INDIVIDUAL PROFILE

BREFFNI LENNON

INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 11, 2020

IS THE FUTURE NOW?

This interview is based on an original recording for the MyEnergy2050 podcast focusing on changes within the energy system. Each expert demonstrates both an in-depth understanding of their core area and also a broader vision of how the energy system changes. The material is useful for both teaching and research. It was created as part of a case study project of the Jean Monnet Chair in Energy and Innovation Strategy at Central European University.

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

BY PROFESSOR MICHAEL LABELLE

Dr. Breffni Lennon is a senior postdoctoral researcher in the Cleaner Production Promotion Unit at University College Cork, which is based in the School of Engineering and an affiliate centre of the university's Environmental Research Institute. He is a human geographer researching the social, cultural and economic dimensions to climate change, and the energy transition.

1

Can you describe your background and how did you end up at the Environmental Research Institute at the University of College Cork?

I'm a geographer by background. I like this field for the idea of maps and space and people's relationship with the environment--they were very informative for me. My PhD research looked at the renewable energy policy in Europe and was looking at how that translates from the supranational, to the national, down to local and then how actions at the local level actually feedback up and impact on those supranational policies.

2

What year did you do this?

I finished my PhD in 2012. I was looking at the period from the 1990s up to 2012. So, particularly renewable energy policy was looking at wind energy at a European level. That was the big focus. And I was trying to unpick some of the processes and what happened there and how people reacted, because it's very much similar to what's happening today. People have a very positive view of renewable energy and ideally, we want to have this carbon-neutral economy and we want to tackle climate change. But then when it comes to the local level, and what actually is happening. And I think a lot of the time, the debates were informed by NIMBY--that it was NIMBYism and all of this--and it was very dismissive of actual genuine local concerns that people had. And they were not necessarily around the technology, per se, or the actual siting of the turbines, it could be other factors, but also those as well. So, there was all that feeding into my research.

3

I would like to talk about the ENTRUST Horizon 2020 project, which we began to talk briefly about. Can you provide a bit of a background to this? Because this is where the idea and the concept of energy citizenship are explored. And maybe provide a background to the whole ENTRUST Project.

The ENTRUST came out of a research application that Dr Niall Dunphy did for Horizon 2020, and it was looking at the idea of how people respond or understand 'energy' and the energy system. How the energy infrastructure that we have all around us is very ubiquitous, we barely notice it. So it was trying to unpick those understanding and those relationships, and very much from the bottom-up. We were taking a very intersectional approach. There was no right answer, we weren't being experts telling them these are the solution, or these are the problems. We were very much going in and saying, "Oh, what problems have you got? And how do you understand energy?" It generated interesting discussions in the communities that we engaged with, there were some unexpected things as well and it was good. It was a very dynamic project and it generated a lot of academic and intellectual discussions amongst the research team as well. We had a broad range of partners from across Europe, and that was very good as well. It's simulated debate. In many ways, it reflected the multidisciplinary team that we have, and that was also reflected in the project because we were working with SMEs, we were working in local communities that had very different experiences. There was an eco-village in Paris, it was described as a eco-village, but it was quite a wealthy suburb in Paris, and their experiences compared to say, we were working in Secondigliano in Naples and we were looking at the experiences that they have. And again, there's a spectrum of experience and I think that comes out in the research as well.

4

And how do you think people are going to have their voices heard more? Say, protests in the US. And so, protests are happening, but when we talk about climate change, energy transition protests against coal-fired power plants, all these things are based on mobilizing people. How do we mobilize people now or how will groups mobilize people now?

I'm going to plug some current research that we're doing, a Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) funded project and we're looking at how that how people mobilize either for or against an energy project and how that relates to the energy transition. It's an ongoing project so we're still in the midst of the research and the analysis, but I think the problem that a lot of the discourse sometimes has is that which we have around change and all of that. We tend to focus on say individual or group actions, rather than on the systemic changes that are needed.

I think the systemic changes are the 'elephant in the room' that are not being addressed as much. The example we can give about the protests in the US with Black Lives Matters. People came out onto the streets to protest because they felt very strongly about the issues. But those issues haven't gone away. So, the mobilization itself is only one part of the process and I think it's important for academics and researchers as well, and the actors within the system to recognize that a change needs to occur and occur quite quickly.

5

I think there are other specific case studies you're looking at there in Ireland, in terms of funding.

We're looking at two case studies in Ireland, and we have a one in Austria. The two cases in Ireland engendered a very negative reaction within the communities of both projects there. And they have quite interesting geographic and socio-cultural, and socio-economic, and socio-political context to those as well. So, at the end of the day, they're both historical examples. They were quite informative on how people say, mobilized against those two particular proposals for example.

6

What projects were they?

