens, cooperatives, associations, unions, local authorities and public bodies, political parties, sociopolitical and environmental movements).
- Temporality, regularity, and formats of citizen and local community participation. It is intended to determine if this participation occurred from the beginning or only in a more advanced stage, if it is frequent or occasional, if it takes one or multiple formats.
- Distribution of revenues from renewable electricity production. Questions may include, for example, whether they benefit the community as public goods or are privatized.

Universal right to renewable energy:

- Guarantee of access to essential energy services (at a minimum, renewable electricity for domestic uses).
- Fair pricing (should be equal to or lower than the price set for the regulated electricity

market, ensuring savings on the bill).

- Improvement of energy efficiency and thermal comfort inside buildings.
- Increase in self-sufficiency, which can be measured in terms of growing autonomy from private energy retailers.

Social justice:

- Participation free from financial constraints, meaning citizens have the possibility to participate regardless of their socioeconomic status.
- Inclusion of households suffering from energy poverty and/or benefiting from the social energy tariff.
- Direct or indirect creation of jobs with rights and dignified wages.
- Qualification and training of workers.
- Contribution to territorial cohesion, meaning specifically that social, economic, and environmental benefits are not restricted to urban and densely populated areas.
- Transfer of knowledge and best practices and support for other initiatives.

It is not required that an energy democratization instrument contribute to all dimensions simultaneously and strictly meet all criteria. It may even promote energy democracy through means not indicated here. On the other hand, an initiative to decentralize the production of renewable electricity is unlikely to be an energy democratization instrument if it does not reinforce at least one of these dimensions.

### **ENERGY FUTURES IN PORTUGAL: A RESEARCH AGENDA**

At a time when Portugal commits to achieving ‘carbon neutrality’ by 2050, it is only fair to avoid disproportionately burdening vulnerable groups, thereby reproducing multidimensional inequalities. A just energy transition must necessarily be grounded in energy democracy.

Decentralization is not necessarily synonymous with democratization. In fact, the decentralization of renewable electricity production through REC or other community-based initiatives will only be truly desirable if it contributes to democratic control of the energy sector, the redistribution of political and economic power, universal access to renewable energy, and social justice.

However, many of the REC initiatives emerging in Portugal reflect and may come to replicate the socioeconomic inequalities that permeate the country, as participation in such initiatives is strongly conditioned by citizens’ financial resources. On the one hand, investment guarantees ownership and control by REC members, but those who lack the means to participate are bound to be left out. In Portugal, given the alarming numbers of energy poverty affecting between 1.8 and three million people, a considerable portion of the population is automatically excluded.

If energy is understood as a right and not as a commodity, it is crucial to discuss the

role of the State in providing this public good and controlling the energy sector, expanding the spheres and scales in which energy democracy is typically conceived. The building of power and the progressive institutionalization of energy democracy require an analysis of planning tools, subordinated to ecological and social justice goals, which can be mobilized in the energy transition. It also requires a comparative analysis of energy democracy, especially within the European Union, exploring possible similarities and differences between member states. It is furthermore important to explore the international trajectory of energy democracy, the challenges in building a global movement, to challenge its Eurocentric bias, assess its applicability to the Global South, and investigate its incorporation into the discourse and practice of different international organizations.

Equally relevant is the assessment of the new relationships between emerging actors in the energy transition, such as REC, and incumbent actors, notably private fossil fuel companies, now transformed into renewable energy companies leading, to all practical purposes, the energy transition. Finally, it will be important to explore the asymmetric power relations that have transitioned from the fossil fuel era to the era of renewable energy, as well as tensions, potential dynamics of cooptation, and misappropriations of the ideas of ‘energy community’ and ‘energy democracy’.

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