

THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA



BLACKOUTS



BORDERS

& BLAME



*Disaster Governance
and Winter Storm Uri*

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ABSTRACT

ON VALENTINES DAY, 2021, A FRIGID WINTER STORM RIPPED THROUGH NORTH AMERICA.

While temperatures dropped, the energy infrastructure keeping millions warm began to crumble as power outages rippled throughout the region. International media attention highlighted the situation in Texas. Meanwhile, garnering less news coverage, a similar energy crisis swept through Mexico, exposing the brittle bones of the state energy infrastructure.

This research explores the political intricacies behind the power outages in Mexico, and asks: who benefits from this disaster? By analyzing regional media about the storm, and implementing theories from contemporary studies in disaster colonialism and energy regimes, this research finds that the State of Mexico oriented disaster governance around the storm to bolster its political power. In the context of a global energy crisis, an alternative energy management system will be needed in the fight against climate change.



INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the rising case numbers during a COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals clung to keep respirators online during Winter Storm Uri. Businesses closed, and families huddled together in their homes waiting for any sign of relief. After three long days, the disaster in Texas caused an estimated \$295 billion in damage, and took the lives of nearly 250 people (Stipes 2021). As a resident of Oklahoma, I spent the duration of the storm crouched over my phone, sorting through the countless stories and tweets from my southern neighbors.

In the middle of doom scrolling, I received a message from a friend in Puebla, Mexico, whom I met on an exchange program the previous year. She was checking in on me to make sure I had electricity. At that point, I was privileged with sustained power, and as a courtesy, I asked her how she was doing. To my surprise, she informed me that her family had been without steady electricity for several days. I checked my weather radar to see if the storm had moved further south than I realized, and yet, it was a warm 68 degrees fahrenheit. Something didn't add up. How had I been online all day, but not read a single headline about the widespread outages across Mexico? I was determined to explore this inequality.

Most can agree that the event of Winter Storm Uri was a disaster. However, the question of what caused the conditions for disaster creates different answers depending on who you ask. This is mainly due to the fact that the disaster experienced in Mexico is circumstantially different from the disaster experienced in Texas.

Over 4.5 million households endured blackouts in the United States for 48 hours, where the storm engulfed the majority of Texas in addition to parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arkansas. In Mexico, an initial 4.7 million households experienced outages that eventually expanded south, affecting a total of 7.9 million over the duration of 72 hours (BBC News Mundo, 2021; Infobae 2021). Despite the lesser intensity of the storm throughout Mexico, the numbers show a significant energy crisis in comparison to Texas. This hints that, in collaboration with the storm, other actors were involved in the creation of this disaster.

Who is to blame for the disaster, and what conditions were in place that elevated its impact nationwide?

At the time of writing, research surrounding the topic is scarce, especially from the perspective of someone living in the United States. Few American news outlets refer to the Mexican side of the storm at all, and details released by state agencies regarding the outages are often critiqued for a lack of transparency.

In terms of blame, articles coming out of the U.S. tend to attack renewable energy or the isolationist-style electricity grid that Texans rely on. On the other hand, conversations in Spanish surrounding the blackout in Mexico were much more complicated, revolving around the fight for energy sovereignty. In the preliminary research for this paper, I sought to find what territorial and political conversations emerged from Winter Storm Uri in Mexico. I asked how these conversations demonstrate centuries of power struggles. What I found is that Winter Storm Uri became a disaster at the hands of disaster governance. When placed under an investigative microscope, the political discourse of Winter Storm Uri demonstrates territorial agendas of neoliberal energy regimes and coloniality.

To explain this thesis, the following paper begins with an overview of the

methods used to develop key findings in the research. Then, I introduce a background section that gives important context surrounding the conditions of the storm across north america, and a brief summary of the electricity grid in Texas that serves as a comparative force. To explain the theories of disaster governance, energy sovereignty, neoliberal energy regimes and coloniality, I present a literature review of current topics. In the body of this paper, I curate a media analysis that demonstrates the theories presented in the literature review. Finally, I conclude by positioning my findings against timely conversations surrounding climate change and a sustainable energy transition.

METHODOLOGY

I employed contextual historical and record-based analysis, where the social phenomena outlined in the records demonstrated behaviors influenced by context and theory. Through newspapers and scholarly narrations, I lay out the political and environmental events leading up to the storm. I collected media and news reports from a database search query that involved a strict timeline of the storm and combined sources in both English and Spanish.