One of those was the Corrib gas field and there was a pipeline proposed there during the 2000s. The view that was taken by those developing the project was very much in a traditional role. And the concerns of the local people weren't really factored into the planning or the implementation of the project. So, it created a lot of controversies and in a way informed a lot of thinking post the project as well in terms of how the government reacted, say for example national government and the state, and how it involves itself in these types of infrastructural projects. So, there are a lot of interesting questions emerging from this work.

7

So, the gas pipeline, for example, that wasn't built?

Yes, it was built in the end. One of outcomes was the original pipelines that was proposed was in a more dangerous area and there was local knowledges there saying that "if you build it there, you're going to have significant problems, and it's going to cause danger to the local community." So, where it was eventually put in there were still a lot of people from the community who weren't happy with the development. It still went ahead, but what they did manage to do was make it a safer project, from those protests. And then there the other project in Ireland is looking at a pylon plan for 400 kilovolts running from Cork through to Kildare and it was going through a number of counties with communities with different socio-demographic backgrounds. Again, they present an interesting difference in that they are a lot closer to Dublin, so their connection to the seat of power was closer, whereas for Corrib the community was very much on the periphery. And so, it was more difficult for those mobilizing to engage with centers of power, around Dublin say. So, there was an interesting difference there between the two.

8

How did you break apart the power dynamics?

Well, it's with the discussions. We were talking to the locals and we've been doing a lot of desk-based research as well. It was actually an interesting one, with Corrib one of the participants there received the Goldman Environmental Prize at the time, which highlights the work of environmental activists and is based in California. They recognized the importance of Corrib at the time, and it was a case study that generated a lot of media online as well, there was a website for it stuff like that. There was a lot of debate I remember at the time and subsequently as well. So, was in many ways a 'new' protest and in a lot of ways. It wasn't just walking the streets, it was online, it was engaging with media, there were all those aspects as well.

9

So, they were able to elevate the profile.

They struggled. They did struggle, but they were able to elevate it. And I think it engaged a lot of different sections of society as well. So, you had musicians, there were documentary movies made of the protest. All these things came into it as well and it did mobilize groupings within Irish society that maybe had been a little bit dormant for a while up until then.

10

And did that project go ahead or was it canceled?

With the pylon project? That was cancelled in the end. They [the developers] decided to change the approach they were going to take, so that didn't go ahead in the end. The Austrian example that we're looking at, that was a more positive experience. It was a solar panel project where they were looking at, the local community and the local government, a municipality there in Austria, were looking at developing a more inclusive way of using the facilities that they had already. So the public buildings that they had, they developed solar arrays on those buildings, but they also then created a facility whereby local people could also invest, even if they had a small amount of money because like say the Anglo-American experience, which happens in Ireland too, is that you need deep pockets to make any sort of investment. Whereas the Austrian example was a little bit different. If you had 100 euros, you could invest and get some money back or if you had 100,000. So, it was more equitable in a lot of ways. And so it was more positively received as a result. It's been an interesting one as well.

11

You said in the beginning, looking at the systemic change, systemic shift, and what are these case studies then demonstrate over how to change the system as a whole?

When we talk about systems, it can be quite an amorphous term. But I think it does demonstrate that the traditional approaches to community engagement haven't worked. And while in previous energy transitions, that was fine because people didn't have a voice so people just had to get on with whatever experience it was--whether it was coal powered station or a hydroelectric dam or some other important area--people had to leave their villages or towns or whatever to facilitate that.

There's also I think, one of the things that the push for wind power in the 2000s was that it built up a body of people in societies now that are experienced in protesting, and have an understanding of the processes and understand the systems that are there. From that level they're there and they're not going away, and they're going to be actively engaged. And I think for systemic actors, say like the State and energy incumbents and all that, there does need to be more of an emphasis on participatory engagement and not just the tokenistic "we're informing you and this is what's going to happen, and we're the experts. Thanks very much, now we're going to get on with it."

12

If there's a protest against a project, then the supporters of the project accuse these protesters from being outside the community, they're agitators, and they're getting the local people stirred up. How do you work through the local protests movements to understand how grassroots they are?

I think from the discussions I had with the local people, say in Corrib for example, they were very mindful that it was their protest. It wasn't outside people and that can be a strategy. They were aware that that could be a strategy on the part of those promoting the project, that it wasn't the local people, that it was outside people that are influencing this (protest), and they were very mindful of that. So I mean, I think one of the things I think the ENTURST project demonstrated to us is that people are far more aware of the situations that impact their lives than we would often give them credit for, or that they are getting credit for.

And I think that scenario, that presentation of outsiders in the protests, and yes while it does happen, there's also an element of the nimbyist dismissing of genuine local concerns. So, I think that we have to be careful, I suppose and again, it's all about language and presentation. And like for local people a lot of the time their access to the narrative--the popular discourse--is very limited. Whereas, say energy incumbents and the like, do have considerable resources and access to existing media and everything that can drive those narratives. So, I think it's when you talk to local people and unpick some of that, like they were very aware of that. And they were very much "no, this is our protest, and we will take the information – that if you have experience or information that can inform us – we'll take that on board, but this is very much our own.

