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Consulting virtue: from judgement to decision-making in the natural gas industry

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Shifts in the terrain of energy politics have given rise to consultant experts who produce and distribute knowledge of energy futures. Drawing on fieldwork at executive roundtables in global cities across North America, this essay examines the consolidation of this form of expertise and the opulent settings in which it is distributed. By exploring the role of aesthetic judgement in market-orientated decision-making, it contributes to anthropological work on elites, expertise, and energy ethics by highlighting the relationship between credibility and luxury. The essay also considers the enrolment of the expert in a kind of virtue ethics, whereby adherence to neoclassical economic principles is taken to be a character trait worthy of emulation. While clients may not look to consultants for advice coded in terms of ethics, I argue that they regard the person-based qualities of consultants as proxies for their ability to recommend a judicious course of action. By adopting this analytic, the essay sheds new light on the confidence that clients place in consultants by drawing out the relationship between depersonalized, quantitative approaches to energy markets and the virtue of the persons who propose them.

In 2002, Ed Kelly was in his mid-forties and senior economist for the consulting firm Cambridge Energy Research Associates. When asked for his advice on energy issues, he would spin tightly knit sentences from memory and would take pride in the weight that others placed on his predictions. Kelly's statements were couched not just in terms of expert advice, but also in terms of a credible disposition. His immaculate features and slightly wooden manner gave me the impression of a man deeply committed to ideals of excellence.

When I first met Kelly, I was the energy co-ordinator for Alaska Governor Tony Knowles and reporting to Larry Persily, Knowles's assistant on oil and gas development. Kelly, Persily, and I met at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, where, earlier that day, Kelly had delivered his latest market forecasts to executives at a Cambridge Energy roundtable event. Established during the California gold rush, the Palace Hotel had provided us with a room large enough to accommodate a chaise longue and Old World-style armoire, while stamped on the hotel stationery was a gilded two-headed eagle with the words 'The Luxury Collection'. We had gathered in this opulent setting to discuss strategies

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2 for promoting a multibillion-dollar natural gas pipeline that would cross Alaska. Ever
3 since the discovery of a large natural gas reservoir at Prudhoe Bay in the 1960s, state
4 officials have harboured fantasies of delivering Arctic gas to lucrative North American
5 markets thousands of miles away.

6 Ethnographic research in contexts such as this one raises a number of questions about
7 the social life of energy extraction. What role do consultants play in the promotion of
8 global oil and natural gas development? What is the nature of consultant knowledge,
9 such that it demands to be conveyed in luxurious spaces like the Palace Hotel? What is
10 the broader context for this form of knowledge production in terms of how industry
11 actors understand energy systems? And, finally, how do answers to these questions
12 offer insights into the ethical dimensions of knowledge production in a domain where
13 reliable information is both scarce and prized?

14 In this essay, I draw attention to a shift in energy planning in the Global North
15 whereby new spokespersons and spaces of knowledge provisioning coexist with older
16 and more established mechanisms for deliberation and oversight. I identify three
17 emergent features of this political landscape: first, the rise of consultant experts
18 who analyse market information to produce knowledge of energy futures; second,
19 the distribution of this knowledge at executive roundtable meetings; and, third, the
20 enrolment of the consultant in a kind of virtue ethics, whereby adherence to neoclassical
21 economic principles is taken to be a character trait of excellence and trust. Taken
22 together, these features suggest a shift in energy planning from calculations based on
23 political judgement to calculations made by economic decision-making.

24 To grasp the meaning of this shift from judgement to decision-making, I draw
25 inspiration from sociologist Lucian Karpik's (2010) account of qualitative and
26 quantitative choices in commodity purchases. For Karpik, certain types of commodities
27 are unique or singular, including wine, artwork, and the professional services of
28 lawyers and psychologists. Such so-called 'singularities' are marked by uncertainty
29 about quality and therefore do not follow the logic of neoclassical economics by
30 which choices are based on equal access to information about market pricing (see
31 Kopytoff 1986). Neoclassical economic theory attempts to explain prices in terms of
32 interactions between supply and demand, given the substitutability of production
33 inputs. On this view, alternative methods of production exist for each commodity and
34 consumers make rational choices between them on the basis of fully transparent pricing
35 (Garegnani 1990: 76; Morgan 2016). In a letter written to Alaska's revenue commissioner
36 around the time of my meeting with Kelly, Cambridge Energy consultants noted that
37 modelling energy market prices in this way means that 'clients can better understand
38 the forces driving the future'. That is, prices explained in terms of the substitutability
39 of factors of production lay bare how significant uncertainties can affect the future
40 strategically.

41 By contrast, purchases of what Karpik calls singularities must be made even when
42 the nature of the product and how it is priced remain a mystery (see Appadurai 1986).
43 Such uncertainty calls for qualitative choices, which depend on a synthesis of values and
44 knowledge and for which judgement is ultimately associated with the notion of taste.
45 Here, Karpik draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), whose work rescued taste
46 from essentialist doctrines of aesthetics and showed how the everyday judgements
47 it entails are structured by the subject's habitus. That is, while taste may present
48 itself as a naturally occurring phenomenon, Bourdieu reveals it to be a hierarchical,
49 classificatory scheme of judgement with social origins, often shaped and transmitted

1
2 through formal education. According to Karpik, judgement – like taste – mobilizes
3 preferences through ‘regulated improvisations’ (Bourdieu 1977: 78) that index social
4 relations as they unfold. Importantly, Karpik grounds this concept of judgement in
5 the judicial system, where legal decisions are handed down on a case-by-case basis by
6 figures who remain personalized.

