

Book Review

Atkins, Ed. 2023. *A Just Energy Transition: Getting Decarbonisation Right in a Time of Crisis*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.

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It is a given that to address the climate crisis, we as an international community need to transition away from our dependency on fossil fuels. However, such a broad-scale transformation of our global energy profile would be economically costly and logistically disruptive, and it also could create burdens for people who would be displaced, lose job opportunities, or otherwise experience negative externalities as a result of the transition process. This raises additional questions about justice when the people experiencing these externalities are economically, ethnically, or otherwise marginalized groups.

In *A Just Energy Transition: Getting Decarbonisation Right in a Time of Crisis*, Ed Atkins asks, “how can an energy transition be made fair, equitable, and just?” (150). In doing so, he points out that the challenges of shifting away from fossil fuels are not simply technical but involve questions about politics, social relationships, and economics at national, regional, and local levels. Over nine chapters, he develops an argument that the coming energy transition should adopt a “nationally led but community-centered” energy model. In chapter 5, the author elaborates on what one such model would look like by showing how national and municipal governments can coordinate with local communities to design energy transition projects that meet the energy needs of economically vulnerable households, modernize the energy grid, and provide avenues of employment for the working class (71).

To frame the discussion, the author illustrates the multiple ways in which justice is implicated in the transition to renewable energy. Drawing from the broader environmental justice literature, Atkins describes justice as a multidimensional concept, comprising *distributive*, *procedural*, *recognition*, and *restorative* elements. *Distributive justice* addresses the ways in which environmental harms are distributed across already marginalized populations. *Procedural justice* is affected by the ability of local populations to participate in environmental decision-making. *Recognition* requires that participation be designed in ways that are attentive to the cultural understandings of affected vulnerable people. Finally, *restorative justice* is shaped by whether there are policies in place that remediate the socioeconomic damages that energy transitions create for affected people. Throughout, Atkins clarifies that attending to these varied dimensions of justice will require different forms of remediation and care. If all dimensions of

justice are properly implemented, energy transitions can become an important pathway toward *energy justice*, in which people have access to safe, secure, affordable, and sustainable energy in ways that meet community needs at the local level.

In his case studies, Atkins demonstrates precisely how shifting to renewable energy can create socioeconomic and environmental harms. As Atkins points out, one of the most commonly understood challenges to just energy transitions is the fact that environmental protectionism is often seen (sometimes correctly) as a “jobs killer” (23) for blue-collar workers in the fossil fuel industry. In addition, expanding renewable energy infrastructure may meet national emission targets and satisfy investors but may also displace communities that need to be moved for new energy infrastructure or harm local ecosystems.

His case studies are primarily, but not exclusively, drawn from successful and abandoned renewable energy projects, particularly around wind development in the United Kingdom. The author frames each chapter by introducing local stories from the United Kingdom that embody tensions around local-national relations and demonstrate the scale of needed energy transitions and the challenge of balancing these with community relations, domestic life, and employment. The cases include renewable energy projects like the Cleve Hill Solar Park (chapter 2) and the construction of wind turbines in Lawrence Weston, Bristol (chapter 4). Together, they illustrate how easily and quickly renewable energy projects can become mired in community dissent because of issues like “ecological concerns due to aesthetic disruption caused by the glint and glare of sunlight landing on solar panels ... biodiversity impacts, the disruption caused by traffic and construction, safety, and the sheer size of the project” (19).

Atkins also supports his research with cases from outside the United Kingdom, including by discussing problems associated with the Markbydgen and Øyfjellet onshore wind farms in Sweden and Norway, respectively. In those cases, wind farms are planned to be built in the migration paths of the reindeer that Saami communities use for subsistence and cultural reasons. Consequently, their construction will likely disrupt the migratory patterns of the reindeer in ways that undermine the Saamis’ traditional practices, showing how renewable energy projects too often demonstrate “limited concerns for local communities [and] ecological impacts” (38–39). As with the UK cases, these illustrate that energy transitions may provide green energy, but at significant economic and environmental costs to local, often marginalized people.

At the same time, although he recognizes that energy transitions can undermine environmental justice, Atkins avoids romanticizing local resistance to renewable energy projects. One of the case studies he discusses is a successful campaign of local opposition against the proposed Cape Wind wind farm in Massachusetts. In that case, financing and support for this campaign came primarily from a small, wealthy coterie of people, many of whom were vacationers or part-time residents in the area, ultimately blocking a much-needed investment in clean energy. As such, he argues that this was “an example of how

the rich and powerful can dictate the forms that energy transitions take—and where” (56).

Atkins is also clear that local resistance is not inevitable. As counterexamples, Atkins discusses cases, such as the expansion of hydrogen infrastructure in Orkney, that developed with local support, community engagement, and public financing as exemplars of possible just transitions (47). As Atkins shows throughout, it is possible to incorporate local communities in renewable energy planning in ways that avoid backlash and the spread of antienvironmental NIMBYism.

In total, his book provides several real-life examples of how energy transitions have affected and been affected by local community needs. By drawing from lessons learned in these and other case studies, Atkins outlines six critical rules for a community-centered energy model for a just transition to clean energy: governments should develop community-scale energy projects, emphasize participation and voices of communities, support community energy schemes in local economies, prioritize vulnerable households, support the participation and inclusion of labor, and recognize energy transition as a global justice issue (17).

Although Atkins details throughout how improperly managed energy transitions can exacerbate environmental injustice, he is also clear that environmental justice will *require* a transition to clean energy. Climate change itself is a driver of environmental injustice, since “the everyday lives of communities in the Global South are impacted and made more precarious by emissions in the Global North” (147). Moreover, if managed correctly, transitions can lead to restorative justice for economically underprivileged or vulnerable communities. Renewable energy, including (but not limited to) solar panels, can lower energy costs for consumers and reduce energy poverty. A decarbonizing economy can provide an opportunity for greater training for labor in emerging low-carbon employment opportunities, and the growing number of “green jobs” can be structured to give more opportunities to marginalized groups across gender and racial lines (chapter 7).

Atkins also points out that the life cycle of renewable energy includes processes of extraction, production, and waste generation in the Global South, and as such, decarbonization connects communities and people globally. In chapter 8, he draws our attention to the entire supply chain of renewable energy, reminding us that environmental fairness and equity are important not only for communities targeted for transition policies but also for those communities in which the raw materials of renewable energy—lithium, cobalt, and other minerals—are located. Consequently, the book argues for a cosmopolitan approach to justice in energy transitions. Financing energy transitions at a cost to poor people in the Global South is not environmental justice.

Atkins’ book is empirically rich and dense. The book is well written, is up to date, and refreshingly evaluates the main issue. That said, some areas could have been strengthened. Although the book is addressed to a global issue,

Atkins derived his “six rules” primarily from a study of renewable energy projects in the developed world, in particular, in the United Kingdom. As such, climate- and energy-related challenges and problems particular to the Global South, including the local harms of fossil fuel extraction and the difficulty of starting community-based renewable energy projects in economically and politically underdeveloped states, are comparatively less well developed. Consequently, it is unclear if the path toward energy transition in the Global North will be easily replicable in the Global South. However, it is clear that the book’s goal of promoting buy-in for energy transition at the community, municipal, and national levels is crucial for generating political momentum toward solving the climate crisis. In the end, it is an excellent resource for people interested in energy transition, as well as for policymakers, academics, and researchers.