I analyzed existing academic work through direct interpretation. My findings are qualitative in nature, pulling conclusions from the literature, and exemplifying their theories through a narrative retelling of the events of the winter storm. My findings are inductive, relying on the deep colonial history of Mexico and Latin America. I pull from scholarly work to find similarities between academic predictions and quotes from the news media, comparing reactions from Mexico and the United States. I position these quotes alongside scholarly theories regarding coloniality, disaster governance, and energy extraction.

I conducted a literature search within the growing discourse of political ecology. For the purpose of this research, I employ a definition of political ecology that works to “expose the forces at work in ecological struggle and document livelihood alternatives in the face of change (Robbins p. 21).” With this guiding mission in mind, the intent of this review is to understand the timeline of academic contributions in disaster studies that led to the contemporary discourse of disaster colonialism. A multi-perspective search revealed a wide variety of literature synthesizing both geographical and historical trends of interest, where a gap in information also served as proof of

a one-sided argument. The following section is curated to provide important methodological, historical, and theoretical context for further analysis.

BACKGROUND

Winter Storm Uri was not a typical winter storm. Its duration was exceptionally long, and the temperatures in Texas dropped to 40 degrees below the average for the time of year. Near the U.S.-Mexico border, snow fell in areas where it had only been reported twice since 1989, and analysts recorded low temperatures not seen in decades (El Nacional 2021). Reporters called it an “arctic blast” that changed weather patterns for the entire North American Continent (Popovich et al. 2021). The storm moved in on Sunday, February 14th, and lingered for five days until Thursday, February 18th.

The southernmost states of North America were more likely to experience power outages, due to a lack of infrastructural capacity to deal with extreme conditions. However, most were able to recover after a day or two. Alternatively, residents in Mexico and Texas suffered a much longer outage. Their isolation is due, in part, to the fact that both states honor a nationalized, anti-federal electricity grid.

In the United States, there are three electricity grids: one in the west, one in the east, and one in Texas. The grid in Texas is called ERCOT, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, formed as a self-made regulatory entity to keep the federal government out of the business of Texas energy companies (Galbraith 2011). However, without the additional support from other grids, ERCOT quickly fell to Winter Storm Uri. Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, who received over \$26 million in campaign contributions from oil and gas, had motivation to accuse renewable energy as the culprit. He claimed that iced-over wind turbines were to blame for the outages (Weber and Merchant 2021). Critics quickly invalidated this claim, as the President of ERCOT affirmed that the turbines accounted for only 13% of the outages, while the natural gas system was to blame for the majority of outage issues (Chute 2021). The solitary electricity system in Mexico is similar to that of Texas., and they are bound together by a series of international business agreements.

In Mexico, there are 10 regional power grids across the country, all monitored and controlled by the state-owned Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) and managed by The National Center of the

Control of Energy (CENACE). Fossil fuels supply 66% of the total energy generation, while renewables (wind, solar, and hydro) represent about 28% (Zhou et al., 2021). However, Mexico is not an export-based energy industry.

In-state generation only accounts for about 60% of the country's consumption. In 2018, Mexico bought over \$7 billion in fuel from other countries, where 80% of that fuel came from the United States (BBC News Mundo 2021). This relationship has heavy dependency implications over Winter Storm Uri. When the winter storm made its first appearance, and outages began to scatter across northern Mexico, Governor Abbot suspended all natural gas exports during the storm until February 21 (BBC News Mundo, Business News Americas). Interpretations of this act did not sit well with critics on either side of the border.

Despite their infrastructural failure to deliver services during the storm, Texas energy analysts denounced the statement as a purposeful act, instead externalizing the blame onto the cold weather (Villagran 2021). Even with all the fuel imported from the United States, the country has the capacity to store only 5 days worth of natural gas (BBC News Mundo 2021).

Critics in Mexico condemned their government for shifting blame away from their own infrastructural dependency problems, referencing a similar nationwide blackout that occurred throughout Mexico in December of 2020, which affected nearly 10.3 million people.