7 Whereas judgement consists in and is limited by particular points of view, decision-
8 making, for Karpik (2010: 14), is ‘lodged in a system of equivalences’ set up to produce
9 solutions that are not unique but instead substitutable. While judgement is hierarchical,
10 decisions based on economic calculation assume an egalitarian form in which rational
11 choice is available to all through the transparency of the market. Here, proponents
12 of neoclassical economics align themselves with what Cymene Howe (this volume)
13 describes as the political location of free speech: that is, as a kind of critique that selects
14 ‘frankness over persuasion’ (p. XX). Q2

15 The idea that decisionist knowledge or quantification has a significant role to
16 play in displacing the idiosyncrasies of judgement is by no means a new one.
17 Theodore Porter (1995) describes the nineteenth-century application of statistics to
18 such diverse fields as the natural sciences, engineering, and accounting, displacing
19 pre-industrial regimes of discretion and negotiation that favoured local interests.
20 The result, for Porter, is the centrality of expressions of quantification to more
21 and more aspects of society, serving as a kind of historical substrate for the rise
22 of twentieth-century modernism and arguably signalling a threshold of modernity
23 itself.

24 More recent studies of neoliberal governance have also identified a post-war form
25 of decision-making that has had powerful effects in corporate management. Samuel
26 Knafo and his colleagues argue that decisionist knowledge emphasizes quantitative and
27 mathematical precision as an attempt to structure a process in explicit opposition to
28 the privileging of judgement through experience (Knafo, Dutta, Lane & Wyn-Jones
29 2018). These scholars identify insights from game theory and rational choice theory,
30 initially developed by economists working at the RAND Corporation, who model and
31 quantify the uncertain environments in which organizations operate for the purpose
32 of strategic decision-making. Elsewhere (Mason 2006), I connect futures research
33 developed by RAND to first comprehensive programme by the US Energy Information
34 Administration (EIA) for producing forecasts on the nation’s energy supply system. The
35 purpose of the EIA is to generate reliable data and methods and to produce relevant
36 supply forecasts. Here, *reliable* means faithful representation, verifiability, and neutrality
37 for the purposes of financial accounting, while *relevance* signifies information that has
38 feedback and predictive value as well as timeliness for decision-making. Today, analysts
39 from many of the well-known consulting firms, including Cambridge Energy, began
40 their careers as EIA economists.

41 Thus, studying energy consultant practices builds on existing scholarship around
42 efforts to promote decisionist knowledge amidst shifting traditional authorities. In this
43 essay, I argue that the spread of consultant-driven neoclassical economic thought can be
44 explained by two interconnected factors: first, *aesthetic judgement* in establishing luxury
45 as a condition for consultant expertise; and, second, a process of emulation rooted in
46 *virtue ethics* as the mechanism for the uptake of consultant expertise.

47 The growing and perhaps paradoxical importance of aesthetic judgement to
48 decisionist knowledge coincides with a shift over the past few decades towards
49 communicating predictions via new modes of expression for intellectual work. Bourdieu

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Figure 1. The energy salon. (Photo by the author.)

(1984: 152) suggests that new ways of organizing intellectual life through brains trusts and think tanks as well as new institutionalized modes of communication arise among intellectual producers who are ‘more directly subordinated’ to economic demands. Neil Pollock and Robin Williams (2015) argue that industry conferences are particularly important in building acceptance of such knowledge and establishing distinctive formats for knowledge production and consumption. Energy development is one of several industries reliant upon such encounters for the alignment of distinct perspectives (Brown, Reed & Yarrow 2017: 15).

As I demonstrate in what follows, the mobilization of Arctic futures has come to require the provisioning of expertise in particular contexts such as executive roundtables, which take place in luxury hotels, art museums, and other elite spaces (Fig. 1). I refer to these settings, where luxurious lifestyles intersect with the work of energy planning, as *the energy salon* (Mason 2015). My use of the term ‘salon’ is meant to evoke a kind of trading zone where purpose, action, and affect mingle towards both instrumental and unintended ends. In such spaces, judgement does not necessarily entail a concern with the sense of goodness associated with deliberation over a set of possibilities (High & Smith, this volume). In the energy salon, the aesthetics of luxury serve as a ‘judgment device’ (Karpik 2010: 44) for discerning the quality of market information. What clients do with this information is, of course, susceptible to ethical evaluation by different parties. But in the process, the association of energy planning with neoclassical quantification becomes naturalized as a mode of action that is beyond reproach.

A second factor in the spread of decisionist knowledge is that the consultants I came to know fostered communities of interpretation that subscribed to neoclassical market rationality but derived their persuasive force from a kind of virtue ethics. Briefly, virtue ethics is a category of moral philosophy that emphasizes the character of the ethical actor in contrast to other varieties of normative ethics that emphasize rules or ultimate consequences (see van Hooft 2014). To be clear, clients of Cambridge Energy were not

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2 necessarily looking to consultants for advice coded in terms of ethics. Instead, efficacy
3 was their primary overt criterion. But clients seemed to regard the person-based qualities
4 of energy consultants as guarantors of their ability to recommend a judicious course
5 of action. The confidence that clients placed in the consultants was at once rooted in
6 a depersonalized, highly quantitative approach to energy markets and in the matchless
7 singularity or virtue of the person who proposed it.

