Opportunity or Threat: dissecting tensions in a post-carbon rural transition

Abstract

The deployment of renewable energy technologies represents a highly visible and contested indicator of rural change in terms of the function and appearance of rural places. In this paper, we examine how notions of rurality and place intersect with macro-level objectives for reducing carbon emissions, and how competing storylines underpin opposing and supporting coalitions in the deployment of wind energy projects. The paper explores a series of recent controversial proposals for mega-wind energy projects in the Irish midlands driven by energy companies seeking to take advantage of an Irish-UK intergovernmental agreement to export green energy from Ireland to assist the UK in meeting its renewable energy targets. To examine these issues we develop and apply an interpretive approach to policy analysis inspired by the work of Laclau and Mouffe on the role of signifiers, antagonistic narratives and the constitutive outside. We identify how opposing and supporting discourses talk 'past one another' by framing narratives through different spatial referents (national versus local) and competing conceptualisation of the rural 'resource'. This inhibits the potential to imagine alternative post-carbon rural trajectories.

Keywords: post-carbon, energy, discourse, disagreement, windfarm, Ireland

Introduction

Scientific consensus concerning the impacts of human activities on the global climate system have led to widespread calls for radical thinking and action to develop and transition towards a substantially decarbonised society to avoid irreversible and damaging global climate change (Bailey and Wilson, 2009). This necessity has led Urry (2010; 2014) to call for a shift in social sciences towards post-carbonism to develop new thinking and practices to enable the emergence of interlocking sets of low carbon systems. Central to Urry's analysis, is a recognition that energy systems and social systems are often highly interconnected, although 'the forms in which societies are 'energised' are often hidden from direct observation, especially in the case of more distant forms of energy' (2014, p. 4) in an era of interconnected smart grids spanning continents. While energy systems may appear 'hidden' in an urban context, rural communities experience the consequences of a shift to low carbon technologies more directly (Albrechts, 2014) as biofuels, solar energy and wind energy, and associated electricity infrastructure (e.g. mega-pylon projects) change the

appearance and function of rural places. When often contentious debates concerning the potential of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) are accounted for, it becomes apparent how rural places have increasingly become sites for highly contentious energy decision-making, with renewables and fracking cast as both an opportunity and threat to rural communities. These contested debates shed additional light on Urry's observation that energy and social systems overlap – in this context, as new energy-scapes overlap social spaces or landscapes of significance for local identity, place attachment and quality of life. Energy futures may thus be seen to act as a major rupture in our understanding of rural change and as a source of conflict.

It is in this context that the last decade has witnessed an increasing number of researchers turning their attention to exploring and explaining the array of concerns that may be found at a local level regarding wind farm proposals (Cowell et al., 2011; Devine-Wright and Howes, 2010; Jobert et al., 2007; Jones and Eiser, 2010; Wolsink, 2007, 2012). Such work reflects a broader realisation of the inadequacy of assuming that more information generated by positivist epistemological perspectives can resolve the socio-political obstacles that generate tensions between what some conceive as divergent local and national objectives in planning for renewable energy (Bell et al., 2013; Cowell, 2007; Ellis et al., 2007; Ellis et al., 2009; Lennon and Scott, 2015; Warren and Birnie, 2009). Thus, an ever growing number of researchers have begun to employ constructivist epistemological approaches to investigate the complexities of wind farm debates (Fisher and Brown, 2009; Futák-Campbell and Haggett, 2011; Haggett and Toke, 2006) and how such debates may intersect with the formulation and contestation of rural identities (Barry et al., 2008). Indeed, research by Woods (2003; 2006; 2008) places rural conflicts and politics within a discursive context, where cultural meanings and processes shape and inform multiple discourses of rurality. Woods charts how (often competing) discourses of rurality have underpinned a shift in rural politics to a 'politics of the rural', where the centrality of the meaning of rurality itself has become a primary focus of conflict and debate within both local and national policy arenas, particularly concerning debates over the protection or development of the countryside. We extend this analysis by examining the intersection of rurality and the imperative of a low carbon transition to explore conflicts surrounding mega-wind energy projects.

In this paper, we explore how notions of rurality and place frictionally interact with macro-level governmental objectives for reducing carbon emissions and private sector business aims. As Devine-Wright and Howes (2010) argue, deepening understanding of stakeholder and public responses to large-scale renewable energy projects is of academic and practical importance, given the imperative and policy commitment to lessen fossil fuel use in many countries. In building upon the seminal work by Barry et al (2008), Cruickshank et al (2009) and Lysgård et al (2013), this paper aims to contribute to this understanding by employing an interpretive approach to investigate the discursive processes through which different realities are constructed and contested in debates concerning a major renewable energy project in a rural location. Specifically, we adopt this approach to analyse the various and competing narratives and storylines concerning proposals for the deployment of mega-wind energy projects in the Irish midlands. We hold that probing the discursive constitution of alternative rural futures promotes academic sensitivity to the social complexities of realising a post-carbon transition in economically dominated decision contexts that frequently marginalise the non-quantifiable cultural dimensions of energy policy. In particular, we scrutinise the discourses of opposition and support for wind energy deployment to reveal the processes by which rural identities are produced, contested and consolidated through the antagonistic forces of inclusion and exclusion by different parties to a debate.

Discourse and Coalitions

An interpretive approach emphasises an epistemology of 'social constructionism' by maintaining that knowledge is neither revealed from an external reality nor formulated by reason independent of such a reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Here, knowledge is conceived as 'the outcome of people having to make sense of their encounters with the physical world and with other people' (Blaikie, 2010, 22). This focus on intersubjectivity or shared knowledge accentuates the generation and transmission of meanings through varying degrees of collective interpretations regarding signification and significance. Attention to the role played by discourse in mediating such interpretations is a central concern of those engaged in interpretive research (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Wetherell et al., 2001). As noted by Torfing (2005, 3), 'discourse theory comes in many shapes and colours reflecting different traditions, disciplines and ontologies'. However, these are united by a preoccupation with exploring how, in what context and for what reasons,

discourses are constructed, contested and changed by whom and when (Jørgenson and Phillips, 2002; Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

Storylines and Coalitions

Storylines form an important focus of much discourse analysis. A storyline is a 'condensed statement summarizing complex narratives, used by people as shorthand in discussions' (Hajer, 2005, 302). Such storylines help frame perceptions and thereby affect practice (Epstein, 2008; van Hulst, 2012). They achieve this by forming tropes or shortcuts into broader narrative schemes that configure events and actions into a unified order which identifies the larger patterns to which they contribute (Throgmorton, 1993). Storylines not only convey meaning, they also offer those who ascribe to them a way of perceiving the phenomena under examination (Fischer, 2003). In this way, storylines orientate interpretations, and in doing so, they help constitute reality for those who ascribe to them (Paltridge, 2006), and consequently, storylines may foster the 'collective centring' (Hajer and Laws, 2006, 260) that allows constellations of actors to coalesce.

