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Politicizing energy justice and energy system transitions: Fossil fuel divestment and a "just transition"☆

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ABSTRACT

The burgeoning energy justice scholarship highlights the importance of justice and equity concerns in the context of global decarbonization and the transition to a green economy. This paper seeks to extend current conceptualizations of energy justice across entire energy lifecycles, from extraction to final use, to offer an analytically richer and more accurate picture of the (in)justice impacts of energy policy decisions. We identify two key areas that require greater attention and scrutiny in order to enact energy justice within a more democratized energy system. First, we call for greater recognition of the politics, power dynamics and political economy of socio-technical energy transitions. We use the example of the fossil fuel divestment movement as a way to shift energy justice policy attention upstream to focus on the under-researched injustices relating to supply-side climate policy analysis and decisions. Second, the idea of a "just transition" and the distributional impacts on "and the role of" labor in low-carbon transitions must be addressed more systematically. This focus produces a more directly political and politicizing framing of energy (in)justice and a just energy transition.

1. Introduction

Limiting the danger of climate change requires a rapid transition from fossil-fuel energy, agro-food and transport, to low-carbon systems based on green technologies and new infrastructures, policies, consumer practices, cultural meanings and scientific knowledge. Concurrently, there is increasing inequality – of income, wealth and resource ownership. Inequality of access to safe and affordable energy is rising, as is energy poverty, even in affluent nations. There is therefore a need to consider whether, where and how policies aimed at decarbonizing the economy can address the range of injustices and impacts of such a socio-energy transition.

The burgeoning energy justice scholarship highlights justice and equity concerns in the context of global decarbonization, climate change and the transition to a green economy (Sovacool, 2014; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2016a, 2017; Sovacool et al., 2017). Despite its growing popularity and increasing application, there remains a need for more energy justice literature to consider the full extent of justice implications across entire energy lifecycles. In this sense, our paper responds to calls from others, who have identified a neglect of how energy justice is constructed, understood and tackled across a range of scales, supply chains and related systems such as food and transportation (Gagnon et al., 2002; Florini and Sovacool, 2009; Goldthau and Sovacool, 2012; Walker and Day, 2012; McCauley et al., 2013; Heffron and McCauley, 2014; Sovacool et al., 2017). This paper seeks to complement that growing body of energy justice literature which addresses energy supply chains (Heffron and McCauley, 2014), calls for 'whole energy system' approaches (McCauley et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2014, 2016a), and political economy analysis of energy (in)justice (Jenkins et al., 2016b).

Specifically, we identify two key areas—a "just transition" and the role of divestment in the political economy of energy transitions —, which require greater attention and scrutiny in order to enact energy justice within a more democratized energy system. We argue that the idea of a just transition and the distributional impacts on and the role of labor in low-carbon transitions should be addressed more systematically in energy justice analyses. Here, we call for greater recognition of the potential and perceived socio-economic costs of decarbonizing policies, which can hinder democratic/popular support for those policies. These include the negative impacts on fossil fuel energy workers and communities affected by a decarbonization energy transition. Without an energy justice dimension decarbonization strategies run the risk of 'locking in' patterns of exploitation and dispossession that characterize the current global political economy, even while

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seeking to overcome carbon 'lock in' (Unruh, 2002). Here it is essential that social costs are taken into account as part of any just energy transition (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). Recognizing the importance of a just transition and political economy questions within conceptualizations of energy justice means critical questions of:

> 'who wins, who loses, how and why' as they relate to the existing distribution of energy, who lives with the side effects of its sites of extraction, production and generation, and who will bear the social costs of decarbonizing energy sources and economies (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013: 2).

An obvious but important point here is that a just energy transition is intensely political—not simply a technological or indeed a socio-technical matter. Indeed, since it is characterized by issues of power, distribution of and access to resources, political economy, and so on, it can be described as a deeply political struggle.

This leads us to our second argument. Some energy justice literature underemphasizes the political economy of socio-technical energy transitions, particularly surrounding extraction. Key to a full energy life cycle analysis, we argue, is greater recognition of the politics, power dynamics and political economy of socio-technical energy transitions (Goldthau and Sovacool, 2012), which addresses underlying causes and not simply identifying the unequal or unjust consequences of the energy system. Without attention to power, political economy and politics, tensions between "decarbonization" and "justice" will continue (Finley-Brook and Holloman, 2016). While a number of scholars assert that politics is a critical component in the transitions approach, it is largely missing from much of existing analysis of socio-technical energy transitions and the energy justice literature (Meadowcroft, 2005, 2009; Smith and Stirling, 2007; Baker et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2016a). Instead, a narrow focus on policy management (often focused on energy technologies or an energy fuel focus) characterizes much of the literature, reflecting a "tendency towards techno-economic determinism" (Lawhon and Murphy, 2012) and a reformist-incrementalist approach, as opposed to disruptive and systemic-structural socio-energy transformations (Scoones et al., 2015).