8 The ethnographic data I present are drawn primarily from debates over Arctic natural
9 gas development, which took place at the turn of the millennium when expectations
10 began to mount about transporting natural gas from the North Slope of Alaska to
11 continental markets. Proposals for a pipeline that could accomplish this task were first
12 considered during the 1970s, when plans for constructing energy infrastructure led
13 to the passage of the Alaska Natural Gas Transportation Act (ANGTA). By the early
14 2000s, though, energy consultants had embraced a growth imperative underpinned by a
15 model of unlimited global gas development. Stoking expectations of dramatic industry
16 expansion, consultants seized on legacy infrastructures like the ANGTA system as the
17 raw material out of which new logics and systems of meaning could be elaborated. By
18 2010, these visions had extended across the Arctic from Alaska to natural gas basins in
19 the Russian Barents Sea.

20 As I demonstrate in what follows, the rise of energy consultant knowledge and the
21 distribution of this knowledge at executive roundtables function to replace political and
22 legal judgements with economic decision-making. The aim of doing so is to establish
23 conditions for making rational choices in a market of large-scale projects. I argue
24 that consultants drive this shift from the qualitative (as reached through deliberative
25 mechanisms like the legislative process) to the quantitative (based on neoclassical ideas
26 of information about price) in a way that is, crucially, routed through the singularity of
27 their own expertise. Consultants go to great lengths to frame markets as a function of
28 relations between energy supply, demand, and price projection, from which competing
29 actors can then make rational choices. If, for Caura Wood (this volume), it is a set
30 of calculative procedures that makes it possible to render the qualities of prospective
31 hydrocarbon sites into imagined economic assets, I argue that energy consultants and
32 their clients take abstraction one step further by investing the qualitative dimensions
33 of judgement in the figure of the expert. Here, the luxury of the executive roundtable,
34 which requires aesthetic discernment to parse and participate in it, also thematizes the
35 discernment that is needed if clients are to align themselves not just with any expert,
36 but with the right one.

37 Has the rise of the consultant expert, who can speak in the name of the market,
38 short-circuited a democratic sense of deliberation and oversight that characterized
39 previous regimes of energy regulation? The nostalgic tone that many of my informants
40 slip into when discussing the pre-consulting era might suggest so. I am wary of
41 romanticizing the kind of turf wars between oil companies and federal agencies that I
42 discuss below, because these power struggles were carried out in the context of more
43 fundamental forms of collusion: the closed-circle, backroom arrangements of public
44 utility officials, industry leaders, legislators, and technocratic elites who presided over
45 much of the expansion of twentieth-century energy systems. Yet, analytically speaking,
46 I am convinced that it is important to describe shifts in the terrain of energy politics,
47 even without a normative stance to fall back on. Such an approach to energy ethics
48 seeks to describe the material and epistemic processes by which the contingent becomes
49 normative and even necessary.

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2 **Of quantities and qualities**

3 Energy consultants like Ed Kelly gained prominence during the 1980s during a period of
4 regulatory transition in North American natural gas markets when a highly integrated
5 industry morphed into one composed of distinct, but interlocking segments. Before this
6 restructuring, pipeline companies moved natural gas from producing areas in Western
7 Canada, the Rockies, and the Gulf of Mexico to consumers on the East and West Coasts
8 of the United States. Under the supervision of federal and state regulators, pipeline
9 companies purchased gas at the production source or well-head, then gathered, treated,
10 processed, compressed, stored, and transported it before delivering it to customers.
11 Today, though, pipeline companies provide only transportation; all other merchant
12 activities are performed by independent companies or by pipeline affiliates subject to
13 the new regulatory mandates of open service.

14 The transition from integrated pipeline service to today's fragmentation has seen
15 the emergence of distinct market segments which provide a host of services along
16 the interconnected pipeline grid system. These segments operate alongside and in
17 conjunction with gas commodity markets and include: gathering and processing;
18 pipeline transportation; marketing and trading; management of market centres or
19 'hubs'; storage; and packaging of gas-related financial instruments. Each exerts an
20 influence on the prices realized by producers at the well-head, as well as on end-use
21 prices paid by consumers.

22 If there is one set of actors that straddles all aspects of today's gas industry, it
23 is marketing companies. Gas marketers handle more than 80 per cent of natural
24 gas consumed in North America. Their activities serve to link the production and
25 distribution of natural gas to facilities like power stations that assemble gas supplies, hold
26 and repackage them as necessary, and make deliveries to a portfolio of gas customers.
27 Competition among marketers, coupled with the opportunity to earn unregulated
28 profits, has created a demand for innovative services. The proliferation of marketing
29 firms has spurred growth and innovation in related activities. The marketers' need for
30 information has, in turn, created robust opportunities for firms such as Cambridge
31 Energy which collect, interpret, analyse, and distribute information relevant to gas
32 buyers and sellers, including information about weather, future prices of gas and other
33 fuels, transactions, demand patterns, storage flows and levels, and much more.

34 Energy consultants rely on abstract models to advance particular market futures.
35 Following Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon (2009a; 2009b), I understand future-
36 making in terms of an interplay of institutions, material entities, socialization practices,
37 and ways of seeing and speaking that serve to establish authority (see also Boyer 2005;
38 Carr 2010). Susanne Wengle (2012), for instance, also frames this interplay in terms
39 of market-shaping phenomena by describing shifts in the Russian power sector which
40 have contributed to a transnational process of cultural evaluation constructed and
41 configured by agents engaged in valuation practices.

