

Democracy, Justice, and Socially Sustainable Energy

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1. Introduction

It's difficult to imagine confronting climate change without transforming the way our societies think about, produce, and distribute energy.² A transition to renewable energy must be part of any response to climate change. A recent report from Princeton University (Larson et al. 2020) details several scenarios for the US to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. All scenarios require an almost total electrification of energy generated from renewable sources across the US economy. Other recommendations from the report included investing significantly in new energy infrastructure, expanding the capacity of wind and solar, and phasing out the use of natural gas in residential structures (Mooney 2020).³

¹ Illinois State University was built on the land of multiple native nations. Find out more by visiting the university's land acknowledgement page: <https://illinoisstate.edu/president/diversity-inclusion-advisory-council/land-acknowledgement/>

² This paper draft is in its early stages, growing from discussion notes on my recent Energy Justice seminar I taught at Illinois State University during the Covid-fall of 2020. I thank my students for their thoughts and participation during a difficult semester. I am also working with colleagues on a project to evaluate utility-scale solar energy farms according to various dimensions of sustainability. My discussions with them have also informed my position on this topic and for that I am grateful.

³ According to the US Energy Information Association: "The electric power sector accounted for about 56% of total U.S. renewable energy consumption in 2019, and about 17% of total U.S. electricity generation was from renewable energy sources." These numbers have been growing. "The consumption of biofuels, geothermal, solar, and wind energy in the United States in 2019 was nearly three times greater than in 2000" (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2020).

To fully address the ethical challenges of climate change, philosophers and political theorists must ask questions about what a just transition to renewables will look like (Carley 2011; Shaw 2011; Sovacool et al. 2016; Banerjee et al. 2017).⁴

Many energy scholars have noted that the nature of renewable energy technologies, especially wind and solar, open a host of possibilities for rethinking the injustices associated with the world's current energy system. While fossil fuel energy systems tend to concentrate ownership and production, renewable energies are dispersed and scalable (Stephens 2019). Rather than relying on centralized power plants to produce and distribute energy – which themselves depend upon the constant input of fossil fuels extracted from “sacrifice zones” (Healy, Stephens, and Malin 2019; Johnson 2019; Klein 2015) – renewables can do this at local-levels to suit place-specific needs. Once built, they produce perpetually without the need for outside input beyond maintenance. Renewables are therefore more amendable to production models which emphasize localized and democratic control (van de Biezenbos 2018). Such features have driven calls for greater energy democracy as part of any just transition to renewables (Szulecki 2018).

But greater democratic control over energy production is not a prerequisite for technological, economic, or even environmental dimensions of sustainability. Rather, underwriting these calls for democracy and justice are appeals to a social dimension of sustainability.

This presents certain challenges. Scholars and policy makers often describe social sustainability as more difficult to define and more often contested than other forms of sustainability, such as its economic or environmental dimensions (Boström 2012; Murphy 2012; de Fine Licht and Folland 2019). Some suggest that social sustainability is value-laden and subjective, whereas economic or environmental sustainability are objective and scientific, which makes the former more prone to dispute. Normative ideals associated with democracy and justice tend to be folded into the social dimension of sustainability. The difficulty of defining social sustainability makes it more challenging to realize these ideals – although many governments, NGOs, and grassroots organizations have certainly used the concept to underwrite or evaluate their projects.

In this paper, I make a case for the connection between social sustainability, environmental justice, and energy democracy. First, I survey a wide range of energy literature to note that many definitions of social sustainability incorporate some democratic ideals, albeit in different modalities. Next, I situate the difficulties of thinking about social sustainability in the wider historical challenges faced by an environmental justice framework and its evolving scope (Schlosberg 2013). Finally, I define energy democracy and describe why it is a valuable framework for realizing social sustainability and energy justice. I look briefly at calls for greater energy democracy by energy justice struggles in Mexico, Australia, and the United States. All three frameworks – social sustainability, environmental justice, and energy democracy – are helpful for addressing justice concerns centering on energy and sustainability, and therefore, for the rapid transition to a more just, more sustainable energy system.

⁴ Philosophy especially can say more about energy democracy and a just transition. According to Sovacool and Dworkin (2014) very few articles over the past 10 years have included both “energy” and “justice” in their title and few philosophers have written about the topic (22-24). Although few studies are framed with energy justice in mind, many argue for normative conclusions (Banerjee et al. 2017, 783).

