

Energy Security, Equality, and Justice. B. K. Sovacool, R. V. Sidortsov and B. R. Jones. Earthscan, Routledge. London and New York (2014)

(Suggested review length: 800-1500 words)

Energy is a fundamental good that has a vital role in our lived experience, creating so called “energy ripples” that affect our society, economy, politics and environment. Yet as we face the pressing contemporary challenges of climate change and energy security, to name just two, we are being forced to re-work the established patterns of energy supply, distribution and consumption. Amidst this widespread acknowledgement that our current energy structures are unsustainable, and as energy moves up the social and political agenda, it is increasingly clear that we must consider the ethics of our energy actions and decisions. Despite this acknowledgement, however, the literature surrounding the emergent field of energy justice is underdeveloped. In this regard, Sovacool, Sidortsov and Jones’ contribution is both timely and essential.

Sovacool and his fellow authors ambitiously explore the intersection between energy security, equality and justice; the eponymous title of their book. Following a review of the concept of energy justice as it’s commonly understood - a concept that houses the core tenets of distributional, procedural and cosmopolitan justice - Sovacool *et al.* introduce two new and intentionally simplistic over-arching theories, the prohibitive and the affirmative principles of justice. They do so as recognition that the provision of energy should not interfere with access to basic goods, and that where it is the only means of achieving these goods there is a derivative entitlement to the energy service itself. Later, using five substantive chapters built around the core themes of temporal, economic, socio-political, geographical and technological dimensions of justice-related impacts, they explore the complexity and enormity of our energy justice challenges. In doing so they identify cross cutting themes, all of which are required for a comprehensive understanding of energy justice at any given scale.

As one of a series of three books produced by the Energy Security and Justice Program at Vermont Law School, this book contributes to a growing list of publications that address the intersection between energy and justice. Alongside such a crucial and timely focus, the main

strength of this book is its well-chosen and well developed case study approach. The field of energy justice is not only embryonic, but to date lacks empirical examples outside of the case of fuel poverty, and the dichotomy between the developed and the developing world. Thus the authors' exploration of real-world energy price increases and their impact on energy justice, as one of numerous examples, helps contextualise an otherwise potentially abstract concept. In so doing, it moves the justice agenda forward. Indeed, such contextualisation effectively emphasizes the importance of attention to this issue at a *global* scale across all stages of the energy system. Further, this presents an opportunity to engage a wider audience, and new readers not yet convinced of the need explore this emerging field.

Moreover, within these examples the authors implicitly cover some of the core debates of our time: the role of nuclear energy in a low carbon future, how to balance our desire for low cost energy, reliable energy and a cleaner environment, and how to tackle the dualism between the developed and the developing world. With now wide acknowledgement that such issues of equity, security and justice are here to stay, such books are welcome contributions that challenge our conceptions of both these problems and, most pressingly, their solutions.

However, it is no small task to sum up the state of the literature, introduce new principles of energy justice, explore their global relevance across temporal, economic, socio-political, geographical and technological dimensions, *and* come to a clear conclusion in just 210 pages. Thus, in this regard, it is no surprise that this book contains a few weaknesses.

Firstly, on a structural note, the signposting of this book leads the reader to underestimate the significance of its contents. In particular, in the absence of an introduction Chapter One does not clearly outline the theory of the book as a preface should. The authors would have benefitted from a more abbreviated preamble that explicitly summarised the core thesis of this book: the aim to introduce two new principles of energy justice - the prohibitive and affirmative principles – to illustrate their relevance through up-to-date case studies from real-world energy cases, and in so doing to make the case for energy justice as a key policy focus. The rather understated introduction of these principles does not give due credit to

their importance as concepts. Furthermore, the sensationalist language that their opening chapter contains, whilst arguably an important premonition of the threats of our current energy system, may estrange a more sensitive and potentially international reader. The authors state, for example, that “egregious human rights abuses associated with energy production – including the denial of free speech, torture, slavery, forced labour, executions, and rape – would continue to afflict thousands of people around the world”. Whilst provocative, such language is also off-putting.

Secondly, though admirably thorough in its approach, the reader is left to wonder how we unite *differing* conceptions of justice. Discourses of justice are not static and do not map equally across the world. One person’s trash is another person’s treasure, so to speak. Therefore, a book written by three preeminent western authors inescapably presents discourses of energy justice that embed western conceptions of what injustice is and implicitly, what justice may be. How would indigenous communities in areas of uranium mining articulate justice? (Pg. 64) And how would the head of an energy company do so? In providing a concluding chapter with a clear energy justice "check list" the authors make an important first step towards tackling our current system weaknesses, but here, to be truly effective, we must explore in more depth the assumptions and perspectives that lie behind that check list. Who is their justice for? Further volumes by the authors and research in the field should acknowledge discourses of energy justice from the eyes of non-academic actors. After all, whilst energy justice is undoubtedly a global concern we must have to appreciate its *contextually and culturally-embedded* solutions.

Despite the aforementioned weaknesses, however, the central concept of this book – that energy justice issues are extant throughout the global energy system and that they must be acknowledged – is irrefutable. As the author’s state at the outset:

Clearly, such a troubling outlook makes global energy security and access one of the central justice issues of our time, with profound implications for our notions of social welfare, virtue and equity. Any self-respecting society must grapple with the energy-related injustices that weaken its social fabric,

degrade the environment that sustains it, and burden the economy that supports it.

Indeed, the necessity of our attention to such issues is indisputable as we seek to meet our global energy needs in ethically defensible ways. Thus, in outlining the significance of energy justice and reinforcing its importance with up to date climate and energy security data, we owe Benjamin Sovacool, Roman Sidortsov and Benjamin Jones a great deal of gratitude. This book contributes to a debate that it would be remiss to ignore.