42 My initial research in this space was structured by my role as a participant observer in
43 the Office of the Governor of Alaska in Washington, D.C., where I worked on legislative
44 issues related to the Alaska natural gas pipeline project. In this role, I became familiar
45 with Cambridge Energy's Member Executive Roundtable Sessions. Following Peter
46 Adey (2014), such events may be considered elite premium networked environments
47 that take place in expensive hotels located in global cities; I have, over time, attended
48 roundtables in Washington, Houston, San Francisco, Calgary, and Mexico City. At each
49 roundtable, six or seven Cambridge Energy experts give individual talks lasting fifteen

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COLOUR

Impressive Summary

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Which Gas Supplies at What Prices?

	\$1.50	\$1.75	\$2.00	\$2.25	\$2.50	\$3.00	\$3.50
Gulf of Mexico—Deepwater*	OK	OK	OK	OK	OK	OK	OK
Western Canada	X	?	OK	OK	OK	OK	OK
Gulf Coast	X	??	?	?	OK	OK	OK
Mid-Continent	X	??	?	?	OK	OK	OK
Permian	X	??	?	?	OK	OK	OK
San Juan	X	??	?	?	OK	OK	OK
Rockies	X	??	?	OK	OK	OK	OK
Scotian Shelf	X	??	?	OK	OK	OK	OK
Gulf of Mexico—Shelf	X	???	??	?	OK	OK	OK
LNG—Existing & Expansion	X	X	??	?	OK	OK	OK
LNG—New	X	X	X	??	?	OK	OK
Mackenzie Delta	X	X	???	??	?	OK	OK
Alaska—North Slope	X	X	X	???	??	?	OK

Source: Cambridge Energy Research Associates, September 2001

* Drilling continues regardless of cycles

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Handwritten notes on the table:
 - Next to "Gulf of Mexico—Shelf": *Original?*
 - Next to "LNG—Existing & Expansion": *5.5-6.0\$/Btu*
 - Next to "LNG—New": *7-8\$/Btu*
 - Next to "Mackenzie Delta": *How do you estimate the cost of the Mackenzie Delta? It's not a gas pipeline, it's a gas pipeline.*
 - Next to "Alaska—North Slope": *How do you estimate the cost of the North Slope? It's not a gas pipeline, it's a gas pipeline.*

Figure 2. Natural gas supply regions lodged in a system of equivalences. (Reproduced courtesy of the PanArctic Energy Archives.)

minutes each. The expert stands near a wall-screen onto which PowerPoint slides are projected. Clients observe and listen, but also follow along in an agenda booklet that they are issued upon arrival. This booklet contains reproductions of the slides that are being shown by the expert. Often clients scribble notes in the booklet, an activity that I came to understand as an effort to elucidate the relationship between the printed material and its meaning as explained by the expert. The tempo of scribbling would often pick up during Q&A sessions, when clients worked to transcribe points of expert clarification.

In Figure 2, I include an example of my own jottings in an agenda booklet. I do so to illustrate that the printed material itself does not tell the whole story, but requires added-value notations that draw on the singular expertise of the speaker. Clients saw the roundtables as encounters with charismatic individuals and not just conduits of information. As Larry Persily, whom I introduced above, explained it:

You're in a room with people who do this [market analysis] for a living. From that, you get a consensus on where gas supply and demand and price is headed. You get a consensus on what the rest of the world suppliers, users, utilities, are thinking. What are they planning on, what are their expectations, what do they think is going to happen? Because no one knows what's going to happen.

Note the date when the printed graphic was created in the bottom left corner of the page; this indicates the relevance or freshness of data and analysis. The timeliness of Cambridge Energy data series was important in providing adequate and accurate information for market analyses and policy decisions. Price fluctuations impose substantial risk on capital-intensive projects that require long lead times, such as the Alaska natural gas pipeline. Unpredictable pricing was also said to have deleterious consequences for natural gas consumers by increasing the risk associated with the operating costs of natural gas facilities. Restructuring in the industry facilitated the design of new data collection instruments, redoubling efforts by the EIA to assure data quality, accuracy, and timeliness. Cambridge Energy relied on EIA data and often

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2 cited the organization directly. Yet the comparative advantage for getting this data from
3 Cambridge Energy was the firm's ability to repackage it into market-specific analyses.

4 In learning to decode the various symbols and words ('X', '?', 'OK') that are put to use
5 in this chart, the client would become acquainted with comparative cost estimates for
6 various developed and proposed natural gas projects. This chart provides a real-time
7 assessment of the cost of bringing units of natural gas to the marketplace. The cheapest
8 paths for natural gas delivery are listed at the top. So, for instance, both Gulf of Mexico
9 and Western Canada natural gas could be delivered to market at \$2 per thousand cubic
10 feet of gas (Mcf). These sources are listed at this price with an 'OK'. However, at a cost of
11 \$1.75 Mcf, delivering Western Canada gas to market becomes questionable ('?'), while
12 Gulf of Mexico gas remains profitable ('OK'). At the bottom of the chart, Alaska gas is
13 presented as the most costly to deliver to the marketplace. It is shown to be 'OK' only
14 at \$3.50 Mcf.

15 While from a regulatory perspective, these energy regions differ as to how proposed
16 developments might turn a profit, they appear in the chart and at the roundtable as, in
17 Karpik's terms, 'lodged in a system of equivalences' (2010: 14). The basis of equivalence
18 in this case is the relationship between natural gas supply and US energy demand.
19 Most consultants viewed the US gas market as growing incrementally. They would
20 therefore direct clients to protect market prices by avoiding large influxes of supply.
21 Practically speaking, this required an economic environment in which individual supply
22 sources would compete with each other in a sequence of staged developments. From
23 the perspective of officials from Alaska, then, the chart indicated which other sources
24 were most likely to compete with Alaska to fill the incremental gap between North
25 American demand and supply. The development of other supply sources, while it
26 exerted downward pressure on price, also jeopardized the economic fundamentals of
27 demand for Alaska gas.