Accordingly, many began to frame the blackout as a trend, rather than a freak event. In just the first 24 hours of the storm, outages inspired a deep historical and political debate throughout the region. The bulk of this paper is an analysis of this debate, positioning Winter Storm Uri against the theories of disaster governance, energy dependency, and coloniality, to better understand how storms are politicized. To introduce these concepts, a literature review follows.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Disaster Governance

Studying disaster governance from a retroactive perspective helps to understand the framing of the storm as a political entity. Since disaster prevention is reliant on resources that are widely distributed by a central governing source, like electricity or infrastructure, it is impossible to separate disasters from the political implications of its aftermath. Disasters are understood by interpreting the connection between hazard, vulnerability, and resilience.

Originally used in ecology to describe an ecosystem's reaction to changes in the environment, scholars borrowed such terms to understand the impact of disasters on development and governance (Adger and Brown 2009, Kelman et al. 2016, p. 131; Sun and Faas 2018). To give a simplified definition, western literature produces hazards as external forces that ecosystems and human systems must react to, such as floods, hurricanes, volcanoes, or earthquakes (Sun and Faas 2018; Kelman et al., 2016, p. 130). Vulnerability is described as the likelihood that a system may be harmed by such hazards, and resilience is the system's ability to adapt to a hazard (Sun and Faas 2018; Kelman et al., 2016, p. 130). These terms are deceptively simple, and scholars have spent decades in debate over their nuanced meanings and interactions. Spatially, the history of these terms combine to demonstrate an ongoing conversation surrounding the politics of disaster discourse and its place among the creation of the state.

Disaster research encountered a transformative breakthrough in the late 20th century with the emergence of political ecology and environmental justice. Political ecology, loosely defined, is the study of political and ecological

systems as an interconnected network (Robbins 2011). In contrast with the reigning a-political approach of the 1950s and 60s, political ecology directly involves political systems as an essential element of ecology. Under this framework, vulnerability is seen as a condition of political inequality, with its own propensity to create harm (Kelman et al. 2016 p. 131). This theoretical framework helps us establish that disasters are the result of institutional failures, rather than the sole condition of a storm or ecological hazard. Without the assumed destruction and degradation of human systems, these hazards would be seen as a “natural” component of Earth’s systems. In applying this theory to the case of Winter Storm Uri, it is extremely important to see the cold weather hazard as a punctuation of the norm in an already failing system, rather than a force of cyclical unpredictable evil.

Critical scholars combined these concepts to reveal an interconnected climate and social system, often referred to as disaster capitalism (Rivera 2020). They demonstrate the impacts on state-led political economy through the entire timeline of a disaster— from inception to relief (Rivera 2020, Covarrubias and Raju 2020).

This led to the study of disaster governance, that is, the way that states are inclined to manage, prepare for, and frame disasters given their place within global regimes (Tierney 2012). Such concepts help explain states’ behavior towards disaster. In Mexico, the political framing of the storm and its corresponding energy crisis by governing bodies demonstrates the states’ acts of disaster governance.

As cities expand through urbanization, and governments face mounting pressures to combat climate change, the disaster discourse is central to environmental advocacy today (Pelling and Dill 2010). With a strong foundation on critical advocacy through political ecology, contemporary scholars seek a more comprehensive discussion around disasters— one that centers the ongoing presence of systematic oppression and discrimination (Rivera 2020, Covarrubias and Raju 2020). In addition, as we begin to experience an increased extremity in ecological hazards due to climate change, the gap between human and earth systems is closing. Now, disaster governance can more clearly be seen as a cyclical human issue, rather than a reactive policy to an event outside of our control.

With a growing impact of disasters, further stress is placed on the government of infrastructural energy issues. The case of Winter Storm Uri demonstrates this consequence, allowing us to see the full spectrum of climate disaster.

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B. Disaster Colonialism

As a political mechanism, disasters have a long history of manipulation that must be addressed, as it is this historical framework spearheading disaster discourse today. In her discussion surrounding hurricanes in Puerto Rico, Danielle Zoe Rivera (2020) stresses the importance of recognizing disaster colonialism as a guiding perspective for disaster studies, because it addresses the historical gap in the discourse. Rivera asserts that by analyzing the colonality of disasters—long term colonial behavior and consequences— scholars integrate relentless cycles of prejudice (Rivera 2020).

Therefore, disaster colonialism is the principal analytical theory present in this research.

