

Book Review: Power Shift: The Global Political Economy of Energy Transitions by Peter Newell

In Power Shift: The Global Political Economy of Energy Transitions, Peter Newell examines energy transitions at all levels of governance, drawing out the lessons learned from prior energy transitions to unlock an actionable understanding of today's struggle to decarbonise the global economy. While the book stops short of presenting a detailed comparative analytical framework, researchers can learn a great deal from Newell's activism, insights and his extensive survey of the existing literature, writes [Mark S. Langevin](#).

Power Shift: The Global Political Economy of Energy Transitions. Peter Newell. Cambridge University Press. 2021.

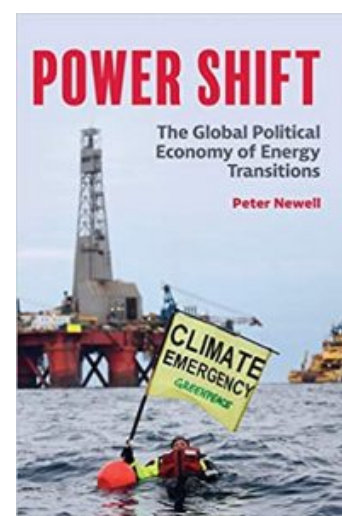
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Climate change and debates over energy production and consumption rivet the attention of policymakers around the world and scholars across disciplines. Peter Newell has taken full advantage of the spotlight given to the climate crisis to offer his insight into the world of energy politics and the literature on energy transitions. His new book, *Power Shift*, starts from the scientific premise that climate change is a threat that calls for a speedy and transformative global effort to decarbonise energy systems.

His analysis begins and ends with the global goal of limiting global warming to [1.5°C above pre-industrial levels](#), threading this benchmark throughout his discussion of energy transitions at local, national and global scales and within the complex intersection of economic development, public health, energy security and poverty. Newell's analysis of and advocacy for energy transitions fold into his greater political and scholarly concern with contemporary global capitalism and its climate change-induced 'legitimacy crisis'.

Newell's approach to examining the political economy of energy transitions is sensible, even for those unwilling to adopt his use of the Gramscian '[trasformismo](#)' concept for tackling such a complex scholarly puzzle. According to the author, well-established fossil fuel producers (termed incumbents) highlight their small renewable energy investments in the hopes of undercutting challengers (decentralised and community renewable energy producers), who are pushing for a swift transition to clean energy. He asserts that current rates of global warming limit capitalist growth, the critical precursor to the current system's legitimacy. Accordingly, 'green' or low carbon capitalist growth cannot keep up with the demands or resolve the system-wide contradictions (related to wage labour and the unequal division of labour and resources between developed and developing countries) that are further aggravated by global warming.

Conversely, Newell posits that climate change has triggered a set of power shifts that could result in a transformation of fossil-fuelled energy systems at the local, national and global levels. He aims to shed light on the possibilities of such transitions by providing a 'fuller political analysis of the historical precedents [...] of large-scale sociotechnical and economic change'. His approach draws out the lessons learned from prior energy transitions to unlock an actionable understanding of today's struggle to decarbonise the global economy.