28 Each roundtable session that I attended lasted half a day and was given a title referring
29 to the corresponding advisory service provided by Cambridge Energy. Clients, who
30 included high-ranking individuals from private firms, government agencies, and other
31 stakeholders along the energy value chain, sat around a U-shaped table and asked
32 questions in polite, rapid exchanges. In the process, they gained and shared new insight
33 about the functioning of energy markets. For the uninitiated, though, the significance
34 of these exchanges, the visual materials they draw on, and their relation to a market out
35 in the world might not be readily perceived.

36 At the beginning of my research, the idea of reducing the future to such an arcane
37 set of symbols and acronyms seemed like a vast simplification. For Cambridge Energy
38 experts and their clients, however, the arrangement of these quantifiable elements served
39 to propel their expertise and its material effects into the future. This is because, as Karen
40 Hébert and Samara Brock (2017) have pointed out, quantification enlivens registers of
41 knowledge and experience. By accumulating individual numbers and interchangeable
42 units, experts can build powerful stories of uniqueness. In this way, the qualitative,
43 forward-looking judgements of energy consultants are visible signs of their associated
44 quantities. Indeed, these quantities and the need to constantly refresh them might be
45 said to reproduce the aura of uniqueness of qualitative reasoning by accelerating its
46 depreciation.

47 Over the course of my work at the Office of the Governor of Alaska, I learned
48 to summarize roundtable sessions. These summaries consisted of three typed pages
49 which addressed whether competing gas supply sources were expected to be developed,

1
2 the time frames of development, and the elements, forces, movers, and uncertainties
3 that favoured or deterred development. I circulated these reports to other officials in
4 Alaska's state government, particularly at the Departments of Revenue and Natural
5 Resources. Looking back at these documents today, I am struck by the emphasis that I
6 was expected to place on the interplay of quantifiable qualities, measurable units, and
7 quantities expressed as value. These data can be understood as crystallized economic and
8 political relations. Quantities, the anthropologist Paul Friedrich (1989: 298) observed,
9 often 'obsess' our informants during periods of historical change because they enable
10 systematic realignments and reorientations.

11 Yet if the stakes of quantification were high for energy market actors, executive
12 roundtable events were spaces where numbers could be curated in authoritative ways.
13 The energy futures on offer at these events were commodities whose uncertain value
14 to a great extent relied on trust. Consider this statement by a strategic planning analyst
15 for the gas marketing firm KeySpan whom I met at a Cambridge Energy roundtable:

16
17 Our company needs to look at prices. We need to have supply for the customers [and know] when
18 the prices will go up. We need to know that to let the customers know. We've been working with
19 Cambridge Energy for a long time. We always renew the contract to get the Internet subscription
20 and a spot to attend the roundtables. One time, they came in [to our offices] when we did scenario
21 planning, to project the future and how the company could respond to different scenarios. They've
22 been doing it for a long time, so people trust them in one way or another. Because internally, you're
23 interested in [gas pricing and storage] but you don't have the time to develop that; as a company you
24 only have so much resources and time. A lot of times, price projections and scenarios are important
25 for us. Internally, I don't know if we have enough people to develop certain things so we look out,
26 and [Cambridge Energy analysts] are the ones that we've been looking at.

27 Since firms like KeySpan lacked the capacity to produce projections of their own or even
28 to validate the forecasts they were presented, assessing the quality of this knowledge
29 required non-expert forms of judgement. Over time, I saw that representatives of such
30 firms seized on the incidental features of luxury found at these roundtables as a way of
31 dispersing judgement about the quality of consultant knowledge so that it was not solely
32 directed at the speaking subject of expertise. In fact, after attending other roundtables
33 that were viewed as insufficiently luxurious by participants, I became convinced that
34 the aesthetic dimensions of these events and, specifically, the performance of luxury
35 served as a proxy for the quality of the expertise on offer.

36 In moments when outdated technology or the absence of high-end retailers signalled
37 a breakdown in the aesthetics of luxury, attendees openly complained about the quality
38 of the event as a whole. It was as if knowledge provisioning and incidental luxury were
39 bound up in what Marcel Mauss called a 'total social fact' (1990 [1925]: 3). I first became
40 attuned to the linkage between aesthetics and credibility at Cambridge Energy's annual
41 CERAWeek event after it was moved from the ageing Galleria hotel in Houston to the
42 newly built Hilton Americas. Many of the attendees with whom I spoke told me, with a
43 sigh of relief, that CERAWeek was now 'back on the A-list': that is, the expertise on offer
44 at CERAWeek was now more credible because of its adequately luxurious surroundings.

45 A different connection between credibility and luxury at such events is access to
46 knowledge and networking through the astronomical cost of attendance: \$7,000 to
47 \$15,000 for three days. This point occurred to me at the Hilton Americas during 2010
48 CERAWeek when a few energy executives and event participants, myself included,
49 gathered at the hotel bar for after-dinner drinks. In one exchange, Jad Mouawad,
then energy reporter for the *New York Times*, deadpanned that the cost of staying

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2 at the Hilton Americas was too expensive for his travel budget. More earnestly, he
3 stated that staying at a cheaper off-site hotel in no way compromised his experience
4 of CERAWeek. Unconvinced, the executives began teasing Mouawad over the missed
5 personal exchanges that came from not staying at the hotel and the appearance of
6 professional underachievement as indicated by an inadequate expense account. Staying
7 off-site in a less luxurious hotel threatened the possibilities for achieving the knowledge
8 acquisition and authoritative presentation of self for which roundtable attendance
9 represented a bid.