Over a period of almost forty years, Ernesto Laclau devised and honed a discourse theory that offers depth of understanding on how such collective centring occurs, is consolidated and given influential force (Laclau, 1990, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In this approach, a 'discourse' is conceived as the patterning of differential relations between a series of elements (e.g. objects, agents, problems, identities etc). Laclau theorises that the relational fluidity of these elements are temporarily fixed within different discourses by 'floating signifiers' (Laclau, 1990). Such floating signifiers reflect the way certain words (signifiers) facilitate different concepts (the signified) in different contexts or relative to different interpretations, but whose divergence is not acknowledged. This is not to suggest unbridled polyselmy. Rather, it simply represents a means to acknowledge the inherent fluidity of language. Associated with such floating signifiers are 'empty signifiers'. As with floating signifiers, these lack a specificity of content such that there may exist varying interpretations as to what they refer. However, they differ from floating signifiers with respect to the acknowledgment of ambiguity and a recognition that dissimilar interpretations may be occurring. The unfixity and ambiguity characterising these forms of signification was famously described by Lacan as the 'incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier'

(Lacan, 2006, 419). According to Laclau, this ceaseless movement is only arrested by the intercession of a master signifier capable of partially fixing the meaning of various floating signifiers through organising them into a coherent set of relations, which in turn render 'meaning-full' the empty signifiers. This master signifier thereby forms a 'nodal point' that unifies a variety of discourses which have been temporality fixed around floating signifiers. The nodal point unifies these discourses by facilitating perceptions of likeness between different discourses through restructuring their relationships relative to each. In this sense, the discursive process of constructing realities in contentious planning debates can be understood as an effort by the different parties in such debates to privilege the nodal point that they perceive as best resonating with their views and advancing their interests (Lysgård and Cruickshank, 2013; Winther and Svendsen, 2012). As noted by Cruickshank et al, (2009, 78), 'The nodal point is not defined from something outside the discourse. The political debate can be seen as a struggle to dominate the discursive field by establishing a nodal point.'

Epstein (2008) has demonstrated how such collective centring on a 'nodal point' may result in the formation and/or expansion of a 'discourse coalition' (Hajer, 1993, 1995). Based upon research concerning acid rain related debates in Great Britain and the Netherlands during the 1980s, Hajer theorises that such 'discourse coalitions',

> *...are defined as the ensemble of (1) a set of story-lines; (2) the actors who utter these story-lines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based.* (Hajer, 1995 65)

In a governance context, a discourse coalition thereby provides the well of support for a policy approach by facilitating the aggregation of multiple agents and interests around a set of storylines that frame interpretation.

Fantasy and the Constitutive Outside

Recent empirical research inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis has deepened our understanding of the central role played by storylines in shaping perceptions of reality through emphasising the workings and roles of 'fantasy' (Griggs and Howarth, 2013; Gunder and Hillier, 2009). As noted by Gunder (2014, 3), 'fantasy acts as a crucial means to simplify

the anxiety-inducing complexity and often-apparent inconsistencies of reality, so that social reality appears a coherent materialised, yet simplified, comprehensive entity.' Such a narrative functions through 'providing *direction* and *energy* by pointing to things that are desired or rejected' (Howarth, 2010, 322 – emphasis in original). In this sense, a fantasy is a specific form of 'narrative structure involving some reference to an idealised scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness (the beatific side of fantasy) and, by implication, a disaster scenario (the horrorific side of fantasy)' (Glynos, 2011, 376). While both forms of storyline operate via different velocities, they frequently work as antagonistic pairs wherein the force of reaction against a 'horrorific fantasy' consolidates the desire to realise an explicitly conveyed or implied 'beatific fantasy'. In such instances, failure or the fear of failure to realise the beatific fantasy may be explicitly explained or implicitly understood through reference to the obstructing influence of some malevolent factor seeking to advance the horrorific fantasy that aims 'to destroy what an individual holds most sacred' (Bloom and Ceserstrom, 2009, 165).

In the context of contested rural identities, Winther and Svendsen have shown that 'because the construction of political projects involves antagonisms – i.e. the selection and de-selection of meaning – the process divides society into insiders and outsiders' (2012, 471). This observation draws upon Laclau's hypothesis that establishing discursive coherency, providing clarity of direction for agents and fomenting a discourse coalition may occur through the suppression of potential differences between an array of storylines. This is achieved by ordering the various composite storylines relative to something perceived as of greater dissimilarity beyond the boundaries of the discourses deployed. Inspired by Staten (1984, 16), Laclau (1990, 17) refers to such extra-discursive elements as the 'constitutive outside'. This perceived 'Other' thus defines those elements within the discourses and helps establish the orderly patterning of relationships that specify identities. To account for this, Laclau and Mouffee (1985) introduce the concept of a 'logic of equivalence'. This entails 'the dissolution of the particular identities of subjects within a discourse by the creation of a purely negative identity that is seen to threaten them' (Howarth, 2000, 107) or through suppressing the possibility of various subjectivities by the projection of 'sameness' onto a multiplicity of potentially different identities (Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015).

We take these theoretical insights forward in the next section and use them to inform our analysis of debates concerning windfarm proposals in the Irish midlands. We then use this examination to formulate some deductions regarding the inherent frictions between interpretations of rurality and macro level objectives concerning renewable energy development and the transition to a post-carbon economy. We subsequently draw some conclusions for wider debates concerning the interpretation of rurality in a post carbon world.