In the context of the disaster discourse, Rivera defines colonialism as, *“a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire (Rivera, 2022, p. 127).”* In simple terms, colonialism is a system of unequal power. Rivera makes the distinction, however, between colonialism and colonality. If colonialism is the system, then colonality is the behavior enforcing the system. It is the action behind the outcome— the extractive practice that deprives postcolonial societies from sovereignty. From a traditional understanding of colonialism, imperial states act as a foreign puppeteer of domestic institutions, labor, knowledge production, culture, and media (Rivera 2022, p. 127; Sun and Faas 2018, p. 4). However, by looking at the behavior of colonality, the researcher extends their perspective from a static, passive scope, towards an inclusive, progressive view of the socio-ecological landscape created by colonialism.

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Positioning disaster research around coloniality is key for studying disaster in Latin America. As this thesis demonstrates, the footprint of colonialism continues to dig its heel in Latin America through processes of development and changes in political regimes.

Vulnerability, one of the core concepts of disaster studies, permeates as a symptom of coloniality (Pereira Covarrubias and Raju, 2020, p. 226; Rivera 2022). Unequal power structures enforced by post-colonial governments in Latin America actively withhold access to safety, where the technological and financial ability to provide full protection is often available.

With the presence of hazardous conditions, marginalized communities experience a higher propensity to suffer from the impact of a hazard (Pereira Covarrubias and Raju, 2020, p. 222). These power structures are the repercussions of longstanding colonial power relations. However, coloniality grows outwards from its institutional origins and transforms into new behaviors of extraction.

As we trace the colonial origins and behaviors of disasters, we can clearly see the political roots of disaster studies. We observe that disasters punctuate the norm and challenge the status quo.

Disaster management reveals hidden state agendas and exposes domestic and international systems of colonial inequality. To demonstrate this relationship, NGOs have rebranded “natural” disasters as humanitarian disasters, because it is the human response to the external destruction of a shared safety net that causes the extremity of a disaster (Pelling and Dill 2010). However, a political approach to the disaster discourse requires a critical look at any way that disasters are framed in the literature— especially by NGOs and other humanitarian organizations.

Coloniality is further threaded through the neoliberal policy of disaster risk management (DRM), which has been recognized as one of the detriments of failed development programs from the Global North (Pereira Covarrubias and Raju, 2020, p. 221). DRM programs were implemented throughout Latin America by multilateral development institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations (Pereira Covarrubias and Raju, 2020, p. 221). In their position within Latin America, these institutions implemented extractive growth-oriented projects, proposed as a cooperative way to alleviate poverty and create investment incentives.

However, industrialization not only failed to provide economic independence, it also led to a disruption in the ecological processes of earths' systems, therefore inducing more hazards and disasters (Pereira Covarrubias and Raju, 2020, p. 221). Understanding the embedded historical framing of disasters in Latin America gives an essential background for interpreting contemporary disasters, like Winter Storm Uri. It helps us to see ongoing behaviors of oppression and inequality, an essential skill for developing a path forward.

C. Energy Regimes

Finally, we must talk about energy. The introduction of energy into the disaster discourse is a question of resource accessibility. As explained in disaster governance, the state participates in the creation of disasters by curating hazards towards their political agenda. In the case of winter storms and extreme weather, hazards and vulnerability are created through the unequal distribution of energy. Kelman et al. explain, *"the cold becomes a hazard only because vulnerability exists in the form of inequity and poverty (Kelman et al., 2016 p. 132)."* In other words, since the state has the technological ability to provide heating for all, their failure to equally distribute

reliable electricity creates a hazard and sets up the system for vulnerability. A question then arises in the literature: why does the state create such situations, and how do they go about justifying it?

In answering this question, the literature emphasizes the importance of recognizing the state as a product of diverse construction (Ferguson 2002). Knowledge production of the power and purpose of the state are threaded through similar discussions of interrelated factors that do not exist in a vacuum (Ferguson 2002). Basically, it's complicated. Therefore, disaster colonialism begs a greater understanding of the concept of the state, and how processes of governmentality are formed through colonial relationships. For the purpose of this research, the scope of this review is narrowed to the case of energy production in Mexico. Under this pretense, my search revealed an ever-changing energy and electricity regime across the country.

