

ENERGY POLICY

The great debate

Competing perspectives face off in a quest to find common ground on controversial energy issues

By Gabrielle Wong-Parodi

When I was a young researcher, I naively assumed that presenting lay audiences with information about climate change would be enough to change the hearts and minds of science skeptics. My fieldwork interviewing ranchers and coal miners in Wyoming about their perception of technologies designed to mitigate global warming soon disabused me of this. There, I found that more was at stake than simply belief. Not only were people's livelihoods on the line, so too were the way of life they loved and the places that they cherished. I came to appreciate that there are as many "truths" as there are people and began to believe that understanding this in a deeply respectful way is how we can best make progress on the big and seemingly intractable challenges facing our planet.

In *Fact and Fiction in Global Energy Policy*, Sovacool, Brown, and Valentine make clever use of the Hegelian dialectic to take on 15 core energy questions (e.g., "Do conventional energy resources have a meaningful 'peak'?"), showing how each has a mutually exclusive thesis and antithesis.

By understanding these differing viewpoints, the idea is that the truth in both can be revealed and perhaps reconciled in a synthesis. The authors take an evidence-based approach when considering differing perspectives, often drawing from primary sources of literature and data sets to build each side's case.

Take, for example, their treatment of the question "Is mitigation or adaptation the best way to address climate change?" Here the authors first present the biologist Garrett Hardin's lifeboat metaphor, originally used to discuss the ethical dilemmas related to overpopulation.

Picture a lifeboat floating in the ocean with 50 people on board and room for only 10 more. There are 100 people swimming in the water who desperately need to get on the boat to survive. Overloading the lifeboat will cause it to sink, spelling doom for all on board.

The authors ask the reader to imagine this metaphor in the context of climate change. Given the limited capacity of our lifeboat, planet Earth, should we help the swimmers in the water through abatement strategies



"[E]nacting a technological transition from one energy technology to another is less about facilitating technological change than about overcoming entrenched interests."

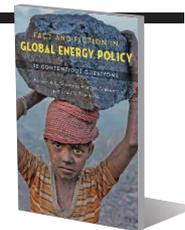
(adaptation measures, such as sea walls) or limit the number of swimmers in the water by reducing the amount of greenhouse gas emissions released to the atmosphere (mitigation measures, such as energy efficiency)?

On the one hand, proponents of mitigation argue that "it is better to stop emissions than to deal with their likely effects." For example, advocates often claim that mitigation efforts can be cost-effective and that developed nations should be doing these things anyway. Using the McKinsey & Company cost-abatement curve as an example, the authors present compelling evidence that actions such as energy-efficiency investments in buildings and homes both are profitable and mitigate climate change.

Fact and Fiction in Global Energy Policy

15 Contentious Questions

Benjamin K. Sovacool,
Marilyn A. Brown, and
Scott V. Valentine
Johns Hopkins University
Press, 2016. 387 pp.



However, proponents of adaptation argue that climate change is already happening and we need to protect people and infrastructure that are already at risk. Furthermore, efforts to mitigate climate change on the national stage have fallen far short of what is needed to avoid the worst climate change. Taking a historical perspective, the authors present evidence that many of the "larger GHG emitters either have backtracked on climate change mitigation commitments or continue to sit on the sidelines."

For each question, the authors then tease out the truths on both sides in an attempt to reach a common ground. In the case of mitigation versus adaptation, they conclude that both are needed and should be cooptimized.

The authors are careful to caution that this analytical exercise is not intended or designed to reveal the "capital-T" Truth but is a way to learn more about how difficult energy problems are conceptualized. A clear "winner" may emerge, but the goal is to have "fewer, better disagreements" (1).

I have rarely read a book or policy piece that has so clearly laid out the competing perspectives on contentious energy questions with

such sympathy, humility, and rigor. In light of the tremendous energy and environmental challenges facing us today and in the future, this would be an excellent book for classes in environmental policy, political science, and geography. Indeed, this is a must read for researchers and practitioners interested in understanding how to address the most pressing contentious energy questions of our day.

Too much is at stake for us to pretend that other perspectives don't matter. They do, and we ignore them not at our own peril but at the peril of future generations.

REFERENCES

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