“Against Transition: Meiji Tokyo and the Revolution of the Anthropocene”

In an age of fossil-fueled global climate change and calls from all quarters for “energy transition,” my intervention is aimed at the capital of the world’s third-largest economy: Japan, which imports 95% of its primary energy. The country built an empire in pursuit of energy: labor and food calories, coal, hydroelectric sites, and oil. The story of Japanese modernization is one of almost unrelenting growth and little that looks like “transition.” Instead, Japan’s energy history is a history of energy accretions, each form layering over the top of what came before. The advent of hydroelectricity did not lead to a reduction in demand for coal. Coal consumption increased for the next fifty years (and is growing again), with only one exceptional decline: the final, lethal frenzy of the Japanese Empire’s collapse from 1943-1946. The rise of coal did not reduce demand for physical labor. In a well-known pattern, steam amplified demands on bodies by changing patterns of labor. Using Japan’s peculiar case—an immense archipelagic economy utterly dependent on overseas sources of energy—I will argue against the dominant nomenclature in the social sciences and policy circles, against the suitability of “energy transition,” in favor of the common Japanese term, enerugii kakumei, or “energy revolution.” The political, economic, technical, and cultural dynamics that fueled the creation of the nation’s modern political-economy were called “miraculous” by Cold War modernization theorists; seen through the haze of emissions, they look more like a eco-technical revolution whose undoing demands a commensurate response.