From the time that electricity was introduced into Mexico in the 1880s, it was a highly contested resource tossed between the state, the private sector, and international actors (Castrejon-Campos et al. 2022). A study by Castrejon-Campos et al. on the history of electricity in

Mexico helps to demonstrate the ongoing coloniality of related policy, whereby the alternating ruling state and the United States extract electricity resources as a performance of statecraft (Castrejon-Campos et al. 2022).

Such processes are described in the literature as “state spacialization” creating a “resource-state nexus” (Ferguson 2002, Bridge 2014). From these perspectives, energy reform awards power. The administration under President Lopez Obrador had recently rolled back on the privatization of the energy sector led by former President Enrique Peña Nieto, and was building back infrastructure to nationalize energy in Mexico (Villigran 2021). This back and forth is just the surface of a century-long fight for energy and electricity autonomy over the past century.

As Castrejon-Campos et al. (2022) demonstrate, changes in political leadership often mean an overhaul of the energy sector in Mexico. Combined with a dependency on U.S. energy, this constant remodeling of the energy system has left the grid vulnerable to shock (Zhou et al., 2021). This relationship is documented in the literature as a cycle of blame towards a contemporary trend of neoliberal reform, structural adjustment, and the

change of political regimes (Castrejon-Campos et al. 2022, McAfee & Shapiro 2010, Rodriguez-Robayo 2022, Covarrubias & Raju 2020) . Understanding energy as a fluctuating apparatus for power is essential to the geopolitical research of disasters in Mexico.

Combined with an analysis through the lens of coloniality, the literature provides a well-defined path of investigation of the politicization of Winter Storm Uri. Primary news articles are presented in the following body of this research. With the careful integration of such findings, I show how the Mexican state and the United States guided disaster discourse around Winter Storm Uri towards their colonial and political authority.

RECIPE FOR DISASTER: THE STATE'S RESPONSE TO WINTER STORM URI

A. Colonial Trust Issues

Political regimes socialize disasters to further their colonial agendas. Governments frame disasters as a singular, out of control event that is to be dealt with after the damage is done. In doing so, they gain credibility for their response to the disaster, and create vulnerability in affected populations (Pelling and Dill 2010).

In Mexico, Winter Storm Uri was used by the government to advocate for the nationalization of power. This was accomplished through a carefully crafted response through media and disaster governance. The public was largely informed through a series of tweets, social media campaigns, and press releases about the event. However, the national approach at distributing energy information was already a controversial topic.

In December of 2020, just two months before Winter Storm Uri, 10.3 million people experienced a power outage across Mexico. At the time of writing, the cause of the outage is still under debate. The Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) asserted that the power failure was the direct result of a random wildfire in Tamaulipas. However, the Coordinator of Civil Protection in Tamaulipas argued against this story, presenting an alternative blame on the overall reliability of the national grid (Zhou et al. 2021). According to state sources, the fire caused a disruption that cut off the natural gas pipeline supply to 16 different states.

Confusion surrounding the issue resulted in a slew of apologies by state agencies (Zhou et al. 2021). President Lopez Obrador promised after the outage that it would never happen again, promising to “rescue” the CFE which has been “plundered” by former administrations (Spanish Newswire Services 2021). Amid the damage control following the blackout, President Obrador Lopez took the opportunity to introduce his reform package for the CFE, notably investing in state-owned renewable energy (Spanish Newswire Services 2021). This event demonstrates a trending behavior of coloniality, which set up the environment for skepticism when Winter Storm Uri came around. Simultaneously, it reveals the motivation behind disaster governance– they are looking for ways to justify their policies, instead of tending directly to vulnerable communities. Citizens of Mexico were familiar with an unreliable perception of the state that is voiced in frustrated comments and retweets on social media. Influenced by the December outage, the following sections outline the timeline of the state response to the energy disaster following Winter Storm Uri.