13

What is the role of an energy citizen? This term is being used more by the European Commission. How do you examine and explore the concept?

I think as the research is being developed, it brings it into the idea of energy citizenship as well. You as part of being a citizen, you have rights and responsibilities, but you also have intersecting levels of access to power. So not every citizen is created equal, let's put it that way. And it's the same idea with energy consumers. The idea of being a consumer and having agency or power is quite ludicrous because you're only given a choice A or choice B of the same type of product that's created in the same area, using the same manufacturing materials and infrastructures and everything else. So, it's not necessarily, I suppose, a lot of the time choice is a big thing and I think that a lot of time it's the one thing that's always being removed in a lot of the discussions.

I mean, like the people that we were speaking to regarding Corrib, say, for example, like they're not afraid nor are they against gas, per se. I mean, they were saying, "we're modern people, we use gas, you don't mean we, of course we want the benefits of modern existence. But we don't want to endanger our community by having a pipeline that will potentially explode amongst the houses and dwellings that we have here".

So, these are the issues that were being asked and being raised by the community, and the answers that they got were not satisfactory. So, the idea of having a participatory engagement, it does need to take on board the concerns and often valid contradictory perspectives. Now, it's not always the case, there are not always valid reasons. But in the majority of cases there are and people generally speaking are quite rational and engaged in a lot of ways especially in how things affect their lives.

14

You set up a, let's say, a dialectic argument there or position in a sense. It's interesting because, we've been talking about the supply-side things, supply-side infrastructure projects. And then when we talk about the agency of people, and I like what you said about not everyone's created equal and, in a sense, right? We could say even consumers themselves are not quite equal. So, that brings us to think about the demand side of it, and energy efficiency projects, the how people live. And how from, from your experiences. Does energy poverty play out in these communities? Or is it addressed? Rather than just supply side.

It's an interesting one, because I think when you talk to people it is very much focused on how they live their lives, while energy is not considered in such comprehensive terms. Okay, so a lot of discussions that we have around energy are quite middle class and how we frame the world. It's very much framed in that sense. Say if I go and buy a new piece of electrical equipment, I'm looking at whether it's A-rated or B-rated or whatever, so I'm getting efficiency and I feel good about that. But then that ignores the huge amount of carbon that has gone into creating that new product, rather than continuing on and fixing maybe the old products that I have. So, all these kinds of questions do need to be asked. We did an exercise where we had different scenarios where like we had a working-class individual who burns coal, has a coal fire. And we then had a middle-class person who eats goji berries and does Pilates and all of that, but then flies to California like twice a year. This type of thing. So, it was looking at the whole picture, whose carbon footprint is bigger? When you say or hear coal, okay, it's like oh my god this is awful. But then when you talk about how much carbon is used in aviation it skews it back. So I mean, even though we might think of our lifestyles as being positive and more carbon-neutral and we're doing our best, we often ignore the other systemic streams of carbon that are coming in to create that lifestyle and that's something I think we need to address a bit more.

15

I love that. Sorry. I just want to unpack that a bit more. I love that example of essentially someone that's lower-income and they have to burn coal. Not that a rich person doesn't burn coal but, in the sense, they're not able to afford a gas boiler or redo their whole heating system. But rather they just have to use coal to heat their home. But at the same time producing huge amounts of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and just everything. That's bad for your lungs. But at the same time, middle-class family or upper-middle-class flying to Greece, Spain on their vacation. So this is the difference.

Yeah, absolutely. And I think I mean, it was brought home to us on the ENTRUST project as well because we had as an example one of the participants gave where there was a community in the UK and they had switched from a traditional oil-fired heating system. It was a tower block and it was oil-fired, and they switched over to more renewable sources. But, whereas before with the old system occupants were able to pay a fixed rate and then that was it. So, they were able to budget the rest of their income or their outgoings for the rest of the week. So, there were like I said, they had X amount for heating, okay, that's great. I can live off this bit. Whereas when they put in the renewable energy heating system, they changed the way people were actually charged. So, they were charged on a per-use basis. And then because of the inefficiencies in the building, it was built in the '60s, people eren't actually able afford to heat their homes anymore, because the cost of heating became so high. So, people were actively having to think about whether "do I pay for shopping this week, or do I pay for heating?". This had a significant impact on people's lives, not on whim but on a slight decision that was made that you wouldn't maybe see as huge, but which had a massive impact on people's lives.