Contending Storylines in the Irish Midlands

Overview of the Context & Analytical Methods

The European Union (EU) has been proactive in seeking that member states transition to a low-carbon economy. This is epitomised in the EU Renewable Energy Sources Directive (EC, 2009), which aims to increase the share of energy consumption obtained from renewable energy sources by establishing binding targets for each member state on the proportion of energy derived from such sources. One means for member states to achieve their targets is to enter into an agreement for the transmission of renewable energy from countries with a surplus to member states with a deficit. To date there has been little uptake and minimal analysis of such transfer arrangements. However, in January 2013 the Irish and UK governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for renewable energy trading. Two privately financed companies, namely Element Power and Mainstream Renewable Power, sought to capitalise on the MoU by wholly exporting to the UK all the energy produced by a number of windfarms proposed for the Irish midlands. It was proposed that the energy generated by these windfarms would connect into the UK grid via an existing submarine transmission cable.

These proposals prompted extensive debate in Ireland, including media coverage, parliamentary questions and protests, and to a lesser extent some media coverage in the UK. The final number of turbines proposed was debatable[i]. Nevertheless, Element Power signalled an aspiration to seek planning permission for approximately 750 turbines generating about 3000 megawatts of electricity, while Mainstream Renewable Power indicated an intention for the erection of approximately 400 turbines generating about 1200

megawatts of electricity (Shortt, 12 February 2013). The turbines proposed by both companies significantly exceeded the size of those found in existing Irish windfarms. Specifically, the turbines proposed by Element Power were to be about 180 metres high from base to blade tip (BBC, 24 January 2013), while the turbines proposed by Mainstream Renewable Power were to be lower at approximately 156 metres high from base to blade tip (Anon., 2013). Collectively, these two proposals sought to export over twice the normal output of all electricity currently generated in Ireland from renewable sources by almost doubling the number of turbines already installed in the country (Shortt, 17 February 2013).

A significant portion of the proposed windfarm sites were to be located in County Westmeath. Within the county, community groups were among the first to form in resistance to the windfarms and were more numerous than in several of the other counties where turbines were also to be sited. Moreover, many of these groups were particularly adept at employing the local press, audio-visual media and protests to broadcast their views. Consequently, an examination of the storylines deployed by such community groups presents a lens through which to identify and examine the constitution and communication of those meanings attached to rurality. The case study explores the emergence and evolution of *supporting* and *opposition* storylines from May 2012 when Mainstream Renewable Power first announced its intention to develop these windfarms to the effective abandonment of the proposed energy export agreement in April 2014 when the UK government failed to agree terms for an energy trading deal with Ireland. The case study analysis is empirically grounded in the collation and scrutiny of an extensive archive of audio-visual and print media. This material was assembled from a variety of sources aimed at different audiences. The data gathering process thereby endeavoured to capture the diversity of framings advanced by different actors who sought to persuasively frame their discourses for consumption by different audiences. In this context, a detailed study of 10 radio debates and 7 television debates was undertaken and local newspapers in circulation in Westmeath and aimed at a Westmeath readership were also examined. A total of 141 newspaper articles were identified as directly related to the proposed windfarm proposals and therefore closely inspected. In addition, 32 print and audio-visual items produced by the two companies seeking to develop the windfarms were collated and scrutinised. Material displayed on the websites of both companies was likewise examined. A

comprehensive study of social media sites was conducted, primarily Facebook pages of opposition groups.

A deductive-inductive hybrid coding format was adopted to analyse the archive of collated material (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This enabled balance between cognisance of existing theory and a sensitivity to theoretical novelty. Here, broad 'thematic codes' informed by discourse theory were deductively employed simultaneous to the inductive openness of 'initial coding'. The coding process was entirely conducted by one of the researchers to maximise consistency. The inductive coding facilitated the exploration of 'theoretical possibilities' (Charmaz, 2006, 47) and assisted the identification of recurring but potentially unforeseen themes in the collated material (Rapley, 2007). These deductively and inductively derived codes were then used to guide the detailed coding of the material. This detailed coding process distilled the thematic and initial codes by remaining open to iteration as the honing of existing codes and the emergence of new codes was facilitated according as the coding process progressed through a series of three rounds. Such detailed coding continued until the researchers were satisfied that all the collated material had been comprehensively coded. It was subsequently sought to identify thematic patterns in these codes. Once again, the insights of discourse theory were deductively employed concurrent with inductive sensitivity to novelty and the unexpected. This deductive-inductive dialogue continued until the researchers were content that an empirically robust and theoretically astute comprehension of the case study material had been developed.

Supporting Discourses

Different agents championing the proposed windfarms deployed different signifiers to structure their storylines of support. Nevertheless, by collectively emphasising potential fiscal gain, these storylines facilitated the formulation of a discourse coalition advancing a beatific narrative of future unanimous profit. Such storylines worked antagonistically with a series of implied horrorific narratives of economic decline, employment loss and emigration. Three broad themes are identifiable in the storylines advanced by those supporting the proposals, namely: national economic gain; economic growth and employment; and community benefit.

National Economic Gain

Storylines focused on national economic gain were a recurring feature of narratives advanced by the pro-windfarm lobby. Such narratives were evident from the very beginning of debates concerning the proposed midlands windfarms. Indeed, a promotional video produced by Mainstream Renewable Power in May 2012 to accompany the public launch of its 'Energy Bridge' proposal noted that,

> *Like all European countries, by 2020 we're legally bound to generate a percentage of our electricity from renewables...we have far more windfarms waiting to be connected than we need...the UK on the other hand doesn't have enough...This presents a once in a lifetime opportunity for Ireland. We can supply the UK with the electricity it needs, and in so doing, create a new industry and lucrative export market.* (Mainstream Renewable Power, 2012)

In this video, Mainstream Renewable Power advances a beatific fantasy by forging a storyline that evokes a state of imaginary fullness. This is imparted through a simple narrative wherein exporting surplus energy from windfarms in Ireland to meet a deficit in the UK provides an 'opportunity' to 'create a new industry and a lucrative export market'. However, what constitutes a 'lucrative export market' is left unspecified, as is the explicit identification of who such a market will be lucrative for. In this sense, the term 'lucrative export market' serves as an empty signifier that helps profile the beatific fantasy while not restricting it to particular details. Moreover, ambiguity concerning the beneficiary of this lucrative export market is suspended by the repeated reference to 'we', in which it is conveyed that 'we're legally bound', 'we have far more windfarms' and 'we can supply'. Mention of private commercial profit is not furnished. Rather, the storyline advanced here implies, but does not avow, a shared benefit to all presented by this opportunity. Furthermore, such a 'once in a lifetime opportunity' implies a converse horrorific narrative wherein the possibility to 'create a new industry and a lucrative export market' with the assumption of new employment options and national economic gain is squandered through hesitancy to capitalise on a rare favourable alignment of conditions.