B. Outage Overview

When the storm descended into Mexico, meteorologists reported temperatures from -15 to -10 degrees Celsius in the northern states of Durango, Nuevo Leon, Chihuahua, and Coahuila (News EFE 2021). As the pipes froze on Monday, 4.8 million utility customers lost power. In just a few hours, over 23 states were reporting power outages, with an estimated 5.9 million customers affected (BBC News Mundo 2021). In response, the head of the Ministry of Energy, Rocio Nahle Garcia and CENACE released statements requesting that residents conserve energy:

“Turn off the lights that aren’t being used, disconnect electronic devices that are not required, close curtains and blinds to conserve heat, and reduce or turn off non-essential production processes.” (Translated from Spanish, Agencia EFE 2021)

By Tuesday, over 32 states and 7.9 million had been affected by the outages (BBC News Mundo 2021). This was the result of a decision to distribute “rotating and random outages” to southern states, to aid in the restoration of power in the north. The outages occurred between 6:00pm and 11:00pm across the states of Jalisco, Michoacan, Nayarit,

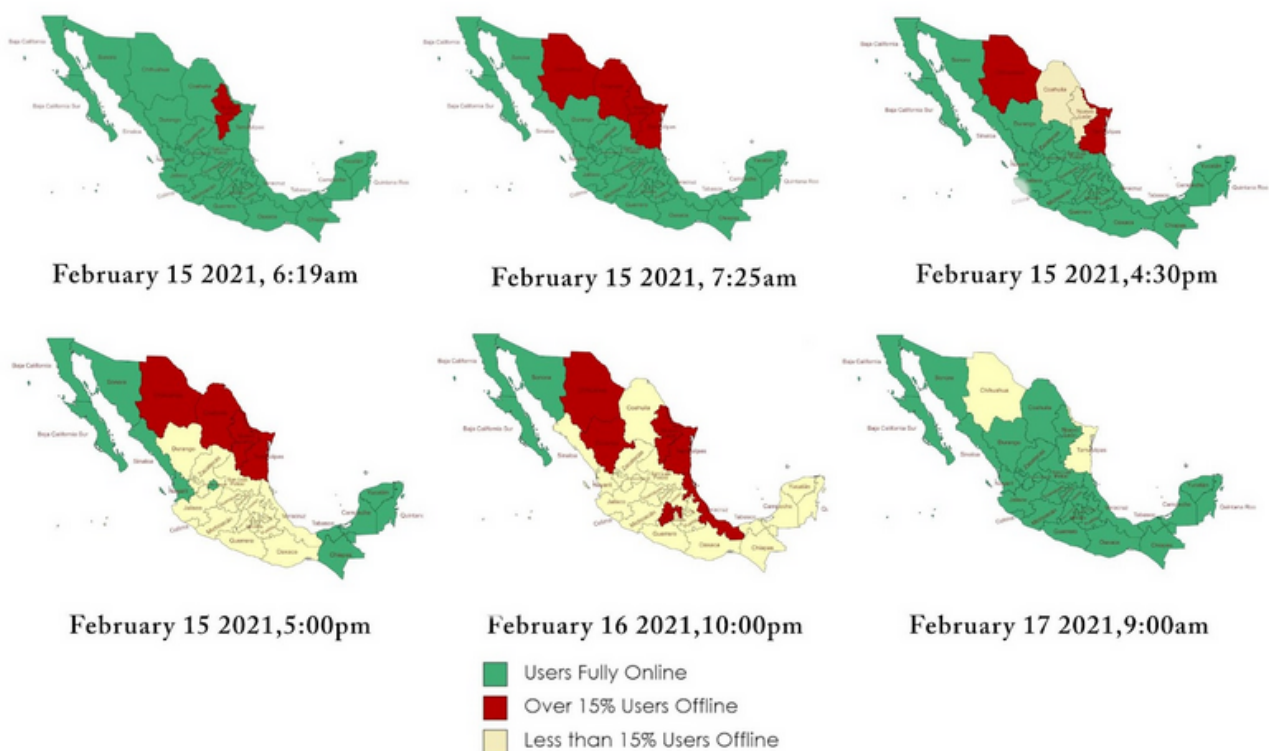
Puebla, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Colima, and the State of Mexico (EFE 2021). Without the infrastructure and gas supply to support the few states experiencing bitter cold, the entire country faced instability due to Winter Storm Uri.

In between politicizing the storm to support nationalized energy and asking citizens to reduce their consumption, President Lopez Obrador offered few tangible solutions. He explained at a press conference that he was going to buy shipments of natural gas to be injected into the fuel tankers, and ordered an increase in the national generation of other forms of energy, like coal and oil (BBC News Mundo 2021; Business News Americas 2021). However, by this point it was already too late for many.