10 Like expertise, luxury is distinguished from the world of interchangeable objects
11 and operations. Indeed, it carries a sense of matchlessness (Gundle 2008). As a visible
12 signature that affirms the presence of qualities that are both unique (Klingeis 2011) and
13 superfluous (Featherstone 2016), luxury is taken to say something about the sort of
14 persons who can command it.

15
16 **Virtue ethics**

17 What does the ethical life look like in action? Virtue ethicists from Aristotle to the present
18 day have concerned themselves with human excellences that are deep and broad rather
19 than mere habits. These involve ‘caring strongly about certain things and reasoning
20 wisely about them’ (Russell 2013: 17). Thus, virtue ethics offers guidance not by offering
21 rules to follow but by offering exemplars of how to become the sort of person – or,
22 crucially, organization – that can act rightly. In this way, virtue and its aspirational
23 emulation are distinguished from a prescriptive focus on deeds or rules of conduct (van
24 Zyl 2018).

25 In a related discussion, the sociologist Steven Brint (1996) has analysed the
26 stratification of ethics and conduct as a shift in social trustee professionalism. Where the
27 highly educated once performed their social role in the name of ethical standards, Brint
28 argues that since the 1960s professionals have become vital in creating market value
29 by applying expert knowledge across industry and political sectors. Porter (1995: 110),
30 too, refers to a narrative about professionals as ‘gentlemen of character’ as a strategy
31 for legitimacy. Following these scholars, I propose a repurposing of virtue ethics for
32 the theorization of energy expertise. Consultant experts, with both the content and
33 the form of the advice they give, come to embody the right functioning of the market
34 (and, implicitly, the distribution of rewards that justly follows from it). Clients then
35 come to bring both their individual comportment, which must not be dissonant with
36 the luxurious setting in which expertise is imparted, and the business decisions of the
37 organization they represent into alignment with those of the consultant as exemplar.

38 To illustrate these points, let me return to the private client meeting at the Palace
39 Hotel with which this essay opened. As part of incentivizing construction of a
40 \$20 billion natural gas pipeline, state officials in Alaska were at the time advocating
41 for a fiscal instrument that would compensate shippers of natural gas should the price
42 fall below a certain benchmark for profit. This benchmark was known as a ‘commodity
43 price floor’, and it would trigger a tax credit for the shipper if the price of gas fell below
44 52 cents per million British thermal units. Members of Congress from other states
45 opposed the commodity price floor, as did competing gas producers and the Canadian
46 government, as an unnecessary corporate subsidy that would inhibit so-called ‘organic
47 growth in the market’. Opponents argued that the need for more natural gas should not
48 be used as an excuse to set up an uncompetitive delivery system or to guarantee profits
49 for a specific group of producers well into the future.

1
2 In reaching out to Ed Kelly, then, Larry Persily and I were seeking counsel on how
3 to counter these objections to the commodity price floor. Several weeks earlier, the US
4 Senate had voted in favour of a bill whose language included the tax credit mechanism
5 for putting the price floor in place. Days after the bill passed, though, critical responses
6 began to appear, including a letter in the *Wall Street Journal* from Michael Kergin (2002),
7 then Canadian Ambassador to the United States, which singled out the tax credit as
8 ‘a vast subsidy providing tens of billions of dollars in transfers from US taxpayers to
9 producers of Alaska gas’. At the Palace Hotel, Larry Persily told Kelly that he wanted
10 feedback on ‘how to advocate the commodity price floor’.

11 At first, our description of the tax provision did not seem to capture Kelly’s interest.
12 As a political operative, Persily wanted Kelly to weigh in on what impact the tax provision
13 might have on the overall market outlook. Given the prospect of confrontation with
14 the measure’s critics, Persily wanted to know what their arguments were likely to be in
15 terms of Kelly’s own neoclassical script. This was a familiar perspective for Cambridge
16 Energy analysts to articulate. Using State of Alaska projections, Persily explained how
17 an abundance of natural gas shipped to market from Alaska would drop prices more
18 than would be paid out by taxpayers through the credit. The precise question he posed
19 to Kelly was: ‘Given elasticity with respect to volume, how much would price drop?
20 And if it’s large enough, can we promote the statement that “policywise, consumers are
21 winners”?’

22 Kelly shook his head and let out a sigh. He looked at Persily and, with an air of
23 scepticism, responded: ‘That may not be the most intellectually honest argument to
24 make, given that we have three years of organic demand growth’.

25 Here, Persily interrupted to clarify his reasoning. Yes, he granted, the Alaska pipeline
26 project, if built, would disrupt three years’ worth of relatively high-cost natural gas
27 production in Canada and Texas. But that same high-cost production would, he
28 argued, become profitable again because of economic growth and increased demand
29 resulting from the availability of low-cost gas from Alaska. Kelly, speaking with dramatic
30 distinctness, replied: ‘But those gas producers are still out 4.5 billion cubic feet [Bcf] no
31 matter what. Right now, it is a 61 Bcf market in the US. The argument that consumers
32 get lower prices because there’s a recovery for postponed gas production? We don’t
33 actually need the Alaska project until 2015’.

34 With this, Kelly made the argument that whoever already held market position
35 should not be pushed out by regulatory design. To devise political mechanisms for
36 doing so would be a violation of the market’s organic unity, on behalf of which he
37 spoke. But Persily persisted: ‘Will existing production be postponed, though? Will there
38 be a price drop on gas from other areas with Alaska gas flooding the market?’