In July 2012, Element Power announced its 'Greenwire' project. Similar to the Energy Bridge project proposed by Mainstream Renewable Power, the Greenwire project also sought the

construction of a series of large windfarms in the Irish Midlands to produce energy exclusively for export to the UK. In a press release accompanying the announcement, the CEO of Element Power Ireland, Tim Cowhig stated that,

> *Greenwire is a particularly timely project which will enable the economy to harness our renewable energy resources to our economic advantage. The UK energy requirement has become Ireland's opportunity, it makes perfect sense to capitalise on our geographic location and create an export industry. Greenwire is the enabling project that will allow this to happen boosting our national trade and generating considerable employment and benefit to the Midlands region.* (Element Power, 17 July 2012)

Similar to the video by Mainstream Renewable Energy, here Mr Cowhig generates a beatific fantasy by fashioning an idealised scenario promising an imaginary fullness through a storyline conveying a simple linear logic that 'makes perfect sense'. In this storyline, Greenwire is presented as an 'enabling project' that permits a reified 'economy' to harness 'our' renewable energy resources to 'our' economic advantage. By repeatedly referencing the word 'our' in this passage, Mr Cowhig extricates his company's financial motivation from the discourse and seeks to frame the Greenwire project as an 'opportunity' to capitalise on 'our' geographic location for shared national and regional benefit. Thus as with the promotional video of Mainstream Renewable Power, the storyline advanced here seeks to create a sense that this 'opportunity' presents an equal benefit to all. However, what constitutes 'boosting our national trade', 'considerable employment' or 'benefits to the Midlands' are alluded to rather than defined. These floating signifiers thereby help contour the beatific fantasy by injecting a normative force into the linear logic of the storyline that associates wind energy export with creating an industry and generating employment. Buttressing this process is an implied storyline of loss whereby failure to 'capitalise on our geographic location and create an export industry' would result in a missed opportunity for employment generation in the midlands.

Economic Growth and Employment

This narrative of unanimous benefit was broadly echoed by Pat Rabbitte, the Irish Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resource, in January 2013 at a conference hosted by The British Irish Chamber of Commerce where he signed the MoU concerning energy

trading with his UK counterpart, Edward Davey. On this occasion, Mr Rabbitte asserted that,

> *Ireland has the potential to generate far more wind energy than we could consume domestically....the opportunity to export this green power presents an opportunity for employment growth and export earnings which we must seize if we can.* (Telford, 24 January 2013)

Although not referencing any particular project, Mr Rabbitte here reiterates the linear logic of the storyline advanced by both companies seeking to develop the proposed windfarms. In this iteration of the storyline, exporting excess 'green power' facilitates 'employment growth and export earnings'. Echoing the assertion by Mainstream Renewable Power, Mr Rabbitte emphasises how this is an 'opportunity' that 'we must seize if we can'. He developed this focus on job creation and economic growth by outlining how,

> *More generally, the shift towards renewable energy and related technologies promises to bring many benefits. There will be opportunities to develop new products across the information technology, remote communications and software. Irish universities are well positioned in this sector. In the near future, we may see Irish-designed products managing everything from control of energy in the home to management of wind farms and ensuring energy on the grid is optimised. With its natural energy resources and strong capabilities in areas such as engineering and ICT, Ireland is well positioned to profit from this opportunity.* (Rabbitte, 27 March 2013)

In this way, Mr Rabbitte sketches a beatific fantasy of 'many benefits' regarding economic growth in industrial sectors potentially associated with wind energy development. Once again, this is presented as an 'opportunity', with the insinuation that it may easily be lost if not ceased.

Community Benefit

Also directed by the concept of 'opportunity' was the storyline of community benefit accruing from the proposed windfarm developments. Illustrative of this narrative was the argument in favour of the windfarm developments that was advanced by Element Power's Chief Development Officer, Kevin O'Donovan, in an interview to the Westmeath Examiner newspaper in March 2013. Mr O'Donovan links multiple benefits, when stressing that

'There's job creation out of it, there's revenue generation, there's benefits to the local community as well as to Ireland Inc' (Farry, 9 March 2013). With a focus on local economic benefit rather than national or international trading arrangements, Mr O'Donovan stated that,

> *They [windfarms] will be contributing to the whole community. If a fifth of Element's turbines are built in Westmeath, that will provide the equivalent of over 50% of the commercial rates revenue pulled in by the council in 2010. That's huge money. Westmeath County Council can do what they like with their rates, but if 50% extra is coming in, they could do a hell of a lot of good stuff.* (Farry, 9 March 2013)

In this way, Mr O'Donovan further broadens the beatific fantasy of shared benefits. However, in this case the opportunity supplied by the proposed windfarms are presented as 'contributing to the whole community' rather than an array of specialised industrial sectors or the national economy. This message is related by shifting focus from employment generation onto local government commercial rates, and by implication, the 'good stuff' that Westmeath County Council could do with additional revenue. This line of argument is thereby predicated on the assumption that Westmeath County Council will do 'good stuff' with the additional proceeds. Nevertheless, what constitutes 'good stuff' is not defined. Instead, it serves as an empty signifier with positive connotations that is elastic enough to facilitate a broad range of interpretations, yet conventional enough to seemingly justify the argument been made. Strongly resonating with this locally focused beatific narrative was the comments of Mr Eddie O'Connor, the CEO of Mainstream Renewable Power, when briefly interviewed on a televised debate concerning the wind farm proposals. Here, Mr O'Connor emphatically sought that those with an interest in the proposals,

> *Look at that wealth coming to the midlands...and what's going to happen to Bord na Móna*[ii] *after all the power stations shut down? Where are all the people going to work? That wind above our heads can actually supply jobs for a huge number of people in the midlands.* (RTE, 12 Febrary 2013)

Here, Mr O'Connor employs an antagonistic relationship between beatific and horrorific narratives to advance the proposals his company seeks to develop in a manner that elides mention of the profit his company hopes to accrue. This is achieved by framing a

declaration about the 'jobs for a huge number of people in the midlands' that the proposals will generate within an insinuated alternative horrorific narrative of future regional economic decline.