Like, one person described a resident coming into a food bank and they had potatoes, and they had vegetables and all of that there. But the man came in and he says “I can't use these”. He didn't have enough in the meter to cook the potatoes and the vegetables, And people were scratching their heads and asking why was he so rude, because he was getting quite agitated. And he was saying, “look, I can't use these. Because he can't actually afford to cook them. There are these issues that we don't always know and that we do need to unpack, and as policy makers or as researchers on how policy impacts, those types of factors are very important.

16

From a technical point of view, yes, everyone should change to solar and wind. There is a lot of discussion in the Netherlands, moving to like electric heating and getting rid of gas, but at the same time, at a very human level consumer. It's another human being. How do they live and what can they afford? The system needs to fit towards their finances as well.

I think that's it, and intersectionality very much informed and continues to inform my research. We have very intersectional experiences and as a white, middle-class male we do own our privilege and we must acknowledge that. But that changes. Those intersectional power relations that we experience in life change over the course of our lives as well. So while we may have relative privilege now, we might have less later when we are maybe say older and have infirmities or something to deal with. So the power does change, and those experiences and those relationships change and can change daily on a daily basis. So, I think it's just to be mindful of that as policymakers, I think that's one of the things that does need to be brought in more as we transition. At the moment, like the emphasis has been on renewable energy, and I'm all for renewable energy don't get me wrong, but it's how that renewable energy is then distributed and shared. And what rights people have and what access to resources people have of that energy because all that's changing is the type of energy and the technology, not the actual the social and political inequalities that continue to be there. So, I think that's something that we need to unpack a bit more as we go forward.

17

You have article about bicycles and bicycle-sharing, but you bring in the Jevons paradox. And maybe I think this goes along with it. I was wondering if you could expand on what that means. It ties into the society and type of technology we use.

I think it's just the whole idea that as we power down in terms of the devices we use – needing less electricity or less energy to operate – we're creating more of them. So, the paradox then being that we, as a society, consume more and I think that that links into wider discussions on consumption in general because the late-capitalist model we have it valorizes consumption. And we have that paradox of when is enough to have a good life. You know what I mean, and the idea of sufficiency and all of these things. Do we need to have the latest x, y and zed to feel good about ourselves? Those type of things. And then if we do need that, we do have to acknowledge the massive stream of carbon and inequalities and injustices and everything else, that have gone into creating that particular technology, whether it's the smartphone and the rare earth exploitation that you have in Central Africa or blood diamonds, or whatever it is. I mean, all those things are very real, and they're very real consequences and I think a lot of the time we're shielded from that. But, to get back to the paradox is that we do valorize consumption, but at the same time, we're tut-tutting individuals for consuming. It's a strange one.

18

Do you think with the use of bicycles and how cities are designed that we are now at a really important turning point?

For urban and rural living. I mean, if you go back to the 1950s, say, in Ireland, bicycles were a big mode of transport for people. The planners who are devising the infrastructure – I'm not blaming planners exclusively rather it was the ideas that informed how they devised those infrastructures. It was a conscious effort to accommodate cars rather than bicycles. I think there is a shift back towards cycling as a healthier mode of transport and as a way of revitalizing our cities as well in particular. But again, nothing is certain. I think that's one of the things that we have to dismiss. The undercurrent we have is a neoliberal idea of “you cannot change market forces, you cannot tamper with these things. These are sacrosanct.” And that's not true. COVID-19 has just shown like how governments can turn on a penny if they recognize the dangers. But we get locked into cycles, and we get locked into life cycles and sort of how you know, we need a car to get to work or we need a car to go get our shopping or whatever. Whereas that's not necessarily the case and I'm all for cycling as well. I think it's a great way to get around.

19

I like how you brought in the infrastructure, essentially for urban planners. The planners were built for the car. Here if you get out to the countryside to the villages and towns, this is how people get to work. This is how people go to the pub, they're essentially like all these people are riding bicycles and in one sense, maybe the reason that's changed In Ireland. But it's also a mode of transport because people can't afford cars. There are other economic financial reasons why bicycles are popular in certain areas as well. So, it's not just the hipster riding their bike to the town. But really, it's also a question of poverty and what people can afford and having this bicycle or scooter, or electric scooter, so all these other modes of transport besides the car for getting around.

Absolutely. But, I think having a bicycle is a sign of poverty when you have a system that's designed for cars. When you have a system or an infrastructure designed for bicycles, then that badge or that symbol of poverty is no longer there. So, I think in the 1950s and 60s, the Netherlands were talking about banning bicycles from cities altogether. In then in the 70s, they switched that around. And there was a huge pushback at the time saying, “Oh, we're not Southern European. Why do we want cafes in our streets? Like, I mean we need cars. That's what they're for.” And look at the Netherlands today. It's very much the second capital of Europe in another way. So yeah, I think it's about challenging established norms and mindsets. And I think just questioning why. Why is that essential? Why is that the way it is? I think that's important for all of us to question.