

Oral Defence by PhD Candidate Matthew J. Burke

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Energy democracy and the co-evolution of social and technological systems



Abstract

As integrated sociotechnical systems, renewable energy systems co-evolve with new social arrangements, as social institutions of the fossil-fuel era are transformed for an age of renewables. This research explores this proposition by examining the recent phenomenon of energy democracy. Energy democracy is both a social movement and a set of principles and goals for organizing collective action toward energy transition. The objectives of this research are to: 1) draw out and critically engage with the implicit theory underlying energy democracy and the associated tensions and implications for practice 2) identify and assess the core objectives and policies advanced by advocates of energy democracy, and 3) demonstrate how energy democracy works as a counter-narrative to mainstream transition narratives while comparing the ways diverse initiatives work in practice toward social transformation. Renewable energy technologies do not necessitate but may facilitate corresponding re-organization of social systems, yet not without committed effort among social groups. If greater technological change is desired, more attention is needed regarding the innovation and democratization of corresponding institutions for societies powered by renewable energy.

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About the Candidate

Matthew Burke is pursuing a Ph.D. (Renewable Resources — Environment) under the supervision of Professors Peter G. Brown (McGill University) and Jennie C. Stephens (Northeastern University). Matthew holds a Master of Public Administration and Graduate Certificate in Ecological Economics, a Master of Arts in Environmental Education, and a Bachelor of Science in Natural Resources.