Outlined above are a series of storylines concerning the proposed midlands windfarm developments and an array of associated narratives prompted by the signing of the MoU. These storylines have different scalar referents but frequently intertwine issues of national and local concern. At the national level, reference is repeatedly made to a set of issues relating to increased national exchequer income, employment, energy security and a transition to environmental sustainability. These vaguely defined floating signifiers supply a seemingly rational justification, structure and direction for a suite of beatific fantasies. At the local level, reference is repeatedly made to community benefit. This signifier configures beatific fantasies that seek to dissipate local anxiety regarding the development of large scale windfarms. The variety of signifiers deployed and the storylines assembled around them are organised into a coherent set of relations by the prominence of the term 'opportunity' within these narratives. In this way, the concept of 'opportunity' serves as a 'nodal point' that unifies these varying discourses by facilitating perceptions of likeness between them and restructuring their relationships relative to each other in a way that suppresses potential divergence. Thus, the concept of 'opportunity' enables the collective centring that stimulates the formation of a 'discourse coalition' focused on a meta-narrative shared by all within that coalition. This meta-narrative comprises a beatific fantasy in which the 'opportunity' of renewable energy export to the UK supplies the stimulus to harness Ireland's surplus wind resources and thereby provide a multiplicity of benefits at both national and local levels. This beatific meta-narrative of multiple benefit is reinforced by antagonistic relationships with a series of implied horrorific narratives concerning economic decline, unemployment and emigration.

Buttressing this coalition of support is an insinuated constitutive outside of irrational opponents who ignore the objectivity of scientific assessment. In doing so, it is implied that such opponents jeopardise the potential of wind farms in general, and the midlands proposal specifically, to deliver national economic benefit and generate employment. Illustrative of this is an interview conducted with Kenneth Matthews, Chief Executive of the

Irish Wind Energy Association, as part of a televised debate concerning the midlands mega-windfarm proposal. In reference to the wind energy sector, Mr Matthews states that,

> *There are real families being supported by real jobs in the sector today. And if we look at the numbers that are employed, effectively what you're talking about is the equivalent of Intel*[iii], (RTE, 23 September 2013)

When questioned regarding the negative health impacts of living in proximity to wind turbines, Mr Mathews responds by confidently stating that,

> *I think it's really important that people have a discussion and a debate about it, but the discussion and the policy issues should be based on facts. There is no evidence in Ireland, or in Europe, or internationally to suggest or outline that people should be concerned.* (RTE, 23 September 2013)

Importantly, Mr Mathews seeks to substantiate his assertions by unspecific reference to the 'facts' regarding the lack of 'evidence' for claims that windfarms are injurious to people's health. In this sense, he implies that those opposing windfarm developments do so based on a subjective fictional fear rather than the objective truth of science. Consequently, those who oppose the midlands proposal are tacitly presented as a constitutive outside of irrational malcontents.

Opposing Discourses

The discourses deployed by those opposed to the windfarm proposals differed in tone, theme and topic from the storylines advanced by those supporting the developments. Rather than focusing upon the fiscal gains that may accrue from the Greenwire and Energy Bridge schemes, this discourse coalition was bound by concern about issues of health, landscape impact and associated house price diminution. Cementing this coalition was the 'constitutive outside' prompted by a perceived threat to the 'rural'.

The Threatening 'Other'

The Lakelands Windfarm Information Group (LWIG) was formed on 20 October 2012 to represent the concerns of a series of community groups in the greater Mullingar area of

County Westmeath, formed in opposition to the proposed midlands windfarms. The LWIG was proactive throughout 2013 in campaigning against the proposed Greenwire and Energy Bridge developments through the use of the local press, radio interviews and protests. A central narrative deployed by the LWIG was that the proposed developments were being 'imposed on ordinary residents without consultation' (Farry, 27 October 2012). This narrative of imposition fostered a perception of threat wherein local politicians sought to convey the concerns of their constituents by expressing a desire to ensure 'that the little people are not going to be walked on by any big company with lots of money at its disposal' (Anon., 20 January 2013). However, who constituted the 'ordinary residents' or 'little people' were left as ill-defined empty signifiers. Adding an implied sense of designation to these signifiers was a storyline that negatively categorised the 'big company' as seeking to inconsiderately force its will onto the counterpoised category of the 'ordinary' or 'little'. Thus, a shared identity of victimisation was implied in the discourse by differentiating this category (those imposed upon) with the constitutive outside of the 'big company'. This phenomenon was illustrated by Andrew Duncan, the Public Relations Officer for the LWIG at a protest march against the proposed windfarms in Dublin in June 2013:

> *Westmeath has become the focal point for the entire country in opposition to what is clearly a scheme designed to profit a small number of people while damaging the majority of people's* [sic] *right to peaceful enjoyment of their home and environment.* (Farry, 29 June 2013)

In this statement, Mr Duncan deploys a storyline wherein a 'small number of people' serve as the constitutive outside through engaging in activities that are injurious to the 'majority of people'. In doing so, he engenders an identity of shared suffering by the 'majority of people' consequent on the profit driven motivations of those against which this identity is defined. This logic of 'us-them' differentiation was also evident at a subsequent rally in Westmeath in August 2013 when several local politicians and campaigners from the county addressed a crowd of protestors reported to number almost two thousand people (Anon., 3 August 2013c). The profit driven motivations and lack of consideration for the concerns of Westmeath residents was a recurrent theme of these speeches, with the 'corporate greed' (Anon., 3 August 2013b) of the windfarm developers counterpoised with the shared identity of those objecting to the proposed developments. This construction of a shared identity

through a constitutive outside suppressed potential differences between those it sought to include through a 'logic of equivalence' focused on a series of signifiers such as 'the community' and 'the people'. These signifiers thereby formed a central element in the construction of a discourse coalition wherein a unified identity was implied. This is illustrated in the assertions of Councillor Paul Daly at the protest rally when he proclaimed that, 'The Lakeland county of Westmeath is not for sale, the people are not for changing, the people are not for bullying and the people cannot be bought' (Anon., 3 August 2013a).

