Twitter Thread by Doctor Historianess



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A thread about electricity deregulation and infrastructure in Texas: 1/

Dereg has been a thing there since we moved to Austin in the late 1980s. A constant push for lower electricity prices. TX is unique in that it has its own grid; the grid doesn't connect to any other states. So TX has a lot of leeway in what it decides to do. 2/

ERCOT is the state agency that "regulates" the grid and the "deregulated" "electricity market." What this means is that you can *buy* power from any number of companies, and regional power companies are responsible for maintaining the grid. 3/

In other words, the company you buy your power from is likely *not* the company that maintains your grid. When I lived in Houston I bought power from Green Mountain Energy but Centerpoint did the grid. 4/

So in a power emergency, I would call Centerpoint and not Green Mountain. 5/

Dereg basically meant that the "market" was choked with companies vying to offer the lowest price: there were contracts, deals, sales, programs...honestly navigating the "market" was like trying to figure out a cable plan. 6/

Companies came and went; some were really fly by night: take your deposit, sign you up for a plan, and then disappear into bankruptcy hell. It was a shitshow. 7/

2008: Hurricane Ike hits. I was without power in the Houston Heights for 17 days. When a group of Georgia linemen showed up, they found out why: the mini-transformer that ran our block? IT HAD PORCELAIN PARTS IN IT. 8/

My house was built in 1923; it still had the ports for gas in it, so it had been powered for some time with gas lights. We think the neighborhood was electrified in the 1930s. The GA linemen thought those porcelain parts dated to the 1930s. 9/

That's right--in 2008 our neighborhood was running on parts that were btw 70 and 80 years old. The disgusted linemen macgyvered something. In enquired multiple times of Centerpoint about total replacement of the transformer. I left that house in 2011 and it had not happened. 10/

This is what dereg does: the middleman power broker companies might provide you with cheaper electricity, but they suck profit out of the system. The monthly "maintenance" fee that goes to the distribution company is NOT ENOUGH to maintain the infrastructure. 11/

TX has had decades of this bullshit. That's decades of neglect for generation, distribution (the big mega transmission lines and the local transfomers). Maintenance is ad hoc and improvements are largely done as necessary and not part of a long term plan. 12/

So for ex dereg did help spur new investment in wind, but the powerful new transmission lines to bring that power east were...controversial. 13/

A lot of NIMBYism cropping up (see this: https://t.co/wplG6qKbja for example) /14

Of course that kind of anti-wind transmission shit is not unique to TX (see Cape Wind in MA for ex) but I do think the dereg status makes new and state of the art infrastructure harder to build and harder to fund. /15

What's happening now is a testament to bad planning and a lack of attention not to just big infrastructure (West-East transmission lines) but also the failure of ERCOT to force local maintenance (my neighborhood transformer). /16

Summertime heat waves challenge the grid in similar ways, and that's been the case for DECADES. But rather than trying to solve the problem by increasingly capacity and efficiency, Texans have preferred cheap electricity and profit windfalls for middleman companies. /17

This has been a slow-motion catastrophe caused by blind fealty to the almighty market and greed. Full stop. Texas could have been better prepared for this, BUT IT CHOSE NOT TO PREPARE. /18

What's happening now is the clear result of actual policy choices that put profits over people. People are going to freeze to death in their homes bc TX has chosen to mismanage its grid for decades. /fin