

Energy, environment and global health

Global energy politics. By Thijs Van De Graaf and Benjamin K. Sovacool. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2020. 240 pp. £17.23. ISBN 978 1 50953 049 6. Available as e-book.

Both engineers and political scientists would agree that energy is power—and this insight is crucial to the understanding of international politics. However, throughout history, energy has traditionally been analysed from an engineering or economic point of view. But this leaves some important questions unanswered. How can we ensure that all people have reliable and affordable access to sufficient energy for their needs? And in what ways can energy be used as a foreign policy tool to coerce other countries? In this book, Thijs Van De Graaf and Benjamin Sovacool aim to answer these questions by arguing that energy issues are deeply political rather than technical.

The authors divide their book into two main parts. First, they discuss the impact of fossil fuel energy on four traditional themes in International Relations (IR): security, the economy, the environment and global justice. In the second part, they address energy issues in a changing world. They argue that there is a ‘three-way relationship between energy, international, and domestic politics’ (p. 7) and introduce a new framework to help social scientists engage in global energy politics. This is based on what the authors call ‘a socio-technical system’ approach and uses ‘contested frames’ (p. 2). The ‘socio-technical system’ they identify spans energy sources and technologies as well as user practices and cultural meanings, while they identify ‘contested frames’ in the way stakeholders approach energy systems, focusing on neo-mercantilism, market liberalism, environmentalism and egalitarianism.

According to a neo-mercantilist perspective, states are the most important actors politically and economically, and energy is crucial to strengthening their power, autonomy and national security. This view is closely related to realist and neo-realist thinking within IR. On the other hand, market liberalism takes into account non-state actors such as multinational companies and notes their capacity to foster technological innovation that benefits society. Environmentalism focuses on sustainability and the role that energy can play in protecting the environment. Finally, egalitarian approaches aim to show that equity, equality and justice are influential concepts in understanding the energy sector.

By using ‘systems thinking’ (p. 12), whether by comparing frames with counter-frames or by analysing the infrastructure of the energy sector, the authors conceptualize energy as a socio-technical system. The crux of the matter lies in going beyond a traditional neo-realist approach. In this regard, the authors have succeeded in showing that neo-realist thinking is just one of several viewpoints.

The discussion on whether energy is deeply political rather than technical remains open, though. In chapter eight, the authors argue that ‘regarding interests, a distinction can be made between public and private interests’ (p. 175). This may be so, but it is extremely flimsy at present. On more careful analysis, the recent

scandal involving Brazilian state oil giant Petrobras and the government has shed light on whether it is indeed possible to separate political from technical decisions in the energy sector. National oil companies' (NOCs) international operations have both public and private interests, technical and political purposes, sometimes at the same time. Though the authors address domestic energy trends and geopolitical relationships, it is not clear how the new frames introduced by them can help with this.

It may take years to arrive at a consensus on the correct solution for tackling climate change. However, the last part of the book will convince readers that climate change is directly related to energy, as fossil fuels account for the majority of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. By analysing global energy governance and energy transition to renewables, the authors show that global energy governance lacks a strong international organization to settle rules and hold countries accountable. Indeed, it has been challenging to extract tangible commitments from different governments with regards to energy. The greater the lack of authority and coherence becomes in the global energy architecture, the more there is a need for non-state actors to participate in energy issues. The example of the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP) is instructive in this respect, since both international corporations and civil society have contributed to its creation.

All things considered, there is no doubt that the use of a socio-technical perspective, as well as different frames, enables scholars and students to better understand energy politics. Thus the most important contribution of this book comes, precisely, through employing systems thinking to deal with energy issues. Van De Graaf and Sovacool have opened up a technical and difficult topic to social scientists while at the same time broadening traditional International Relations approaches.

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Russia and Eurasia

Critical approaches to security in central Asia. Edited by Edward Lemon.

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Security and security policies are often approached from the perspective of cross-border penetration, geopolitical disputes over hegemony and anti-terrorism measures. But in this edited volume, readers will find a critical, bottom-up approach to security, which examines the role that family structures and practices and masculinity play in security, as guided by religious norms and rules.

Scholars and readers who are new to central Asian discourse on security and securitization will be introduced here to a comprehensive range of topics that capture the day-to-day struggle for security between regional geopolitical concerns and suppressive domestic politics. The contributors cover places ranging from the western provinces of China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, all the way