

Energy for the South. How economic expert discourses construct energy transition in the Italian Mezzogiorno

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The current energy transition is a political and semantic battlefield for conflicting socio-ecological projects. Recently, Decolonial Energy Justice has been trying to broaden the range of energy justice, reflecting on how energy transition involves the (re)production of power asymmetries between centre and peripheral areas as well as inequalities based on class, race, gender and human relationship. Subscribing this theoretical call, the aim of this paper is to critically investigate hegemonic articulations of energy justice within economic expert discourses in the context of southern Italian territories. In the past decade, social studies of economics have combined different theoretical and methodological tools, such as network analysis, discourse theory, field studies and governmentality, to highlight how economic expertise is neither simply an organizational asset to deal with increasing global complexity nor a mere ideological apparatus reflecting dominant political projects. Instead, economic expert discourse concurs to construct subject positions and strategically shape political agendas to deal with contingent configurations of the global division of labour. Yet, social studies of economics have only recently dealt with energy transition. Filling this gap, this paper draws on social studies of economics to investigate how economic expert discourses are framing energy transition in the context of the Italian Mezzogiorno. Starting from a decolonial approach to southern Italy, which highlights how the discursive construction of the Mezzogiorno has served as powerful power leverage in national and international development, this paper aims to investigate how economic experts frame energy transition as a driver of development in the current global scenario. Methodologically, the paper combines diachronic and synchronic analysis of how economic expert discourses articulate energy in and for southern Italy. The first part of the paper summarizes, through a discourse-historical approach and cultural political economy, the history of the development of the energy sector in southern Italy from the mid-19th century until today, combining primary sources and literature reviews. The second part adopts a discourse theoretical analysis approach to analyse a corpus of selected reports produced by economics expert institutions to understand how the current energy transition is currently articulated. The analysis will attempt to outline how economic expert discourses frame energy use, strategic goals, and tools to implement the transition in the current global conjuncture. The analysis is based on a qualitative coding strategy of a corpus made of press releases of the Association for the Development of Industry in Southern Italy (SVIMEZ) and reports issued by the Osservatorio Energy&Med of the Studi e Ricerche per l'Economia del Territorio (SRM) between 2021-2023. The analysis highlights how energy, along with maritime infrastructures for logistics, is emerging as a key driver for a new developmental phase and geopolitical centrality for southern Italian territories, a strategy that implies the construction of new sacrificial zones of procedural and distributive energy injustice. The paper aims to study how economic expertise, as an assemblage of frames, data, techniques, political strategy and governmental needs, does not simply picture an external transformation but actively produces and

addresses energy transition through the production of macro-frames that shape transversally institutional political discourse and impact local energy landscapes.