

Climate Justice, Energy Demand and the Right to Energy

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ABSTRACT

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Climate justice raises particularly tricky tensions between increasingly important energy demand reduction objectives as part of climate mitigation and claims in various forms for a ‘right to energy’. Rights-based talk has begun to incorporate energy into a set of ‘second generation’ rights that seek to demand the politically significant socio-economic or welfare demands of contemporary (global) citizenship. The ‘right to energy’, as articulated in both international and regional forms, seeks to assert that energy matters to the degree that it is more than just another commodity, and that the state and other actors involved in energy provisioning therefore have obligations that go

beyond normal (uneven) market relations. That it is a specific matter of justice. However when simultaneously energy use and its carbon consequences are problematized as a fundamental matter of climate justice, the question becomes whether and how the notion of a just low carbon transition can reconcile these (broadly cast) competing justice claims. In this discussion I will particularly consider and problematize what it means to conceive of a right to energy, and how, in so doing, it is necessary to consider carefully what energy is for. Setting the right to energy alongside the more established provenance of the right to water, highlights that energy is not one thing (a constructed rather than a natural category); that its value and demand is derived – for multiple services – rather than more immediately vital or direct; and that (socio)natural flows are implicated in the situated geography of how (produced) energy matters to well-being. These characteristics complicate the practical formulation of a right to energy per se, and in a climate transition context suggest either an essential reformulation of what the ‘right to’ should be, or the abandonment of a rights based politics in any form.

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