2. Democracy and social sustainability in the literature

In this section, I review a range of literature on the definition of social sustainability and make note of references to democracy. First a note on framing: this draft of the paper will deal with energy democracy specifically rather than green democracy or green republicanism more generally.⁵

A. A “definition problem”

To begin with, philosophers have not dealt extensively with the concept of social sustainability. One recent exception is De Fine Licht and Folland (2019). They note the lack of consensus regarding a definition, outline some difficulties with finding one, and suggest a list of desiderata for such a definition. Perhaps philosophers avoid the term for good reason. It’s often used in vague ways to promote projects that clearly contradict wider commitments to sustainability. They note how the lack of consensus and consistency has not stopped policy and planning projects from invoking some version of social sustainability. Problematically, “the lack of a definition seems to make it easier for strong actors to push through their own agendas under the guise of social sustainability” (de Fine Licht and Folland 2019, 22); that is, weak definitions lead to greenwashing.⁶

In their desiderata, they recommend a clear and precise definition, in part, because, in democracies, there is value minimizing the potential for misinterpretations in policy debates, and ensuring the public will understand both each other and “what the politician wants to sell” (de Fine Licht and Folland 2019, 23 & 27). This is not an argument for the presupposition about the values embedded in the concept of social sustainability itself, but the social context in which the concept is applied and has meaning. That is, social sustainability – and debates, practices, and policies bearing its flag – should be compatible with, or at least not inhibit, democracy with imprecise meanings and inaccessible terminology (de Fine Licht and Folland 2019, 26).

Despite nearly every study citing a perceived problem with defining social sustainability, literature that reviews and consolidates use of the term finds relative agreement among definitions. Murphy (2012) writes about the social elements found in sustainable development literature. He conducted a wide-ranging review of this literature: from U.N. and European policy

⁵ It may certainly help to draw from the following frameworks in the larger paper:

- Plumwood (2001) *Environmental Culture* – democratic politics and ecological rationality as they overlap with social equality (Plumwood 2001, 69). Also, the concept of remoteness.
- Fischer (2017) *Climate Crisis and the Democratic Prospect: Participatory Governance in Sustainable Communities*
- Eckersley (2004) *The Green State* – Green Democracy
- Barry (1999) *Rethinking Green Politics: Nature, Virtue and Progress*
- Barry (2012) *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability: Human Flourishing in a Climate-Changed, Carbon Constrained World*
- Dobson (2003) *Citizenship and the Environment*
- Shiva (2005) *Earth Democracy*
- Vanderheiden (2020) *Environmental Political Theory*
- Machin (2019) “Democracy, disagreement, disruption: agonism and the environmental state”

⁶ This is a common observation in the literature. Many authors who write on this topic, some included in this section, also note how the concept is widely applied despite its lack of a clear definition.

documents to multi-disciplinary scholarship. The study found that there was quite a range of agreement on what the social dimension of sustainable development means. One common theme was democracy.

B. Democratic elements of social sustainability

Murphy finds four categories by which conceptions of social sustainability can be categorized. Of these four, one focuses explicitly on democratic themes, what he calls “participation” or policies which aim for “broadening the participative base of environmental planning processes” (Murphy 2012, 21). Social sustainability is measured by examining the “level to which the views and preferences of weaker groups including future generations are reflected in environmental planning processes” (Murphy 2012, 21). Increasing the depth and degree of public engagement will increase public buy in, and thus, legitimacy of those policies. Murphy writes, “The underlying premise here is that if people are involved in decision making, they are more likely to support environmental reform” (Murphy 2012, 22). He is careful to note that the literature well documents how power imbalances can affect this participation, especially when corporate and state interests activate against environmental aims (Murphy 2012, 22). He suggests that steps should be taken to ensure the policies allow for “meaningful participation” if it is to be considered socially sustainable.

