

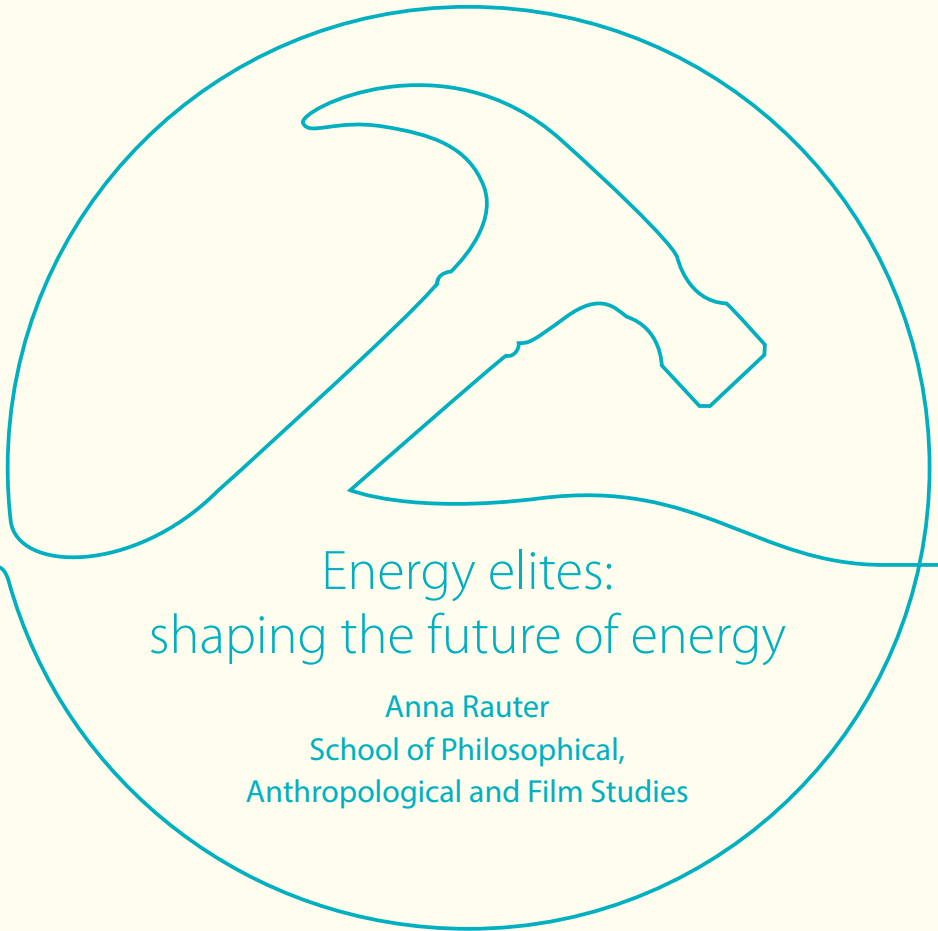


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St Andrews Network for Climate, Energy,  
Environment and Sustainability

## The Sustainability Series



### Energy elites: shaping the future of energy

Anna Rauter  
School of Philosophical,  
Anthropological and Film Studies

September 2021

# Energy elites: shaping the future of energy

Anna Rauter – School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies

(Article written by Garry MacKenzie)

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As world leaders commit to lowering carbon emissions, the transition to renewable forms of energy becomes not simply a practical necessity but also a creative task regarding what kind of lives we desire for ourselves and future generations. Coal, oil and gas are still the main sources of global energy, but use of renewables is growing. As societies work towards a more sustainable future, it is important to ask who is actually leading this transition to renewable energy. If the leaders are from the energy industry, then what are the implications of energy elites (executives, managers, investors and shareholders in fossil fuel and renewables firms) making important decisions behind closed doors? What is their vision for the future of energy and how do they intend to bring that future about?

These are not just theoretical questions: because the global energy transition will affect every household and business, there is a danger that existing social inequalities will become increasingly entrenched. Considering the fact that energy demand is still rising, the problem becomes even more complex.

Anna Rauter, a doctoral candidate at the School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies, seeks to demystify the notion of energy elites in her research project titled 'Powering our Futures: Energy Elites, Energy Imaginaries, and

Energy Production in Norway'. As the public faces of institutions that are ascribed at least some of the blame for climate change, those who direct strategy for the energy industry are sometimes portrayed as 'polluters-in-chief' or 'climate criminals'. In uncovering how energy elites themselves envision the future of energy production and consumption, her work establishes the grounds for future research, policy and industry at a time when debates about the future of energy are increasingly polarised.

