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EMERALD EXTRACTIVISM: BORDERS, ENERGY, AND DATA INFRASTRUCTURES IN IRELAND

Patrick Brodie
University College Dublin

In November 2020, a video surfaced on Twitter showing the earth moving underneath the feet of a local hillwalker. The video was documenting a massive peat landslide at the border between County Donegal (Republic of Ireland, ROI) and County Tyrone (Northern Ireland, NI), which was caused by the construction of the Meenbog Wind Farm. The planning for the project consists of 19 turbines standing at a height of 150 meters apiece, built on an active bog landscape tucked away in the boggy Bluestack Mountains of Donegal. With the sound of the wind in the phone camera and a low rumbling in the background, a line of trees descended a hillside via a raft of peat, crossing the border between ROI and NI by the very existence of its complex soil, plant, and water ecology. The landslide destroyed a vast swathe of active peat bog, key for Irish state carbon sequestration goals, and polluted a significant watershed which spanned both sides of the border, prompting governmental and legal action from agencies and organizations in ROI, NI, the UK, and potentially future EU involvement.

A key piece of the puzzle, absent from many headlines, was that the Meenbog Wind Farm had in 2019 sold its future energy to global logistics and cloud giant Amazon Web Services (AWS) to power its data center operations in Dublin, well over 200km away from the site of this rural wind farm. There had been significant local objection and controversy surrounding its construction in the first place, as many nearby residents felt as though they had not been properly consulted, their localized ecological concerns seen as naïve or regressive due to the urgent necessity of large-scale renewable energy to decarbonize the country's energy grid. But as Dublin maintains one of the highest concentrations of data centers in the world, primarily from US big tech "hyperscalers" (AWS, Facebook, Google, Microsoft) which have availed of the country's low corporate tax rate, the presence and influence of these companies has been profound in shaping ROI's current energy plans, which need to account for the expected ongoing growth of data centers (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2021). As such, the all-Ireland energy system, serving both ROI and NI, is projected to be put under enormous strain, which will have a knock-on effect on the relatively stable energy projections in the north.

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Data centers are thus clearly a crucial element in how contemporary digital systems are assembled across different environmental and territorial formations, but the extent of their influence on wider infrastructural arrangements and externalities is not yet widely understood. The study of data centers has produced a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of study over the past decade or so. From research on the resource use and politics of data centers (Hogan, 2015), to analyses of the territorial and nation-state politics of data centers (Maguire and Winthereik, 2021; Vonderau, 2019), to the waste economies and externalities of these facilities (Velkova, 2016), researchers have found many paths to make sense of these often black-boxed infrastructures of digital economies. Their capital and energy-intensive operations make them increasingly influential in the distribution of access and infrastructure in the places that they are built. But using site-specific fieldwork amongst objectors to the Meenbog project and discourse analysis stemming from the response to the peatslide and its (non-)relation to AWS' climate responsibility, this paper suggests that data centers are only one part of much wider networks operating across multiple geographies and scales, including their role within renewable energy and climate solutions projects with implications far beyond their data center facilities.

One way of analyzing these territorial and environmental mechanics has been through the framework of "logistical media" (Peters, 2015; Rossiter, 2016). As conceived by Peters and other scholars of logistics and infrastructure (Cowen, 2014), technologies of capital movement and circulation are designed to smooth out spatial barriers and contingencies to ensure the uninterrupted flow of goods and information. Inheriting and developing foundational concepts of globalization and the "annihilation of space by time" (Harvey, 1990), I argue that territorial borders are not made "smooth" by logistical media like data infrastructures. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2019) contend, the confluence of "extraction, logistics, and finance" in the operations of global capitalism means that economies must rake across these often messy and differential industries and their more localized formations. As such, territorial markers like national borders become essential features in the emerging shapes of multinational infrastructural formations as they navigate different environmental and regulatory landscapes, and the timescales of historical territory and environmental systems embedded within the ongoing structures of extractive capitalism inherited by increasingly distributed digital systems.

With these frameworks, and utilizing site-specific fieldwork methodologies amongst objectors to these projects, this paper confronts the construction of the border between ROI and NI through emerging renewable energy and data systems, paying close attention to the environmental politics and disruptions in the expansion of "green extractivism" (Voskoboynik and Andreucci, 2021). Expanding on Mezzadra and Neilson's provocation about the productivity, the "fog and dirt, violence and magic" of contemporary bordering systems (2013), the paper will use the Meenbog example to approach the borders and bordering mechanisms cutting through Ireland as sites of contestation about what present and future extractive supply chains will look like, who will bear their burdens, and who will have a voice in shaping them. Taking a supply chain justice approach to systems of green capitalism facilitated through multinational tech and financial interests (Riofrancos, 2019), the paper confronts the role of bordering mechanisms and their imperial residues in the administration of and resistance to green capitalism in Ireland.

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