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Global Energy Justice: Problems, Principles, and Practices

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BOOK REVIEW

Global Energy Justice: Problems, Principles, and Practices

Benjamin K. Sovacool & Michael H. Dworkin

Cambridge University Press, 2014. xxii + 391 pp., £22.99 (Paperback), ISBN 978-1-107-66508-8

It is now a commonplace to frame society's energy predicament as a 'trilemma', defined by the three challenges of delivering energy services that are affordable, secure, and environmentally sustainable. Although often listed ritualistically by decision-makers as separate bullet points, it is centrally constitutive of the trilemma that we face difficult choices about how (and how far) to advance all three goals simultaneously. Into this quagmire of conflict, judgement, and trade-offs, Sovacool and Dworkin's book comes as a timely intervention. *Global Energy Justice* seeks to show how theories of justice—drawn from across moral and political philosophy—can guide us to make better decisions.

A key part of their agenda is to argue that energy decisions have profound implications for happiness, welfare, freedom, equity, and procedural fairness (p. 5); an argument targeted particularly at routine energy analyses, blind or partially sighted towards the equity implications of their calculations. However, *Global Energy Justice* is no mere abstract review. The subject is approached from a clear normative standpoint, that 'energy justice' is achieved by 'a global energy system that fairly disseminates both the benefits and costs of energy services, and one that has representative and impartial energy decision-making' (p. 13). This global frame of reference casts what can otherwise become parochial, national conceptions of what is fair into an international context.

Given the complex, multidimensional intersections between energy questions and justice theories, the book is much to be commended for its effort to organize the field. After scene-setting chapters on the mission of the book and the global energy system, each of the eight substantive chapters addresses a different justice perspective and follows the same, clear structure: beginning with 'What is reality?' (linking engaging, illustrative case-study situations with significant contextual material about a wider energy problem); then proceeding to 'What is justice?' (outlining key thinking on a justice perspective), then concluding in a final subsection labelled 'What is to be done?' that identifies potential solutions consistent with that perspective. Breadth of coverage is achieved by the ingenious device of pairing specific energy problems with particular justice perspectives. So, Chapter 3 explores questions about energy efficiency through Aristotelian concepts of virtue; Chapter 4 assesses the externalities of energy provision through utilitarian perspectives; Chapter 5 considers how energy provision challenges

human rights, using rights-based conceptions of justice derived from Kant; Chapter 6 uses justice as due process (procedural justice) to interrogate energy project consenting decisions and public engagement; Chapter 7 examines energy poverty and access using contract-based justice ideas from Rawls, Sen, and Nussbaum; Chapter 8 critiques the case for energy subsidies from libertarian perspectives; the implications of energy decisions for justice to future generations is the subject of Chapter 9; and then Chapter 10 looks at how questions of fairness and responsibility should impact on energy-climate change issues.

A major feature of the text is the wealth of information about the massive and unequal consequences of current systems of energy provision, and just a few examples will illustrate the global span and substantive breadth of issues encompassed: that the USA in aggregate consumes more electricity for air conditioning than the entire continent of Africa consumes for all electricity uses; states where revenues from oil exports constitute at least 10% of GDP are 80% more likely to get embroiled in military conflict; and annual fuel consumption in ocean shipping is 370 million tonnes, equivalent to 10% of the world's oil consumption and 4% of global CO₂ emissions. *Global Energy Justice* is also remarkable for its collation of potential remedies, embracing truth commissions, transparency initiatives, impact benefit agreements, participatory technology appraisal, social pricing, and assistance programmes, sunset clauses for subsidies and natural resource funds, to name but a few.

If *Global Energy Justice* is a remarkable assembly of answers, it is inevitable—and, arguably, desirable—that Sovacool and Dworkin's ambitious agenda should raise some debates. Firstly, although each chapter addresses a specific justice perspective, these perspectives can be in tension, leading to different, potentially conflicting prescriptions. Thus, do virtue ethics lead us to pursue different levels of energy efficiency to utilitarian perspectives, or those that emphasize responsibilities to future generations? While it would be invidious to expect the authors to attempt a ranking of justice theories, there is a tacit dialogue throughout the book between utilitarian perspectives, with their emphasis on aggregate welfare, and perspectives which would extend, qualify, or challenge utilitarianism. This is given most concrete expression in the concluding chapter, where it is argued that solutions based on energy pricing and subsidy removal can only be a part of the more comprehensive programme of interventions that our energy systems need if they are to be just.

This feeds into a second area of debate, concerning how in practice justice arguments get mobilized or brought to bear on decision-making processes. Wisely, Sovacool and Dworkin largely leave this aside, but a reliance on moral philosophy begs vital questions about which actors, in what kinds of contexts, are effective in pressing home justice-based perspectives, and where the status quo is resistant to change. That the authors often support their ideas of 'what is to be done?' by pointing out that many remedies are also 'cost-effective' hints both at the wider dominance of utilitarian rationalities, but also how multiple justice perspectives can sometimes line up to reinforce the same broad goals, raising the prospects of diverse, cosmopolitan coalitions for change. Herein lay important themes for social science energy research.

Global Energy Justice has achieved a remarkable feat of identifying the multiple ways that issues of justice should bear on energy decisions, and has done so in an accessible and engaging form. The book is aimed at students, consumers, planners, and decision-makers, for whom its careful structure and boundary-

spanning qualities will be insightful. It is also a valuable supplement to the environmental justice literature. Although researchers are not identified as a target audience, I see implicit in Sovacool and Dworkin's work an appeal to researchers in the energy and environment field to engage more explicitly with ideas of justice. As the knowledge demands of the energy trilemma has brought many of us closer to decision-makers, so we would do well to keep *Global Energy Justice* close to hand.

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