Boström’s (2012) article also reviews various definitions of social sustainability in the literature and identifies some of the challenges of incorporating social sustainability into a broad framework of sustainable development. Contrary to many thinkers that he considers, he doesn’t think it’s that difficult of a concept to define. He acknowledges the charge that it is primarily a subjective dimension of sustainability but notes that many objective measures are easily obtainable: such as employment rates and income equality. While well-being and quality of life may be more difficult to measure, there are an increasing number of international standards for approximating such data for making relative comparisons (Boström 2012, 8).⁷

Boström notes that one likely problem with identifying social sustainability arises from confusing the relationship between its substantive aims and procedural means. Specific procedural mechanisms must be in place for a society to achieve substantive goals such as quality of life, happiness, and wellbeing. These include:

- “Access to participation and decision making in different stages of the process and over time”;
- “Participating in the framing of issues, including defining criteria, scope, and subjects of justice”;
- “Social monitoring of the policy, planning, and standard-setting process”; and
- “Accountable governance and management of the policy, planning, and standard-setting process” (Boström 2012, 6).

The aims or ideals of social sustainability are only achieved through democratic means, so both the means and the ends must be considered hand in hand. Importantly, however, deliberative democracy can fall under both aspects. The practice of this form of democracy is both

⁷ For instance, “state or nonstate initiated sustainability projects often refer to well-established principles such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights or the International Labour Organization’s conventions” (Boström 2012, 8).

constitutive of its aims and transformational of individual preferences (Sen 2000, 153; Szulecki 2018, 28; Young 2002, 26).

C. A connection problem

Murphy and Boström agree that there is far less consensus about the connection between the social and other dimensions of sustainability, especially the environmental dimension (Boström 2012, 3; Murphy 2012, 18).

Part of the problem is giving social sustainability its own pillar which allows us to think of environmental problems as fragmented; rather we should consider them holistically. This allows for policy practices to greater prioritize the aims of one dimension over the others. For instance, in Sweden the “integration” of social and environmental sustainability amounted to forcing social agencies to adopt goals associated with environmental sustainability, but not vice versa (Boström 2012, 9).

The Brundtland Report (1987) perhaps offers one of the most famous and often cited definitions of sustainability, which included a social dimension. Importantly, the report insisted on the mutual compatibility of the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, and social) (Murphy 2012, 19–20). Murphy highlights the original more radical message implied by the Brundtland report, which called for limits to economic growth. For instance, he notes that the U.N. Aalborg Charter argued for dissociating happiness and consumption levels that persist in many economic models. Murphy is suspicious of the ecomodernists trends which argue that advances in technology promise continued growth without regard for environmental limits (Murphy 2012, 23–24).

Nevertheless, not everyone shares this view of the radicality of Brundtland. Du Pisani notes that historically, sustainability developed as a middle way between groups who believed that continuous economic growth was necessarily inconsistent with a stable global environment and those who did not foresee a problem with a perpetual growth model. It was therefore never “ideologically neutral” since “it was intended as an alternative for the zero growth option and was therefore positively inclined toward the growth and modernization viewpoints” (Du Pisani 2006, 94). This may be another reason some philosophers have avoided the term, which can be understood as “loaded” or assuming a framework that forecloses the possibility of any radical solutions.

Davidson argues that the difficulties in defining social sustainability, despite its frequent use in the policy world, is due to its lack of political content. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, he calls the term an “empty signifier” – a concept that can organize and orient other concepts even though lacking content itself (Davidson 2019, 32). Social sustainability can operate as a framework for policy analysis – an established set of procedures and normative goals and guidelines – within a larger framework of sustainability even if the specific content of what makes a project socially sustainable is unclear or contradictory with wider interpretations of sustainability. For example, if organizations as different from each other as BP and Greenpeace can both appeal to social sustainability, then the concept must have become politically impotent (Davidson 2009, 28). Rather than abandon the concept altogether, however, Davidson argues that social sustainability must become committed to democracy; for “the only legitimate form of social order to maintain/sustain is democratic” (Davidson 2019, 38). Here Davidson has in mind Rancière’s notion of democracy as a perpetual *process* of affirming the equality of all rather than a static *state* of balance. Whether policies or projects are sustainable is a question

that must be answered concretely and with reference to the communities involved at a particular historically situated juncture (especially since justice claims can reference the past, as with restorative justice, as well as look ahead to vulnerability for future harms).