Increasing calls for disruptive interventions illustrate a new political reality that energy policy decision-makers must now confront, especially in the context of stimulating large-scale and rapid energy transitions. Here the identification by Sovacool et al. (2017) of deliberative resistance to energy injustice is complemented by our analysis of the fossil fuel divestment movement, which often sharply brings this resistance to the fore. We use the divestment movement as a way to shift energy justice policy attention upstream to focus on the under-researched injustices relating to supply-side climate policy analysis and decisions (Lazarus et al., 2015) (e.g., fossil fuel subsides and exploration permits), and to the human health and labor impacts of fossil fuel extraction, including intergenerational and intragenerational justice climate issues. The upstream focus re-orientates attention and responsibility to a new set of actors and relations that may be responsible for energy injustices. This political economy focus produces, we suggest, a more directly political and politicizing framing of energy (in)justice and a just energy transition. This reframing, Princen et al. (2013) and Barry et al. (2015) suggest is where the real power, politics, and political economy are located. We believe greater recognition of the political economy of socio-technical energy transitions, and the role of labor are necessary for the realization of a 'just energy transition'.

2. Democratizing energy system transitions: political pathways for delivering energy justice

Global energy systems are shaped by a political economy in which the interests of elites and powerful actors are more often than not misaligned with the energy needs and environmental vulnerabilities of the world's poorest people (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). Changes in energy regimes therefore must address inequalities in power and injustices across entire socio-energy systems. Yet energy policy design rarely incorporates justice dimensions. Miller and Richter (2014: 76) highlight how major national energy policy and planning documents concentrate almost exclusively on energy technologies, while social considerations tend to be narrowly economic, focusing on energy prices, jobs and, to some extent, energy access. As a result, energy policy and planning systematically fail to recognize broader social and economic assemblages surrounding energy systems, while energy engineers, economists and bureaucrats dominate energy policy design and implementation. Thus, a central but often overlooked dimension, energy justice, addresses the serious and conflict-laden normative and ethical issues raised by energy extraction, production and consumption (Miller et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2017).

However, following Barry (2012), a politicized and *realpolitik* understanding of a just energy transition should begin from a sober recognition that it is *energy injustice* (at different scales and domains) that characterizes our situation, just as it is "actually existing unsustainability" that we face (as opposed to "sustainable development"). The fight against injustice is not necessarily the same as outlining some positive conception of justice. As Simon rightly suggests, "injustice has a different phenomenology from justice... *injustice takes priority over justice*" (Simon, 1995: xvii; emphasis added). It is this reframing of our starting point as one focused on energy injustice, unsustainability (and lack of democracy)—as opposed to energy justice, sustainability and democracy—that makes the approach to energy transition a much more radical, systemic and politically oppositional project. Thus for us, the highly politicized character of a 'just energy transition' is precisely what we see in the divestment movement, which we understand as a response to actually existing *unsustainability* and energy *injustice*.

While climate justice centers on the causes of climate change and the unequal distribution of the negative impacts of climate change, the energy justice literature places a big emphasis on the provision of safe, affordable and sustainable energy for all (McCauley et al., 2016). Sovacool (2013) define energy justice as a global energy system that fairly disseminates both the benefit and costs of energy services, and one that has representative and impartial energy decision-making.

However, due to the implications of climate justice suggesting large-scale and structural changes to the socio-energy system, Heffron et al. (2015) contend that decision-makers find it difficult to relate it to the dominant discipline within policy formulation: namely, neoclassical economics, which is allergic to normative claims of justice and injustice (Barry, 2012). Thus, climate justice has had limited traction in policy formulation, even while receiving rhetorical support from those who make the policy decisions.

A lack of attention to the justice implications of decarbonization policies and the links between energy justice and climate can be partly attributed to weak and fragmented energy governance and analyses (Dubash and Florini, 2011; Goldthau and Sovacool, 2012), alongside a policy preference for avoiding or downplaying justice claims. Whole energy systems are rarely governed in a comprehensive and systemic fashion (Jenkins et al., 2014, 2016a). Identifying, diagnosing and redressing the unequal costs of energy transitions across multiple levels of governance and supply-chains that stretch across different political jurisdictions is a challenging task for publics, researchers and decision-makers alike (Miller and Richter, 2014). Thus there is a need for greater examination of how energy justice is constructed so that decision-makers, citizens and other actors can identify and address the unequal distribution of costs, risks and vulnerabilities across entire energy lifecycles—supply chains, production, distribution and waste chains, and therefore a fortiori, energy system transitions (Jenkins et al., 2016a). Such a whole system and lifecycle approach draws attention to the dominant global carbon energy regime's multiple, but largely hidden or occluded, social, economic, health and environmental externalities across the entire life cycle from extraction to final disposal