Book Review: *Electric Mountains: Climate, Power, and Justice in an Energy Transition.*

Matthew Schneider[1] and Brian F. O'Neill[2]

[1]University of North Carolina – Pembroke, Pembroke, NC, USA, matthew.schneider@uncp.edu
[2]

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A critical, prevalent political discourse on climate change adaptation possibilities revolves around "techno-optimism," the notion that technological innovation can solve the climate conundrum without paying much attention to existing social relations/conditions (Dentzman, Gunderson, and Jussaume 2016). Such a perspective (which has had profound transnational implications) seems to be the outgrowth of the technocratic paradigm formalized by, among others, agents like Adam Weinberg and the more general Cold War technopolitical perspective, i.e., utilizing technology to achieve political goals (Johnston 2018; O'Neill 2020). While promoted with great confidence by industry officials, political candidates, and policymakers, technological fixes operate more like band-aids, smoothing over surface problems rather than attending to underlying political-economic issues (Harvey 2003; O'Neill and Boyer 2020). Perhaps there is no greater example of this than the recent surge of interest in wind energy. United States (U.S.) President Joe Biden, for instance, touted on September 14, 2021, that "investment and innovation" will propel America into an energy transition.

Similarly, in North Carolina, Governor Roy Cooper has strongly supported new wind energy projects, framed wind development as a matter of urgency, and suggested that wind energy is an opportunity to create economic opportunities for "underserved communities" (Talton 2022). Although this may be a step in the right direction, many scholars and activists point to the importance of viewing such statements as falling within a larger socio-historical context. Despite the excitement around a "Green New Deal," we must recognize the many "business as usual" elements of these proposals (O'Neill and Schneider 2021a & 2021b).

Because wind energy has become a primary symbol in "branding" the Green New Deal, it deserves close analytical scrutiny. Writing specifically about the surge of interest in wind energy in the American Northeast, environmental sociologist Shaun A. Golding writes, "as symbols of environmentalism, wind turbines are part of the same green branding that many people associate with the mountains" – they have become "seductively conspicuous" (46, emphasis added). Indeed, it has become conspicuous in the U.S. and globally. Golding's Electric Mountains has contributed to the critical environmental and social science literature on this topic and should have implications for various scholars working across socio-environmental issues.

Shaun Golding's Electric Mountains: Climate, Power, and Justice in an Energy Transition (hereafter Electric Mountains) were released in 2021 by the Rutgers University Press. It begins in the fashion of many ethnographies of its type—describing an encounter that frames the overarching narrative. For Golding, this was an early trip to a mountaintop site of Lowell Mountain to see the "defiled ridgeline," as some of his interlocutors recounted (4). As

Golding discusses, in moments like these, where he listened to the public relations representative of a power company extol the virtues of wind, he began to have misgivings. Unfortunately, the wind industry (in its current form) is not ushering in "an era of cleaner electricity production that would benefit society" (5). The central paradox that Golding aims to present as he recounts an exchange between a wind developer and a member of the tour who asks about the lack of electricity storage options. Batteries were not commercially available at scale, went the response. Here, Golding recognizes two colliding logics that, at first, appear synonymous: carbon accounting versus finance. Why he asks, "would rural electricity projects not maximize their productive capacity?" (6). Through participant observation, interviews with 20 residents across three states in the New England region of the U.S., and various other data collection, Golding explores this question.

Golding usefully develops two analytical insights that he pulls through the book. On the one hand, he explains that much of what scholars have come to know about wind is through the lens of NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) politics. However, Golding argues that this is just a surface tension that focuses on a mixture of distributional inequalities and property values (30). On a deeper level, he asserts that a complex array of arguments about feasibility, costs, and technical arrangements shape the issue and the public's perception. In particular, Golding argues that regional identity is one of the core features shaping attitudes. Indeed, perhaps one of the greatest strengths of Electric Mountains is how Golding calls attention to the tension between local environmentalism and global climate politics. In places like Vermont, a mélange of notions of autonomy, self-determination, old-fashioned American grit, and environmentalism blend to formulate subjects' dispositions. Drawing from the environmental justice literature, Golding also articulates the idea of procedural injustice as a quasi-legalistic basis for dissent and contention.

Another welcome discussion that Golding provides is around the question of risk—a pivotal axis along which we find differing positions from the grassroots to corporate actors. As Golding writes, uncertainty "is a tool utilized craftily in wind debates" (71). On the one hand, proponents of wind energy often are positioning themselves in such a manner to cite long-term uncertainty of electricity price and supply. But, on the other hand, Golding finds NGOs and environmental groups "spinning" their version of uncertainty too, if not stop, then delay the development process (71). This situation places us in the ongoing context of what Ulrich Beck (1992) described as the risk society. The consequence is that fear and mistrust abound in wind debates, and ultimately questions of equity and social justice are never taken head-on (72).

One of the overarching themes that Golding works with to significant effect is distraction: wind energy manifests two key types. The first is that of the turbine itself. It obscures our vision of a just/sustainable future because it has become so incorporated into new green dealings. However, it is along a second dimension that Golding's arguments become more attractive. Golding is also engaging in a kind of political sociology, i.e., sociology that takes the possibility and issues of politics seriously. In problematizing the wind turbine as obfuscatory, Golding implores us that as citizens of the Anthropocene, we need to think of ourselves as political beings.

This often-implied argument coheres well with Golding's most vital takeaways. Because wind turbines are becoming more of a distraction than a solution, they create a limitation, a situation of near false consciousness such that engaging in meaningful ecological politics is quite difficult. While Golding taking this step is laudable and a departure from run-of-the-mill environmental sociology, he also opens himself up for some critique. Golding heavily relies on the standards of the environmental sociological canon's macro-theoretical frameworks: Treadmill of Production, Ecological Modernization, and perhaps the theory that Golding relies on most heavily, Beck's Risk Society. The book serves as an essential introduction to wind power on this level. The command of theory can make this work especially well-suited for advanced undergraduates or graduate students needing a practical example of applications. But, as Golding admits in the early pages, this book raises more questions than it provides answers (20). While the voices support more democratic and transparent energy systems, future work would be well served by engaging with the leading-edge work on the political economy of the environment in general. The past half-decade has seen several works develop. Jason Moore (2015) and Anna Tsing's (2015) critiques of the Anthropocene and Ryan Gunderson, similarly to Moore, elaborate on a neo-Hegelian approach to nature-society relations.

However, what is important across these works are the implications for understanding politics as inseparable from the social analysis.

As Golding has written as part of his public sociology agenda: "The problem is not that wind turbines are as dirty as burning fossil fuels. The problem is that there is little evidence that our wind turbines are sited or used optimally, and strong evidence that alternative climate strategies would be better." Thus, as multiple offshore wind power projects progress near Kitty Hawk and Wilmington, North Carolina, sociologists and activists would do well to monitor their development closely. If these projects continue to move forward, how will they be received by the public (locally and across the state)? Will the projects be the economic boon Gov. Cooper promises, and how will economic opportunities and ecological burdens be distributed? To what degree do renewable energy projects reduce our dependence on fossil fuels?

If Golding is correct, then what is needed is a solid sociological critique of the renewables sector and the narratives it sews into the fabric of our lives. It is necessary to demystify the notions of sustainability that are not derived from the concerns of everyday people but from within the mental and financial structures of a ruling elite. Golding has provided a lucid starting point for proper political sociology of the environment that might take political and environmental social analysis seriously to create a more just society.

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