Others have also suggested that more attention to politics can reinforce the connection between social and environmental problems. A major barrier to linking social sustainability and environmental sustainability is the popularity of apolitical notions of the environment (Boström 2012, 7). Concepts such as “balance” and “stability” not only make social sustainability seem comparably difficult to measure, they obscure agency (Garb 1995); for instance, *who* exactly causes the imbalance? Who suffers most from imbalance, instability, or other environmental degradation? Boström notes that a social sustainability lens presumes radical change as a goal rather than sustaining a present unjust social order. Therefore the aims of social and environmental sustainability (characterized as “maintaining” or “stasis”) can potentially be at odds with each other (Boström 2012, 7). Ultimately, Boström argues that social sustainability is not the most helpful tool for social science, in part because of the perceived tendency of social constructivism to overextend the concept of the social. He does admit, however, that environmental justice discourse has done much with a social sustainability lens to highlight the shortcomings of an apolitical conception of the environment and to develop alternative practices (such as fair trade and similar regulatory frameworks) (Boström 2012, 12–13). I now turn to environmental justice, which shares social sustainability’s inclination toward radical change and transformation.

3. Social sustainability as environmental justice

Social sustainability has its roots in the environmental justice movement and shares many of its challenges. Making explicit the link between social and environmental concerns has been a primary concern of this movement since its inception in the 1980s. Hence, the connection problem is nothing new and has been addressed thoroughly in environmental justice literature.

A. What counts as environmental?

Schlosberg (2013) discusses three stages in the expansion of environmental justice since its inception. Although the first stage was primarily focused on social (distributive) justice insofar as it raised concerns about distribution of environmental harms, it was never solely about this. Early theorists in environmental justice raised questions about what counts as an “environmental” concern and helped expand sole focus on depopulated “wilderness” places to include urban areas (“where we live, work, and play”) and indigenous communities.

Much of the effort in the early movement was too reconceptualize what counts as an environmental issue. Taylor notes that environmental justice activists worked to demonstrate inconsistent attitudes within the environmental movement. Issues were only considered worthy environmentalists’ attention when their impacted extended beyond communities of color (Taylor 1997, 51–54).⁸ Activists argued that urban water quality and asthma rates were not only properly environmental issues, but they were unevenly distributed across class and racial boundaries. In short, they were also political issues of social justice. The environmental justice

⁸ See Taylor (1997) for a detailed account of how the environmental justice paradigm evolved as a response to the inadequacies of prior foci of the environmental movement. Taylor demonstrates how activism described under this movement was led primarily by women of color in communities disproportionately affected by environmental harms.

framework helped highlight the structural roots of environmental racism that contributed to the maldistribution of environmental harms.⁹

But distributive justice was never the only model of justice employed. The environmental justice movement drew from a diverse and pluralistic notion of justice, including importantly, the need for participatory justice in addressing environmental harms (Schlosberg 2013, 38–40). In short it “moved from being simply a reflection of social injustice generally to being a statement about the crucial nature of the relationship between environmental and the provision of justice itself” (Schlosberg 2013, 51). This movement sought to understand environmental problems pluralistically and intersectionally.

B. Empirical support

In addition to advocating for theoretical realignment, environmental justice worked to discover empirical connections between social sustainability, environmental justice, and democracy. Agyeman writes, “Wherever in the world environmental despoliation and degradation is happening, it is almost always linked to questions of social justice, equity, rights and people’s quality of life in its widest sense.” (Agyeman 2008, 752) The assumption that ecosystems are “power-laden rather than politically inert” is also central to political ecology as a methodology (Robbins 2012, 13). Both fields produce empirical evidence to support their claims. For instance,

a survey of the 50 US states... found that states (predominantly southern) with greater inequalities in power distribution (measured by voter participation, tax fairness, Medicaid access and educational attainment levels) had less stringent environmental policies, greater levels of environmental stress and higher rates of infant mortality and premature deaths. (Agyeman 2008, 752)

These data are all quantifiable and help show an increase in environmental degradation and social justice concerns, are correlated with decrease in democratic practices. Hence, the environmental and the social dimensions of sustainability must not be treated atomistically. Furthermore, Agyeman insists on a radical reframing of sustainability to center concerns of justice and equity “[i]f sustainability is to become a process with the power to *transform*, as opposed to its current environmental, stewardship or *reform* focus” (Agyeman 2008, 752; my emphasis).

As Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy demonstrated, the healthy functioning of human systems depends on natural systems. For Katrina, environmental justice advocates noted the double impact of how the oil refineries had affected disadvantaged communities: by exposing them to greater risks linked to byproducts of the refinery process, and the greater risks of climate change that process causes (Schlosberg 2013, 47–48). Activists with Sustainable South Bronx and Brooklyn’s UPROSE in Sunset Park highlighted the same twin vulnerabilities after Sandy. The chemical manufacturing plants, industrial waterfronts, and chemical and waste storage located in these vulnerable neighborhoods present them with extra challenges from storm surges and sea level rise (Navarro 2012). When considering climate change through an environmental justice framework, it becomes clear that “justice itself depends on a stable and predictable set of

⁹ See Gaard (2015) for an account of how ecofeminists worked over the course of decades to reframe climate change as a social justice issue disproportionately affecting women and queer people.

environmental conditions” (Schlosberg 2013, 48). Hence, there is a dialectic relationship: without justice the environment suffers, and without a stable environment, justice suffers.

C. Transformation not stasis

As mentioned above, environmental justice aims at transforming social institutional processes that perpetuate environmental degradation, the very same processes that are linked to other forms of domination, such as racism, classism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Another stage that Schlosberg identifies as recently incorporated into the environmental justice framework is sustainable materialism. Environmental justice here looks for opportunities to build more sustainable relationships and practices:

The focus is on building new practices and institutions for sustainability – practices and institutions that embody not only the principles of environmental or climate justice, but a broader sense of sustainability as well. (Schlosberg 2013, 48)

He suggests the phrase “reconstructive environmental justice” (Schlosberg 2013, 48). Here the importance of energy democracy is clearest. The goal is transforming practices which are both socially and environmentally unsustainable – those linked to environmental injustice – by replacing them with more sustainable practices that historically marginalized communities control locally. Sustainable materialism aims to resist and revise unsustainable practices so that they are more just and inclusive (Schlosberg 2013, 49).

In other words, while many still understand environmentalism and sustainability as a conservative force (preserving what is left of healthy functioning ecosystems, perhaps by holding back the expansion of capital), environmental justice and social sustainability aim to do away with the old forms of relations that exacerbate environmental degradation by positioning some to gain benefits from that degradation and others to risk harm. Democracy can aid this transformation and help resist the maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation suffered by communities that might otherwise serve as sacrifice zones.

4. Democracy and energy

In this section, I will briefly define energy democracy and describe why it is a valuable framework for realizing social sustainability and energy justice. Then I will turn to call for greater energy democracy by energy justice struggles in Mexico, Australia, and the United States.

A. What is energy democracy?

Energy democracy falls under the larger framework of energy justice. An energy just world is one that

equitably shares both the benefits and burdens involved in the production and consumption of energy services, as well as one that is fair in how it treats people and communities in energy decision-making. (Sovacool and Dworkin 2014, 5)

Energy democracy is understood as a means to achieve this form of justice. Szulecki (2018) joins the now familiar refrain when he says that energy democracy is difficult to define. He outlines three dimensions of its use in the literature: popular sovereignty, participatory governance, and civic ownership. Indicators of energy democracy include, for example: shared ownership of grid infrastructure, regulated lobbying, and prosumer support schemes (Szulecki 2018, 36). Energy

democracy both describes existing energy initiatives, and prescribes goals for transitioning to a more carbon-neutral energy system: “Energy transformation affects society, and political processes in the social sphere can (and should) shape the form and direction of energy transition” (Szulecki 2018, 23–25). He proposes energy democracy as an aspirational ideal which understands citizens as prosumers (producers, recipients, and stakeholders) of energy, and which solicits wider participation in inclusive, transparent processes for making energy decisions aiming at the public good (Szulecki 2018, 35).

B. Why energy democracy?

The current fossil fuel energy structure is technocratic and oligarchic (Szulecki 2018, 27), and it functions by creating sacrifice zones, often in places where residents lack political sway to resist unjust policies. Furthermore, “massive corporate profits of large multinational energy companies have perpetuated inequalities, exacerbated disparate vulnerabilities, and promoted widespread injustices among and within communities around the world” (Stephens 2019, 4). Energy democracy is seen as a public check on the private power that is a major source of these injustices.

Additionally, advocates for energy democracy claim the technological potential of renewable energy now makes it possible to overcome the limitations of fossil-fuel-based systems; namely, its concentration of ownership and production. Renewable energies are dispersed, scalable, and capable of meeting local demands while operating under local control (Stephens 2019). Szulecki’s sees the prosumer securing a seat at the decision-making table by proving themselves indispensable to the system.¹⁰

Democracy and its ideals are understood as one part of the call for energy justice. Availability (including affordability and reliability), and equity (both intra- and inter-generational) are others discussed in the literature alongside information, due process, and accountability (Sovacool and Dworkin 2014). Yet the technological changes in, and the call for rapid transition to, renewable energy make democracy a potentially promising framework.

