

Toward Eco-just Energy and Climate Policies

Precis of *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy* By James B. Martin-Schramm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010)

This timely book brings eco-justice ethics to bear directly on issues of climate justice and U.S. energy policy. Avoiding “cheap despair” over these big problems, the author dares to “sketch the broad contours of a [less fossil-fuel dependent] way of life in which human beings can live more justly in relation to each other and more appropriately in relation to the ecological systems that support all forms of life on Earth.” (p. 158).

Jim Martin -Schramm, a Christian ethicist, who is Prof. of Religion at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, opens with a concise Introduction to the moral challenges of energy use, particularly dangerous addiction to fossil fuels and their destructive climate impact. In Chapter 1, he presents a framework of four basic eco-justice norms and twelve related energy policy guidelines that he goes on to utilize effectively in a comprehensive ethical assessment of U.S. energy policy options – both conventional (chapter 2) and alternative / renewable (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the implications for morally consistent international and national climate change policy. The concluding chapter applies this ethic of climate justice locally as the author tells readers about Luther College’s institutional initiative to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions.

“The ethical aims of justice...should be to relieve the worst conditions of poverty, powerlessness, exploitation, and environmental degradation.” (p. 28) Commitment to justice takes definite shape when we concentrate on the four eco-justice norms of Sustainability, Sufficiency, Participation, and Solidarity **as an interactive set**. A section of Chapter 1 delineates these general norms with particular attention to their biblical roots.

Having sketched the broad outlines of this ethic, Martin-Schramm then introduces twelve energy policy guidelines or criteria that are consistent with, and flesh out, the generaleco-justice norms. These twelve energy policy guidelines (developed in policy studies by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.) are: equity, efficiency, adequacy, renewability, appropriateness, risk, reasonable cost, peace, employment, flexibility, aesthetics, & timely democratic decision-making. He applies both the norms and the guidelines when discussing specific issues and policy questions in Chapters 2-6. Following is a sampling of his ethical assessments.

Coal adequately supplies a large share of U.S. primary energy consumption at currently low economic costs, but “the social and ecological costs of this nonrenewable and inefficient resource are significant,” and it poses a high risk future for climate from CO₂ emissions. (p. 52) **Oil** is no longer cheap, produces lots of air and water pollution, is being used inefficiently (which violates the norm

of sufficiency) and is not a sustainable resource to meet global demand. In addition, a century of experience show us that there is “an inverse relationship between oil wealth and democratic power.” (pp.58-59)

What about **natural gas** and **nuclear power** (the other two “fuels from hell”)? The author’s nuanced discussion leads him to conclude that these two energy resources can do much to bridge the gap while moving toward a more sustainable future, particularly because they lower emissions of green house gasses (GHGs) even as they serve the sustainability norm and the adequacy guideline. But, natural gas production from shale beds is becoming ever more environmentally destructive, and the unsolved long-term waste problem of nuclear power and the questionable safety of re-licensed nuclear power plants mean that “nuclear power should be phased out.” (p. 69)

Martin-Schramm anticipates the potential contribution of **alternative and cleaner, renewable energy** options to provide perhaps half of U.S. electricity by mid-century, *if* more priority is given to energy conservation and efficiency, solar, wind, hydropower, geothermal and marine energy, and perhaps hydrogen. Together, they serve the ecojustice norms and many of the energy policy guidelines. But they also pose “significant areas of concern,” particularly: whether they will ever be adequate to the world’s needs (not to mention excess human wants), and how their rapid development will affect the price of electricity. He recognizes the difficulty of making this policy shift and goes on to point out problems of renewable energy sources. To single out one example, he underscores the negative environmental and social consequences of ethanol production, which is becoming unsustainable and is a threat to food security in grain importing countries. Chapter 3 concludes with nine recommendations for public policy change designed to foster movement toward alternative and renewable energy. (p. 105ff.)

The next two chapters, discussing climate change policy, provide an informative overview of international negotiations leading up to Copenhagen. Chapter 4 focuses on the ambiguities of and need for much better regulation of a) emission allowances under “Cap & Trade,” and b) related GHG offsets. (p. 124ff.) That chapter then begins to clarify what climate justice requires by considering two big questions: who should be allocated what rights to emit GHGs? And who should bear the costs of emissions reductions and adaptation to climate change?

As a resource for further discussion Martin-Schramm highlights an ethical framework called Greenhouse Development Rights (GDR) first proposed by two Swedish NGOs and then endorsed by the executive committee of the World Council of Churches as “ethically praiseworthy” from an eco-justice perspective. In the U.S., the same GDR framework became the focus of a collaborative

project between environmental justice leaders and Redefining Progress, a California think tank oriented to sustainability with justice. Chapter 5, written before the December 2009 Copenhagen summit that intended but failed to forge a binding international agreement to grapple effectively with global warming, reminds readers of how little the U.S. government has done (and still isn't doing) to address climate change which already so negatively impacts human civilization and all other life on Earth. Even so, a different scenario beckons, as "Never before have present generations been able to do so much for future generations." (p. 158)