As an extension of this discourse, the 'Other' that served as the constitutive outside for this coalition became entangled with narratives that referred to Ireland's colonial past. Such storylines sought to relate the perceived 'imposition' of windfarm development for energy export to UK consumers with 'The real agenda' of 'a return to Landlordism' (McGahon, 1 August 2013). These narratives contended that, 'The idea of exporting such a valuable resource to the UK where they will not allow any turbines in their countryside, amounts to a new version of colonialism' (Anon., 21 February 2013). A feature of such storylines was allusion to concepts of exploitation and dispossession. Here, parallels were drawn between the history of Westmeath and the windfarm proposals. This narrative is aptly illustrated by 'Concerned Mary' in the letters pages of the Westmeath Topic newspaper where it is contended that,

> *To introduce commercial wind turbines on the lands of County Westmeath would lead to a situation which existed in this county in the mid eighteen hundreds. The people of this county back then suffered rack-rent evictions.*

The author then recounts a story of 'forty families evicted one Christmas morning' before stating that,

> *The above account brings to mind what is happening this very day as we have, instead of landlords, the commercial windfarm companies that are about to move in on farm land...people will be displaced the same way they were during the evictions...People of Westmeath have to stand together and fight for the land the same way our forefathers fought.* (Mary, 3 October 2013)

These narratives carry strong normative connotations that equate the windfarm developers as agents that threaten people and place by their intention 'to move in on farm land' so

'people will be displaced'. This picture of a menacing 'Other' referenced to a history of suffering and dispossession represents an attempt to consolidate the coalition of windfarm opposition through a horrorific fantasy of loss. This storyline then shifts to a rousing appeal to 'fight for the land the same way our forefathers fought'. By reference to 'our' forefathers, the 'People of Westmeath' are identified with the readers of the letter and invited to 'stand together and fight' against 'commercial windfarm companies' in the same way 'our forefathers' fought for the land against the evicting landlords. Therefore, by constructing neo-colonial storylines referencing an historical parallel, such narratives seek to draw upon past difficulties between Ireland and the UK in fomenting opposition to the proposals and reinforce 'us-them' delineations. These storylines thus seek to consolidate the anti-windfarm coalition through intensifying the sense of a menacing 'Other'.

Landscape

As with the horrorific fantasies of neo-colonial exploitation and dispossession, storylines of landscape construction convey a horrorific fantasy of landscape ruin against which opponents of the windfarms are urged to resist. Narratives such as these populate the letters pages of the local press and are illustrated by Margaret Kiernan in her letter to the Westmeath Examiner:

> *I am vehemently against the scale and the extent of this proposed industrialisation of the midlands. So that we can provide energy for use in the UK?...We ask everyone to display their bumper stickers and posters on their property boundaries, to display them like badges of courage; as war cries to our government representatives and to representatives of large multinational wind energy companies who would like to annihilate our landscape with large scale industrial-size wind turbines the likes of which have not been seen across Europe yet! That we say no!* (Kiernan, 21 September 2013)

Such combative language echoes the bellicosity of the neo-colonial storylines. However in this case, the fear is not that the threatening 'Other' (multinational wind energy companies) will dispossess land owners. Instead, it is that this menace seeks to 'annihilate' the landscape. Consequently, the 'Other' that threatens the landscape is allocated a nefarious intention via the term 'would like to'. As such, a villainous constitutive outside is insinuated

and counterpoised with the shared identity of those who have affective concern for the landscape through the inclusiveness of the plural pronoun in referring to 'our' landscape.

This horrorific narrative of landscape destruction operates antagonistically with a beatific narrative of landscape beauty that supplies affective force to the discursive process consolidating the opposition coalition. This narrative advances the conception of an irreplaceable landscape that resonates deeply with the identities of those living within it. As noted by one opponent of the proposals in a national newspaper,

> *The landscape of Ireland is like an ancient parchment which our culture has uniquely affected. It has informed our imagination, our poetry and our songs; it uniquely speaks to us and of us. What is at stake here could hardly be more elemental…* (McGurk, 13.02.13)

Such deep concern for landscape destruction by 'industrial-size wind turbines' was not confined to the invective of newspaper letters pages, but was also evident in the motivations for action by those opposed to the windfarm proposals. This was demonstrated in the comments of a number of residents from the village of Raharney, who on travelling to the local project office of Mainstream Renewable Power to express their concerns regarding the proposals stated that 'this is a rural community and it is no place for industrial turbines' (Anon., 1 June 2013). The emphasis on 'industrial' to describe the turbines also reinforces the perspective that these schemes do not belong in rural localities defined by landscape and agricultural practices and not urban infrastructure. The perceived incongruity of the proposed turbines likewise drew concern from local councillors in the debating chamber of Mullingar Town Council. Here, the turbines were described as 'monstrosities that will destroy the environment' and consequently 'switch off tourist' (Anon., 1 May 2013). In essence therefore, anxiety about the incongruity of the proposed turbines centred on the antagonistic relationship between a horrorific fantasy of 'a disfigured industrial landscape' and a beatific narrative regarding the 'very attractive landscape' of County Westmeath. Reinforcing the affective impact of this discursive process and consolidating the coalition of opposition to the proposals was the perception of a constitutive outside comprising 'greedy people planning to make big profits at the expense of the majority of the people' (Anon., 6 December 2012).

This echoes research in other rural contexts. For example, Phadke (2011), drawing on wind energy struggles in western USA, describes wind turbine infrastructure as a 'conspicuous technology' (p. 755). Wind energy opposition is thus constructed as the threat of green industrialisation on the imagined rural (pastoral) ideal – of a technology not belonging. A landscape narrative can therefore be interpreted to represent a bond between people and place, where landscape is central to place and self identity and a sense of place. Thus, landscape politics often revolves around questions of who 'owns' the landscape and who decides on how it should look, emphasising how renewable energy systems overlap and intersect with social systems and wider social constructions of landscape values.