C. How can energy democracy help achieve justice?

At present, energy democracy is not widespread. Even though there are far more publicly-owned and cooperatively-owned providers than there are investor-owned providers (1,958, 812, and 168, respectively), nearly three-quarters of Americans got their power in 2017 from suppliers who were responsible for returning profits to their stockholders (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2019).¹¹ Though calls for democratic reform are growing in the literature and among activists both in the United States and across the world. In this section, I suggest that to promote justice, energy democracy movements must be sensitive to the local laws, customs, and

¹⁰ Here Szulecki draws from Mitchell's (2011) work elucidating the correlation between the rise of democracies and the working conditions of coal miners. By virtue of their position in the energy system, which afforded them opportunities for massive disruption through strikes, coal miners could assert demands for greater inclusion in their government. Interestingly, Mitchell claims this was not the case for oil-based systems.

¹¹ As electrification spread in the U.S.: “In smaller cities and towns, local governments began setting up their own electric distribution utilities. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, municipalities ran most utilities, and more than 3,000 existed by 1923. Later, technological improvements in generation and transmission made smaller plants uneconomical, and many cities sold their equipment and transferred their customers to IOUs [investor-owned utilities].” (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2019)

histories of oppression and vulnerabilities of the communities involved. Often the problem is not a total lack of democracy, but of insufficient or meaningless participation. In what follows, I look at three cases in which ideals of democracy are expressed, but to an insufficient degree.

Baker (2016) examines the potential for energy democracy to expand energy justice in indigenous communities of Mexico. Following recent energy restructuring in a 2013 constitutional amendment, Pemax, the state-owned oil and gas company allowed private energy companies to develop lands, some of which are home to indigenous communities. Baker views this change positively for energy justice and energy democracy despite the apparent conflict with two other aims: reducing carbon emissions and upholding indigenous rights.

Baker looks at the state of Oaxaca, which contains some of the best wind energy potential in the world (Baker 2016, 381). Despite this, residents of Oaxaca are energy poor. The state has the second lowest electrification rate in Mexico (Baker 2016, 382). Importantly, nearly half of the states' population is indigenous, and many rely on the land for subsistence. A prior reform in 1992 helped to encourage some wind development in the state. However, this development was resisted for violating the ejidos, a pre-Columbian land-tenure system. The ejidos resisted development often citing the threat to already scarce water supplies in the area and the displacement of valuable farmland. Ejidos are a community assembly and decision-making process. They provide "a ready-made infrastructure for consensus-based decisions regarding community energy development." Baker continues:

Under an ejido-led approach to energy development activities, the ejido would be kept intact because land would not necessarily change hands or be alienated in any way, and the benefits and burdens of the energy development would be spread equitably across the entire ejido. (Baker 2016, 388)

Energy democracy principles, working with the ejidos to ensure costs and benefits were distributed equitably, would ensure that communities subject to risk would be part of the development process, consistent with and expanding on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples principle of free, prior, and informed consent (Baker 2016, 384).

Goddard and Farrelly evaluate a transition management framework – a guided, participatory process to accelerate transition to renewable energy. Despite some of its advantages – i.e., allowing for a deliberative democratic process and aiming to provide equitable access to affordable energy – they argue it's been used to bypass calls for better recognitive and procedural justice raised in the traditional energy producing regions of Australia's Gladstone (Goddard and Farrelly 2018, 111). Without a more explicit and transparent commitment to energy justice, including energy democracy, workers and communities who rely on traditional energy production are likely to continue resisting the development of renewables. The authors recommend better involving communities and unions in vulnerable regions in the long-term vision planning in order to combat perceived lack of transparency in the transition process (Goddard and Farrelly 2018, 120).