## In dialogue with energy elites

Rauter began her project with eighteen months of ethnographic research in Oslo, Norway, interviewing over 100 people in leadership and expert positions at energy companies. This is innovative in itself because it is rare for researchers to gain access to the executives of energy companies. Over the course of her involvement with these leaders – to whom she applies the term 'energy elites' – she engaged in open dialogue as her interviews opened up the possibility of new approaches to thinking about energy. Rauter starts from the principle that if we are to understand the complex dynamics governing the future of energy, the views of all actors in society must be taken into account. Her work provides an illuminating record of the deeply

personal motivations and perceptions of those at the helm of the Norwegian energy industry.

Rauter's research also offers more nuanced perspectives on energy elites than are sometimes put forward in popular debate. As with other groups in society, these elites are concerned about issues such as climate change and sustainability. They share the same uncertainties that many others feel about the environment. Furthermore, they respond both personally and professionally to growing public anxiety surrounding energy and the climate.

Nearly one third of the energy professionals interviewed by Rauter over the course of her fieldwork have made a career change from hydrocarbons to renewables. Many explained that this was due to their shifting perceptions, including an increasing desire to work towards a low-carbon future. Even many who remained in the hydrocarbon sector admitted that their personal and professional lives were marked by a deepening engagement with climate matters.

Despite the plutocratic connotations of the word 'elites', Rauter uses the term to highlight the shared socio-economic background and privilege connecting the leaders and experts she worked with. Their career mobility and socio-economic security allowed them to lead change within the industry (one example is those energy elites who decided to leave the hydrocarbon industry in pursuit of renewables).

Rauter further notes particularities of the Norwegian context for her research, where the actions of energy elites are characterised by collective decision-making as moves towards energy transition involve close dialogue with interest groups, government, and other stakeholders. Elites are also attentive to international discussions about climate change, which include the work of activist movements, the impact of the School Strike for Climate, and influencers such as Greta Thunberg.

According to Rauter, this means that action to reduce carbon emissions and improve sustainability must be taken in conversation with the energy industry. She argues that challenging dominant energy regimes (such as those resistant to lowering emissions) necessarily involves cross-societal dialogue rather than retreat into echo chambers. Her study shows that the perceptions of the leaders and experts in Norway's energy companies have been instrumental in shaping the future of energy – not least because those who left work in fossil fuels played a crucial role in promoting the growth of renewable technologies and businesses.

### **Public dialogue: St Andrews and beyond**

Rauter's research is part of the Energy Ethics project funded by the European Research Council and led by Dr Mette High, director of the newly established Centre for Energy Ethics at the University of St Andrews. The Centre combines academic excellence with a supportive

community in which to conduct research, and its work complements the University's wider commitments to both interdisciplinarity and environmental sustainability.

Although her work engages with an academic audience (she has given presentations to specialists in both anthropology and energy ethics, and her first peer-reviewed journal article on energy elites is forthcoming), Rauter sees it as part of a wider cultural debate that is relevant to everyone in society. As such, sharing her research with a wide audience is a crucial aspect of her work. Rauter has shared her findings at

the Rotary Club of St Andrews and also with a Norwegian energy company. She is also a regular co-host of the Centre for Energy Ethics' podcast series, which can be found via her research profile at <https://energyethics.ac.uk/people/anna-rauter>. Her blogs on topics relating to sustainability can be found at <https://energyethics.ac.uk/blog>, while her Instagram [@missanthropologist](https://www.instagram.com/missanthropologist) includes posts and Insta stories inviting readers to discuss the topics of her research. Although her work focuses on Norway's energy elites, it is part of a much broader conversation aimed at creating a sustainable low-carbon future for us all.

### **Find out more**

Researcher profile: <https://energyethics.ac.uk/people/anna-rauter/>

Researcher profile video: <https://youtu.be/64psQurlUjY>

Researcher Instagram: [www.instagram.com/missanthropologist/](https://www.instagram.com/missanthropologist/)

Researcher LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/in/anna-rauter-09b943103/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/anna-rauter-09b943103/)

Project website: <https://energyethics.ac.uk/>

Centre for Energy Ethics Twitter account: [@EthicsEnergy](https://twitter.com/EthicsEnergy)

Centre for Energy Ethics LinkedIn account: [www.linkedin.com/company/centre-for-energy-ethics/](https://www.linkedin.com/company/centre-for-energy-ethics/)

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