In a report by the National Council of the Maquiladora and Export Manufacturing Industry, a reported US\$2.7 billion was lost due to the rolling blackouts, owing to a complete halt in production (Business News Americas 2021). They estimated that for each hour of outage, 200 million dollars were lost (News EFE 2021). Apart from the Maquiladora industry, countless other businesses and offices closed to wait out the outage, effectively putting a pin in the economy.

On the final day of the outages, the state held a press conference with the President and other agency leaders. There, they explained the outages in detail, mapping the progression of the blackouts and tracking their progress. Throughout the presentation, the focus of the blackouts was shifted towards the storm itself and the country's dependence on the United States, rather than the infrastructural issues within Mexico. Below is a recreation of the maps they provided in a powerpoint during the press conference on February 18 (AMLO 2021).

Mapping Outages February 14-17 2021



Gobierno de México [@GobiernoMX]. (2021, February 18). En menos de 72 horas [Tweet].

Twitter. <https://twitter.com/GobiernoMX/status/1362479609539887105>

1. Framing Nationalized Energy

As shown by the history of energy regimes in Mexico, the administration under President Lopez Obrador had the colonial precedent to maintain state power and reputation. Throughout the blackouts, state agencies reframed the disaster to benefit policy plans in two ways: 1) a financial decision, and 2) an example of private and export-based dependency. This section demonstrates these acts of disaster governance as a form of coloniality.

c.1 Financial Decision

In a press conference, President Lopez Obrador blamed both the severity of the storm, and the rising cost of fuel. He cited a CFE report that the price had risen 5,000% due to the winter weather (BBC News Mundo 2021). In response, American analysts were quoted saying that, since their electricity industry is nationalized, Mexico simply didn't want to pay for the extra energy, titling the rolling blackouts as an economic decision to save money (Villigran 2021). This criticism was shared across the border as well, but fails to consider the international complexity of this issue.

Analysts within Mexico made similar arguments, claiming that the state-owned

energy company, Pemex, has always made economic decisions over socio-economic decisions, tying in the country's dependence on U.S. energy (BBC News Mundo 2021). State agencies retorted, ensuring that Pemex is publicly owned, and therefore, its goal is to distribute fair prices (EFE News Services 2021). In an attempt to highlight the precedence of these kinds of financial decisions from former administrations, President Obrador Lopez is quoted in his press release, saying:

"We need to be self sufficient, to be prepared for any emergency. For many years no plan to extract gas was put into practice. We have gas in the country but they didn't care because the business was to buy gas because the 'moche" (bribery) was involved in buying gas (Translated from Spanish, AMLO 2021)."

By navigating the complex financial decision as a symptom of corruption, the state demonstrates a trend of coloniality while externalizing its current behavior to excuse their creation of vulnerability. They are actively criticizing the system that they are perpetuating through a promise of reform.

c.2 Private, Export Dependency

One of the first statements released by

President Lopez Obrador concerns the intent of the blackout. In framing the outages to craft a story surrounding his policy offenders (private companies, international energy suppliers), he assured the public that the outage was not a boycott (Spanish Newswire Services 2021). By opening this can of worms, he invited a swath of criticism from a variety of political standpoints.

As conversations formed regarding the blackout's relationship with the conditions in Texas, questions arose regarding whether the outages were an intentional move by the U.S. to limit power to Mexico. Soon thereafter, the state began making diplomatic moves to prevent a full suspension of power. President Obrador Lopez assured that it was not a purposeful "retaliation," but that the country's dependence on Texas was a big part of the problem (EFE News Services 2021). This dependence is the topic of many other news reports as well.

Alongside President Obrador Lopez, other agencies tapped into the common narrative. In a press conference, Miguel Reyes, the Director of CFE blamed previous administrations for their commitment to creating dependence on American natural gas (EFE News Services 2021). Meanwhile, from the Ministry of

Energy, Rocio Nahle Garcia said:

"We have a large infrastructure that is dependent on natural gas and, today we realize that there was a great dependency on gas that was contracted in the United States." (Translated from Spanish, Agencia EFE 2021)

They framed the outage as a historical dependency problem, completely externalizing their position in the ongoing act of colonial statemaking.

The President offered long term solutions in the form of "consolidating the CFE" and "recovering state owned companies" (BBC News Mundo). He outwardly blamed former governments for supporting private companies and "abandoning" the national energy industry (BBC News Mundo 2021). With the narrative on his side, he explained the need for "energy sovereignty" in Mexico, where the pathway forward was through the growth of Pemex and CFE (Agencia EFE 2021). However, critics were unsatisfied with the ideological nature of the President's resolutions.