Directly associated with the fear of negative landscape impacts were horrorific fantasies regarding house price diminution. This fear that the proposed developments will render 'worthless' the value of houses in much the same way that they will 'annihilate' the landscape through the incongruous industrialisation of a rural environment is reflected in the comments of the Mullingar estate agent and public relations officer for the LWIG when he noted,

> *I think it's absolutely certain that they'll [house prices] go down...Anything that reduces demand reduces the overall value, and demand is undoubtedly diminished where you have a six hundred foot turbine five hundred metres from your home. There's no question in my mind...There is undoubtedly a diminutive effect when you transpose an industrial landscape to a rural environment.* (RTE, 21 October 2013)

In this sense, the horrorific fantasy of landscape destruction operates antagonistically with an implicit beatific fantasy of bucolic beauty that provides a centralising narrative around which several other storylines can revolve. Here, the threat of landscape destruction both stimulates different narratives and helps bind such varying perspectives into a discourse coalition. This occurs by suppressing potential differences between the different members of the coalition via a 'logic of equivalence' consequent on the projection of a menacing 'constitutive outside'.

Health

Concerns surrounding the health impacts of the proposed turbines also featured in discourses of opposition to the windfarm developments. These concerns primarily centred on the issue of noise. Specifically, there was unease regarding the adverse affects of noise generated by the proposed turbines on psychological health. As noted by one interviewee in a radio debate on this issue, 'As a clinical psychologist, my concern is that the lack of sleep is causing stress for people, and I'd just be worried that if they're put in my area, my home area, that we would miss out on sleep and have psychological affects as a result of that' (RTE, 21 October 2013). A more horrorific fantasy was drawn by Elaine Fisher who feared the potential negative influence of the proposed windfarms on her six-year old autistic son. Speaking at a meeting of the Rochfortbridge Windfarm Information Group in September 2013, Ms Fisher stated that,

> *Our children can't speak from themselves, so we have to stand up and speak to protect them...He [her autistic son] will fixate on them [turbines] visually but he will also be able to hear the turbines even when we don't. The constant noise will frustrate him and agonise him...he will have his hands on his ears and he will rock to and fro, eventually he will start to headbutt the wall to try and get some relief from the noise. He will get violent and aggressive and won't be able to sleep. His life and our lives will be so badly affected that we will have to leave our home.* (Farry, 14 September 2013)

Ms Fisher's horrorific fantasy about the deterioration of her son's autism and the resulting need to leave her home provides an emotional counterpoint to the depersonalised, 'rational' and economic centred beatific narratives advanced by those supporting the proposed developments. In this sense it echoes the emotive appeals to history, 'the people' and the foretelling of loss which characterise other storylines within the discourse coalition of windfarm opposition. Such horrorific fantasies were reinforced by the practice of local opposition groups hosting invited speakers from elsewhere in Ireland in which they recounted their negative health related experiences with existing windfarm developments (Anon., 20 June 2013).

The storylines of opposition outlined above make repeated allusion to a threatening 'Other'. This menacing presence serves as a nodal point focused on a horrific fantasy that engenders a meta-narrative of place destruction which gives form to, enlarges and consolidates the

discourse coalition. Buttressing these horrorific fantasies are allusions to beatific narratives of health, home and bucolic beauty that operate antagonistically in enhancing the affective impact of the perceived threat posed to the existing situation. In so doing, this discursive process helps consolidate the coalition of opposition to the proposed windfarms and generates a meta-narrative of threat that injects energy and direction into opposition discourses by mobilising affective concern for the function and appearance of rural places.

Conclusion: Dissecting Tensions in a Post Carbon Transition

In this paper, we have sought to contribute to a better understanding of how probing the discursive constitution of alternate realities promotes academic sensitivity to the complexities of realising a post-carbon rural transition. In particular, we investigated how discourses of opposition and support for wind energy deployment reveal the processes by which rural identities are produced, contested and consolidated through the antagonistic forces of inclusion and exclusion by different participants to a mega-wind project debate. In this sense, we follow seminal work by other researchers (Barry et al., 2008; Bell et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009; Haggett and Toke, 2006) in attending to how the 'truth' regarding the impacts of renewable energy infrastructure are constructed via complex intersubjective processes rather than existing exterior to such processes, as is often suggested by those embroiled in contentious debates concerning this type of infrastructure. Importantly, we complement and extend such work by unknotting the intricate mesh of discursive processes underpinning the consolidation of dichotomous positions. We also explain how by interacting to corral participants into intractably polarised situations, these processes undermine the potential for constructive planning.

The two opposing coalitions examined reflect tensions in transitioning to a post carbon economy. Fundamental to both coalitions are a series of storylines that help connect various members of the coalitions. Shaping these storylines are polarised meta-narratives: whereas the supporting coalition is ostensibly drawn together by a beatific fantasy of wealth creation and employment, the opposing coalition is overtly bound by a shared identification with an external menace that threatens a horrorific fantasy of loss, destruction and suffering. Working antagonistically with these explicit narratives are implicit converse storylines that consolidate the position of the contending coalitions, propel activity

(protests, newspaper letters, interviews) and help structure the format of the discourses deployed.

What the analysis demonstrates is that the variety of positions within the opposing discourse coalitions are aligned through affiliation to master signifiers that serve as nodal points in linking an array of storylines. These centre on frictions between a national and corporate objective to capitalise upon the 'opportunity' for multiple economic benefits presented by renewable energy trading and a local desire 'to protect the villages and towns of Westmeath' (Farry, 27 October 2012) from the menace of context insensitivity profit motivated multinational companies. Thus, the master signifiers of 'opportunity' and 'threat' form nodal points that facilitate the collective centring of various subjectivities into contending perspectives when debating the future of the Irish midlands. These nodal points are not external to or defined by something outside the discourses in which they emerge. Rather, they are co-constituted as concepts simultaneously to the evolution of the discourses that carry them (Lennon and Scott, 2015). Therefore, in this combative space of contending perspectives, the struggle to see realised one's desired outcome can be understood as a contest to institutionalise the master signifier serving as the discursive nodal point to which one is affiliated (Cruickshank et al., 2009; Lysgård and Cruickshank, 2013; Winther and Svendsen, 2012).