Finally, an energy democracy framework can reveal deficiencies in the current fossil fuel energy system and the regulatory framework deployed so frequently in the United States. Sensitivity to specific histories and political struggles is important for all new energy proposals even if they don't involve renewables. Johnson (2019) discusses how the current fossil fuel energy system fails to realize democratic values. Any transition to renewables must avoid repeating these mistakes. Focusing on the permitting process for the Dakota Access Pipeline, Johnson argues

that the current regulatory framework is “alone... insufficient to achieve environmental justice outcomes and may sometimes exacerbate inequity” (Johnson 2019, 337). Especially when the processes for public participation are insensitive to the social, historical, and political background of communities, such as those afflicted by settler colonial expansion: “reliance on a purely regulatory system invests faith almost exclusively in the colonial state to achieve environmental justice for Native Americans” (Johnson 2019, 338). Although the company proposing the pipeline satisfied its legal obligation by evaluating potential impacts on the local community and environment, “the Standing Rock Sioux have contended that the actions taken were insufficient to account for the negative environmental and historical/cultural impacts on the Tribe” (Johnson 2019, 336).

Not only must energy democracy remain sensitive to its locality, but it must also become more than just a set of bureaucratic policies or boxes to tick on paperwork. To address justice concerns raised by affected communities, especially those suffering from a history of exclusion in the decision-making process, public input must be meaningful. The entire legitimacy of the process is undermined when agencies solicit public input, but fail to adjust projects to adequately account for that input (Johnson 2019, 337). Johnson draws from the energy democracy movement to provide an example of what this type of meaningful input looks like. Rather than viewing the state as an ally regulating energy companies, the colonial state should be viewed as an adversary which “cannot provide radical solutions to energy colonialism” (Johnson 2019, 349). Rethinking the nature-as-resource model, energy democracy offers grounds to think about the nature as a commons: “New processes must prioritize community involvement, decentralized energy solutions, and local control over energy systems in order to address the disproportionate burdens currently shouldered by marginalized communities in developing American energy infrastructure” (Johnson 2019, 349).

5. Conclusion

Renewable energy is neither necessarily sustainable nor just. Energy democracy as a framework, drawing from social sustainability and environmental justice, can ensure the coming necessary rapid transition to renewables will avoid the mistakes of the fossil fuel system.

A review of scholarship in social sustainability and environmental justice shows clear overlapping calls for procedural justice, participatory justice, public ownership, and other commitments to democratic values. Democracy is conceptually linked to more just policies, while empirical data shows that those communities who are historically denied forms of democratic participation suffer disproportionate environmental harms.

This is no surprise to political philosophy. Many theorists agree with Davidson that only a democratic social order can be sustainable. At its core, the idea that participation increases legitimacy is a foundational democratic ideal. Young argues for the connection between justice and democracy, specifically deliberative democracy, insofar as its associated ideals of inclusion, political equality, reasonableness, and publicity help create more just policies (Young 2002, 17). She insists, part of what makes democracy so appealing is that it restrains rulers from abusing power; and it presumes that democratic publics and governments will redress any injustices as they arise (Young 2002, 17). In turn, just societies are more sustainable. They are more stable when citizens perceive the laws and policies as fair. They give citizens a better opportunity to live the good life, autonomously, and fully develop as human beings. Democratic decision-making

leads to more just outcomes by ensuring all subjected to its outcomes can participate in the process.

Yet the details regarding the extent of democratic practices, the limits or checks on democratic power, or even the kind of democracy (western liberal, deliberative, radical, etc.) that best addresses energy injustice are far less clear. Democracy is another complicated and contested concept, though one with which political philosophy is quite familiar. Energy justice scholars are calling for more support from normative fields, including philosophy. One of the most prominent scholars in the field, Benjamin K. Sovacool, coauthored a recent book with legal scholar, Michael H. Dworkin. They review eight principles of energy justice, each paired with different political philosophers such as Rawls, Nussbaum, Sen, Kant, Mill, Nozick, and Dworkin (Sovacool and Dworkin 2014). In their introduction, they cite the lack of philosophical engagement with the issues. Clearly demand for political theory to engage with energy issues is clearly high.¹²

Importantly, when philosophy does engage with questions about the transition to renewables, it must resist its tendency to abstract and universalize to the detriment of the site specific and local claims to energy justice. Local histories and cultures will clearly influence the shape that energy democracy can take. Working alongside political ecologist, and energy scholars, the normative work of philosophy can support the overlapping concerns within social sustainability, environmental justice, and energy democracy.

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¹² Sovacool himself has a bachelor's degree in philosophy, though he works primarily in energy and science policy. As I've made clear, these issues often intersect with normative theories of justice.

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