39 In responding, Kelly conjured a different, more ambivalent energy future than the
40 one Persily had in mind. In doing so, he laid claim to a kind of market-based virtue
41 through his responsibility for caretaking the future of the industry. He told Persily:
42

43 As long as we’re playing this conceptual game, there may be very little elasticity. What will actually
44 occur is that prices go down in anticipation of new gas. It comes down to a level where development
45 ceases and enters a fuel-switching layer [at which consumption shifts to a different, usually cheaper
46 fuel]. The assumption is that, with natural gas prices below oil, switching occurs. Let’s say there’s 2.5
47 Bcf market capture of natural gas from oil.

48 As price begins to drop, Kelly forecasted, all industry sectors would take notice. Those
49 sectors using oil or coal would begin to switch fuels in favour of cheaper natural

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2 gas. But this shift would increase demand as capacity expanded, which would again
3 force up price. Persily did not want to be sidetracked by such ripple effects, and
4 shot back an actual figure that consumers might save (per thousand cubic feet of
5 natural gas) as a result of the tax credit's implementation: 'So, would you say \$0.39?'
6 It was at this moment that Kelly reminded us, with his own virtue on the line, of the
7 value he placed on his own predictions: 'I know better than to say a specific number,
8 where "Cambridge Energy says this is the figure consumers will save", and then it's in
9 all the newspapers'. Here, quantification failed (or was set aside) so as to preserve the
10 qualitative assessment of Cambridge Energy as a trusted arbiter. Besides, Kelly added,
11 returning to his neoclassical catechism, 'the legislation you're talking about is utility
12 supply planning for the benefit of consumers. It's a form of national utility supply
13 procurement'.

14 Persily protested, with a catch in his voice that acknowledged he'd been beaten: 'Yes,
15 but there are federal price supports for sugar'.

16 'Not nearly the same thing', Kelly snapped.

17 By speaking above what he framed as the petty interest mongering of energy-
18 producing regions, Kelly worked to burnish the reputation of Cambridge Energy for
19 transcending industry politics and thus enabling competitors to sit down together and
20 work in their shared interests. But this apparent neutrality is also paradoxical, in that
21 Kelly's desire to avoid committing to a particular number was hardly disinterested.
22 That is, even as Kelly spoke on behalf of an impersonal market, he also spoke from
23 the particular location of Cambridge Energy, a firm deemed to be trustworthy within
24 a field of knowledge producers with its own share of hacks. Thus, Kelly's virtue ethics
25 demands an aesthetics of disinterest as a means of reproducing an image of Cambridge
26 Energy as one of a handful of knowledge leaders whose aim is the monopoly over the
27 legitimate production of neutrality.

28
29 **Terms and conditions**

30 It is worthwhile to illustrate how the different regimes of judgement and decision-
31 making in energy planning are bound up with different concerns of contestation and
32 alignment. If, as I have argued, the rise of consultant knowledge and the luxurious
33 spaces of its provisioning have changed how energy planning is undertaken in the
34 Global North, then it is instructive to consider how decisions around the very same
35 pipeline project were adjudicated before they were routed through experts like Ed
36 Kelly. In February 2003, vice-presidents of BP, ConocoPhillips, and ExxonMobil, then
37 sponsors of the pipeline project, sent a jointly signed letter to Alaska's Congressional
38 delegation in support of legislation to expedite construction of the pipeline. Attached
39 to the letter was proposed language that, the writers stressed, should be included in any
40 legislation enacted by Congress. 'There is nothing in the enclosed language that should
41 surprise you', the letter explained, noting that it also appeared in a proposal that passed
42 the Senate the previous year. It went on to say:

43
44 We arrived at this language after a long, substantive process in which *all* interested parties had an
45 opportunity to provide input, including the State of Alaska. Therefore, we strongly urge you to
46 resist any attempt to further wordsmith the language. If the language is opened again, there will be
47 countless efforts to pursue further changes. Considering the cost and risks associated with the Alaska
48 Gas Pipeline, further modifications will weaken support for this legislation and undermine the \$20
49 billion pipeline project. We stand ready to, again, offer all of the assistance we can to move the Alaska
Gas Pipeline closer to reality.

1
2 How is it that language, whether open or closed, can undermine the reality of a \$20
3 billion energy transportation project? And what is the ‘reality’ of a \$20 billion project
4 that is vulnerable in this way? A crucial distinction, I argue, between the legislative
5 process and the executive roundtable rests on the status of the differences between
6 written and spoken language. If the former operates on a text-based framework that
7 builds on juridical precedent, the latter distributes forecasts and scenarios in the form of
8 visual materials that are assembled, but rarely contested, through economic evaluation.
9 Judgement is deployed in the former through text, while decision-making holds sway
10 in the latter through the interplay of images and virtuous expertise.

11 To draw out this contrast, consider the ANGTA, and in particular the associated
12 transportation system documents that would define an initial vision for the Alaska
13 pipeline. During the 1970s, the United States confronted energy shortages, including
14 insufficient natural gas supplies. Energy producers seeking ways to bring new supplies
15 to market filed three separate proposals with the Federal Power Commission (FPC)
16 seeking authorization to construct transportation projects for Alaska’s North Slope
17 natural gas. The applications set off a contentious and litigious proceeding before the
18 FPC, in which competing applicants vied to be picked to build a natural gas pipeline. The
19 shortcomings in the FPC’s process were referred to Congress and resolved, not through
20 an appeal to economic decision-making, but with a debate over and the eventual passage
21 of the statute known as the ANGTA.