Discernible from an analysis of the storylines deployed by the contending coalitions are patterns in the use of different spatial referents. Those supporting the proposed windfarms focus most commonly on national and international spatial referents through narratives concerning national revenue streams and energy security. Conversely, those opposing the proposals direct their attention to the local landscape, the home and personal health. The mismatch in these spatial referents means that contending coalitions shape their narratives around dissimilar horizons wherein different issues are rendered more pertinent. An effect of these different spatial planes is the constitution and circulation of 'floating signifiers' across different discourses. Such signifiers enable the deployment of identical words to signify different concepts relative to the interpretations of the contending coalitions without acknowledging the divergence in their use (Laclau, 1990). Thus, 'environment' both refers to a disembedded and abstract concept with global applicability, and to reference a

localised and experienced series of physical attributes associated with the existing rural character of County Westmeath. Similarly, in using the word 'economy', Mr Cowhig, Mr O'Connor and Minister Rabbitte deploy it to reference a potential but unquantified national benefit. Conversely, those opposed to the windfarms reference a localised 'twenty eight per cent devaluation…[to] your home, your house' and how the proposals will 'switch off tourists' in County Westmeath. This mixing of scale and signification is partially 'fixed' into seemingly patent associations by the different master signifiers of 'opportunity' and 'threat' that serve as nodal points organising the various composite storylines of the contending coalitions. Thus, for those supporting the proposed developments they are seen to logically provide an opportunity to improve national environmental performance and enhance both the national and regional economy, while for those opposing the windfarms they are reasoned as threatening the local environment and damaging the local economy. Moreover, by arresting the unfixity of these floating signifiers and implanting them with scalar associations, the array of otherwise ambiguous 'empty signifiers' deployed in the discourses of the contending coalitions ('lucrative export market', 'little people' etc) are rendered 'meaning-full', seemingly obvious and thereby unquestioned in the context in which they are employed.

This contrasting deployment of discourses inhibits deliberation aimed at resolving perceived problems with the arguments presented by contending coalitions as in effect, the discourse coalitions talk 'past' each other rather than 'to' each other. Such a phenomenon thereby impedes attempts to reconcile differences between the contending coalitions as their contesting discourses fail to achieve the forms of communication necessary to mutually agree on what issues of concern should carry greatest weight in the decisions to be made. In supporting the conclusions of Barry et al (2008), this discursive process was observed in the Midland's windfarm debates as proponents of the proposed developments sought to forge a 'constitutive outside' of irrational malcontents whose views are grounded in subjective fear rather than the objective truths of science. Conversely, it can be discerned in the profit motivated threatening 'Other' that was constructed by the opposing coalition to strengthen resolve and structure the format of opposition narratives. In this context, the potential for constructive debate about legitimate difference is curtailed by the bipolar flattening of political space into insiders and outsiders (Winther and Svendsen, 2012) through a logic of

equivalence that supresses complexity and multiple viewpoints by projecting a sense of 'sameness' onto all those perceived as one's opponents. This is frequently indicated by use of the prefix 'rural' before 'community', 'landscape' and 'environment' (refer to Table 1).

<Insert Table 1 about here>

These discursive processes thereby generate an elemental impasse in the debate: *realising the objective of one coalition inherently negates the other*. Thus, from the perspective of the opposing coalition, to build these windfarms imposes an injurious disfigured industrial landscape on County Westmeath and its residents, but from the perspective of the supporting coalition, building the windfarms amounts to a multiplicity of economic and environmental benefits. Conversely, from the perspective of the opposing coalition, not to build the windfarms preserves the health and wealth of rural communities, the existing landscape and local environment, but from the perspective of the supporting coalition, comprises a lost opportunity for an array of economic and employment gains.

Notably, the proponents of the wind energy projects (state and economic actors) rarely developed narratives relating to transitions, climate change or obligations (whether moral or emission targets) in advancing their case, instead framing wind energy deployment within a largely economic narrative. This is indicative of the nuances and challenges in developing wider societal support for a post-carbon transition. Research by Jepson et al. (2012), for example, illustrates that acceptance uptake of renewable energy may be separate from wider political support for addressing climate change and reducing carbon emissions. Rather support for renewable projects often results from a convergence of values and practices at the local scale, often aligned with environmental scepticism among local actors – in other words, 'saving the planet' was not a motivation at the local scale.

This paper seeks to highlight that resolving tensions concerning rural futures requires greater experimentation in modes of governing in the present (Phillips and Dickie, 2014) while also locating means to envision a framework for a post-carbon transition rather than

provoking the mutation of understandable friction into knotty stalemates. In this sense, we take inspiration from Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in agreeing with Lysgård and Cruickshank that,

> *The main task of the discursive knowledge produced through the process of planning is…[to] prevent an equivalential logic from ruling out important aspects by referring to…the 'outside' or 'Other' of political space.* (Lysgård and Cruickshank, 2013, 2874)

Accordingly, we maintain that disagreement is an inevitable component of the planning process when debating rural futures in a post-carbon transition. Crucially, we also maintain that realising such a transition without the unwarranted marginalisation of valid perspectives necessitates wedging open the 'black box' of meaning-making in planning debates such that reflective attention to discursive processes enables interlocutors to work through conflict and preserve difference rather than being paralysed by polarised positions.

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[i] For example: the Irish Examiner newspaper reported 'more than 2,000 turbines' on 25 March 2013; the Irish Mail On Sunday newspaper reported between 1,700 and 2,400 turbines on 14 April 2013; The Telegraph newspaper (UK) reported on 06 September 2013 that the number of turbines would be 1,100; while the Irish Times newspaper quoting a senior executive from Bord na Móna reported on 19 February 2014 that the number of turbines would be 'about 1,000'.

[ii] The quasi autonomous non-governmental organisation responsible for harvesting and managing Ireland's peat bogs.

[iii] Intel Ireland is a computer microprocessor manufacturer located in Leixlip, Co. Kildare. It is one of Ireland's largest single private sector employers with approximately 4,500 people working at its Leixlip facility (http://www.intel.ie/content/www/ie/en/company-overview/25-years-of-intel-in-ireland.html).