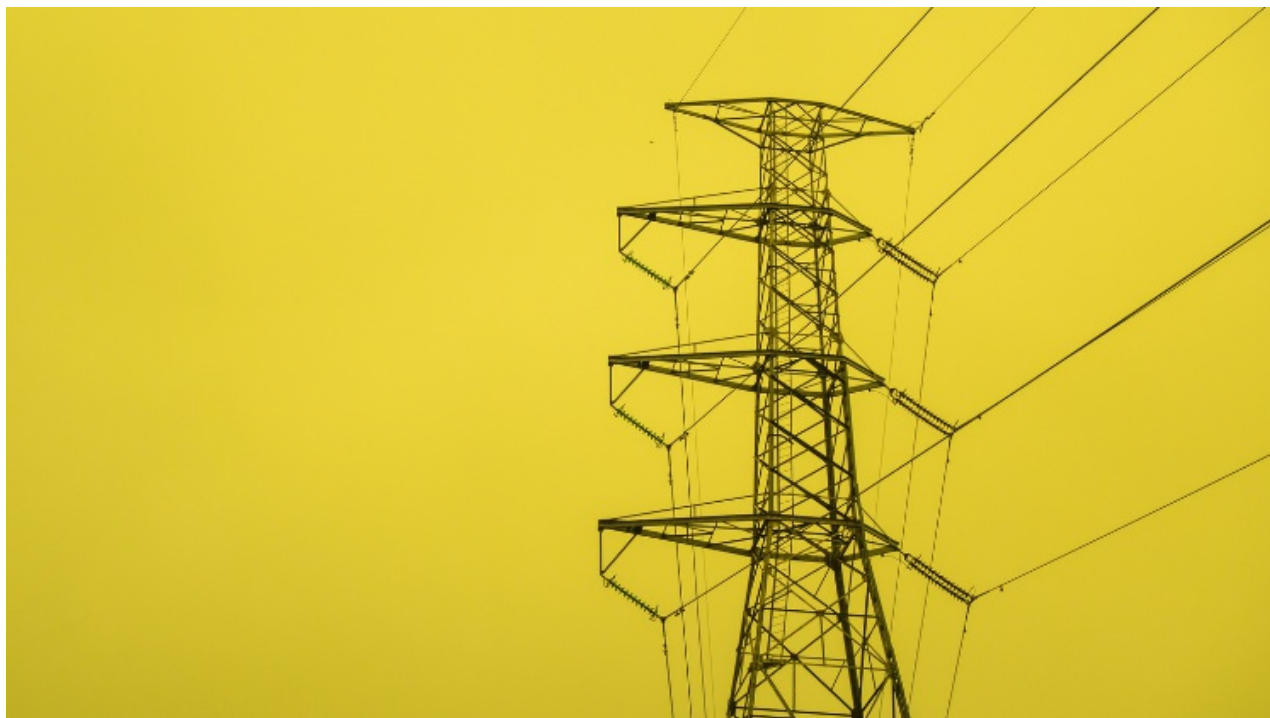


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Unfortunately, Newell does not formalise his theoretical and methodological claims for comparative analysis, though he does deliver a plethora of insights for both policymakers and energy policy researchers. First and foremost, the author does not carefully conceptualise and empirically mobilise ‘energy transition’ for comparison. In Chapter Two, Newell does present a detailed discussion of relevant elements of energy transitions and their underlying political economies, pinpointing his analytical impetus around ‘when and how transitions come about’. In so doing, he also informally specifies a nearly exhaustive bank of economic, ecological, political, social and technological variables that could be applied to a political economy analysis of energy transitions, but he stops short of precisely identifying the comparable historical cases and an accompanying set of explanatory statements to explain their outcomes.

In particular, Newell refers to and partially documents the last century’s incomplete transition from coal to fossil fuel liquids without a full description and comprehensive explanation of this case to compare and contrast with current decarbonisation efforts. He does offer occasional historical information that raises questions about the military and naval shift from coal to bunker fuel in the first half of the twentieth century, but does not employ this case, among many others, to outline a comparative analytical framework for examining the political economy of energy production and consumption across time.

In Chapter Three, Newell neglects an opportunity to propose and test a political economy framework for understanding shifts in energy production, especially in the current context of the politics of global warming. Similar to [Kathryn Hochstetler \(2020\)](#), Newell could have adopted or developed a framework to guide a comparative examination of the overlapping political economies of particular energy sources and production to assess whether the right mix of interlocking incentives are present to trigger a shift or transition. However, he seems more interested in punctuating the literature on the politics of climate change and energy transitions than in explaining the emergence, evolution and institutionalisation of specific energy systems, especially those that could inform our understanding of the global struggle to decarbonise. More to Newell’s original point, the book does not present formal explanatory statements to account for these transitions within broader developments in the global political economy.

For example, Newell proposes that ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’, understood as a recent evolutionary development of global capitalism, has squeezed national governments to privatise state owned enterprises (SOEs) in the energy sector, thereby constraining or eliminating energy transition pathways. He points to the constraints placed on developing countries by multilateral development banks (MDBs) as an example of the uneven distribution of power to shape transition outcomes but he does not explore specific cases.

Conversely, the World Bank has established an Energy Subsidy Reform Facility (ESRF) with the stated purpose of helping developing country governments design and implement energy subsidy reforms aimed at diversifying and incorporating renewable sources without jeopardising the welfare of the poorest citizens. Is this programme an anomaly to Newell's argument or, despite its express purpose, does it act to constrain recipient countries' capacities to shape their own energy futures? Without an overarching conceptualisation of energy transitions, harnessed to a disciplined political economy framework for gleaning the economic interests and political action underlying MDB's energy-related technical assistance and loan programmes, it is impossible to evaluate the ESRF and whether it constitutes a constraint, an outlier or an innovative programme that could expand the available energy transition pathways for beneficiaries.

The book's lack of a sturdy analytical framework for explaining the politics of energy transitions amid the current campaign to decarbonise disappoints. However, Table 7.1 on page 229 categorises 'competing energy pathways' that could serve researchers as a starting line for advanced efforts to conceptualise scenarios based on types of energy producers and consumers and their interrelationships within the broader global political economy. Such a research cornerstone would allow for comparison as well as guide empirical examination of incumbent and challenger interests along with a full range of stakeholder political action.

We can learn a great deal from Newell's activism, his stakeholder-based observations and his extensive survey of the existing literature. His book offers an ambitious and inspired plethora of insight and scholarly documentation that deserves researcher attention. Moreover, Newell's acumen leads him to recurrently spotlight the touchstone of any political economy study of energy — 'Ownership is key' — in his broader advocacy of community control over renewable energy production and distribution. Yet, the book falls short of translating the author's insights and experiences into a comparative analytical framework to guide future research or to serve as a text for the undergraduate classroom.

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