A news monitor from the BBC found that media critics throughout Mexico disliked how the government put an "ideology of inexperience, dogmatism, and decision making absent of technical criteria" at the forefront of the press coverage

surrounding the energy crisis (BBC Monitoring 2021). Concerns align with a frustration related to coloniality, in that by pushing the blame of the disaster on to the neoliberalism of the past, they are excusing behavior that continues today. The BBC reports :

“If the Lopez Obrador government continues to be determined to fight clean energy sources because it considers them to be spawned from neoliberalism, we are going to end up giving the customers more power interruptions, poor quality of services, high costs in their bills, and we as a country will be less productive. (BBC Monitoring 2021)

Such interactions show the existence of an ongoing colonial controversy, where the historical reign of alternating energy regimes has left the public without a trustworthy system. Even through the framing of sovereignty and nationalism, the precedent is simply too strong and drastic acts of transparency will need to be made to restore trust and balance between the governing body and the governed.

CONCLUSION: CONTEXTUALIZING RENEWABLES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

As shown in the media review, the Mexican government's response to Winter Storm Uri is conducive of ongoing colonial behavior discussed in the literature. Every attempt at relaying information to the public was combined with an effort to publicize the state's own reform policy. What's more, the government utilized discourse surrounding dependency to externalize the problem away from the present, instead focusing on the actions of previous administrations. What stands out, is that no matter the administration, the state is all part of the same regime that continues to provide sub-par energy reliability across the nation.

In her discussion of disaster colonialism, Rivera refers to “deep colonizing,” the act of embedding colonialism in everyday procedure (Rivera 2022). Throughout the storm in February and the outage in December, Mexican agencies participated in deep colonizing by continuing a trend of incompetence and secrecy. Most relatedly, Rivera argues that, *“Policies that call for returning to ‘normalcy’ after a disaster are viewed as*

upholding existing social inequities, disallowing any opportunity to radically rethink environmental and social relations.” (Rivera, 2022, p. 129)

The “normalcy” sought by the state was simply a return of power from the same regime that allowed the disaster to happen in the first place. There was little radical thought as to how to reverse pre-planning failures and return true energy “sovereignty” that doesn’t center the state.

Without a clear path forward, disasters that are so heavily involved in the actions of the state have heavy implications in the face of climate change. Climate scientists have long warned of a heightened extremity in hazards as weather patterns become less predictable. Owing to emissions of globalized capitalism, locations with the geological propensity for storms will suffer more disasters, if such colonial consumption patterns are not greatly reduced (Rivera 2020). In the case of Winter Storm Uri and other energy crises, the issue of renewable energy is framed as an additional act of coloniality, caught up in the bureaucracy of disaster governance. Such events beg the question— if governments can’t find reliable ways to manage energy with natural gas, how can

renewables guide the way into an equitable energy future?

As discussed previously, Governor Abbot of Texas was determined to pin the outages in Texas on unreliable renewable energy. In Mexico, a similar argument was used, instead framing it to return power to the state. In defense of their policy desires to incorporate renewables into the country’s energy regime, they blamed the failure of renewables on the privatization of the renewable sector (Spanish Newswire 2021). To the state, no energy source is progressive until it can be monitored and managed by a federal entity. This is problematic in light of a global imperative to move away from fossil fuels quickly.

This paper demonstrated the ways that the Mexican government used disaster governance surrounding Winter Storm Uri to build the power of the state. Held against the larger picture of contemporary arguments in energy democracy, the state’s involvement in every facet of energy production will not serve as a helpful alternative. In the case of Mexico, Zhou et al. demonstrate that the political regime that has allowed erratic negotiations of energy between the state and private companies has left the country without a solid foundation for a

reliable energy transition (Zhou et al. 2021).

Therefore, it is exceedingly difficult to connect the state's interest in renewables with a true desire for movement away from fossil fuels. For the sake of our planet, a change must occur in the state's governance of energy, alongside a critical discussion of outage disasters that involves thinking outside of the box of the state. It will require the surrender of absolute control in favor of a collective energy system that connects the state with smaller communities of diverse input.

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