22 One key question around the ANGTA was the role of a federal inspector with the
23 authority to oversee pipeline construction. The first person to occupy this role was
24 John Rhett, a civil engineer. Rhett oversaw construction of the southern segments of
25 the pipeline, which today deliver Canadian gas to the United States and are known
26 as the ‘pre-build’ in anticipation of the expected construction of an Alaska-to-Alberta
27 pipeline. At the time of Rhett’s appointment, one concern of Congress was whether he
28 could adequately monitor inflated construction costs, which would raise the price that
29 consumers would pay for gas. Members of Congress feared that Rhett might become
30 too cosy with the sponsoring firms and forget his responsibility to audit cost controls.
31 In a conversation between Rhett and California Congressman William Dannemeyer
32 during a 1983 hearing (Congressional Record 1983), Dannemeyer asks Rhett: ‘Are you a
33 friend of the banker, or a friend of the consumer?’

34 ‘Being a portion of the government’, Rhett replies, ‘I would hope I am a friend of
35 all, trying to do what is in the best interests of the country. I guarantee you, there is
36 no problem [with] our being too cosy with [the bankers]. There is much blood that is
37 lying on the floor in many of those conference rooms.’

38 Dannemeyer responds: ‘You know, you are a very charming man, but you would, I
39 think, give a better impression to this member from California if you would not smile
40 so much when you talk about blood on the floor.’

41 Reading between the lines of these historical statements, Rhett would seem to be
42 emphasizing his own ethical credentials by associating bankers with blood on the floor.
43 But Dannemeyer reads his own affect back against him, noting that while his words say
44 one thing, his smile says another.

45 In 1982, the companies sponsoring the Alaska-to-Alberta pipeline segment had
46 difficulty attracting financing and suspended construction. In time, one of Rhett’s
47 successors recommended dissolution of the position, noting in a letter to the President
48 that ‘times have changed’. Congress agreed and transferred the office’s powers to the
49 Department of Energy. But in 2003, with the prospect of restarting pipeline construction

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2 on the horizon, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) requested guidance
3 on how, specifically, those powers would be exercised.

4 At this point, Alaska's Congressional delegation called for legislation that would
5 create a separate Office of the Federal Co-ordinator, with many of the same functions
6 as the previous federal inspector. But FERC did not relish the prospect of being subject
7 to the new co-ordinator's veto power. They made their objections known and a new
8 version of the pipeline legislation was drafted with the co-ordinator's powers cut back
9 significantly. But the sponsoring oil companies began lobbying legislators to include
10 an official on the project whose interest was aligned not with the federal government
11 but with the marketplace, as reflected in the proposed legislative language that they
12 submitted. At one meeting that I attended, a lobbyist argued that a diminished role for
13 the federal co-ordinator would leave FERC with 'virtually unlimited authority to unduly
14 delay and add to the cost of the pipeline'. Moreover, the lobbyist added, 'there would be
15 no check by those putting up the capital, who are taking the economic risk to build the
16 pipeline'. Sceptical, legislators asked lobbyists to provide examples of instances when
17 FERC had imposed 'terms and conditions permitted, but not required, by law' that had
18 delayed other pipeline projects. While the original text of the ANGTA had included this
19 language, the actual dynamics of federal oversight meant that no examples could be
20 found.

21 This contestation over the role of the federal inspector/co-ordinator illustrates the
22 regime of judgement that I argue precedes the regime of decision-making. Energy
23 planning, in this era, was bound up with the turf wars of different government agencies.
24 Significantly, though, the oil companies were forced to go through the legislative process
25 in hopes of installing a regime of economic decision-making.

27 **From hearings to roundtables**

28 In the transformations I have discussed in this essay, I mark a distinction between, on
29 the one hand, economic experts who are said to transcend proprietary attachments to
30 the interests of their clients and, on the other hand, public officials and the technocrats
31 reporting to them, who are said to remain tethered to either local interests or regulatory
32 tidiness in a way that makes them incapable of advocating an industry-wide horizon of
33 expectation.

34 As the former group has gained influence, knowledge within the energy system is
35 increasingly back-ended and supplied by 'partial intellectuals' (Bauman 1987: 114) on
36 whom both industry and government rely. Economic knowledge, here, emerges as in the
37 vanguard and is presented as capable of making claims on behalf of impersonal forces,
38 including the market and the future. As a result, this knowledge becomes attributed
39 with a prestige value as its independence from local entanglements is positioned as
40 an inherent attribute. In this context, executive roundtables offer the possibility of
41 presenting knowledge as neutral so as to enrol competing parties in a shared setting.
42 Yet, by linking the reliability of that knowledge to the aesthetics of luxury, on the one
43 hand, and the personality-based virtue of the consultant, on the other, relationships of
44 quantity and quality come to depend not only on the assembly of data, but also on its
45 abstraction in the event itself.

46 In this way, roundtable events complicate the notion of a straightforward turn from
47 qualitative to quantitative decision logics by replacing the rituals of constitutional
48 politics not with the impersonal market, but with a highly crafted stand-in for it.
49 As Thomas Princen (2005) has argued, experts claim that they will dodge the effects

of labour market restructuring because expertise is unique and not open to greater efficiencies. As with luxury, expertise is said to be matchless. By staging decisive points of view in elite settings, energy planning thus increasingly appeals to an image of rationality that derives neither from the endeavour to control energy-based power (as in techno-scientific rationality) nor from the competition for regulatory power (as in bureaucratic rationality). Rather, it arises from the calculated display of neoclassical quantification as a form of ethics that is, perversely, beyond critique.

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