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Book review

Politics of Renewable Energy in China, by Chen Gang. Published by Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK, 2019, 176 pp, ISBN: 978-1-78811-814-9.

The development of renewable energy in China continues to move at an astoundingly fast pace, but it also faces significant challenges, such as very high rates of curtailment (Andrews-Speed and Zhang 2018). Chen Gang's analysis of the politics of renewable energy in China is, therefore, a timely work that addresses a pressing and practical issue for the country, which remains the world's leading CO₂ polluter by a considerable margin. The book is framed in the theoretical debate of authoritarian environmentalism, a discourse that has recently (re)gained popularity, mainly as a critical response to the lacklustre efforts of many liberal democracies to anthropogenic climate change (Lo 2015).

The overall argument of the book is that China's renewable energy politics are authoritarian, but not monolithic and centralised. The policy process is evidently non-participatory, dominated by the government. However, the government is pluralistic, consisting of various interest groups and stakeholders; therefore, power struggles and lobbying activities occur and the policy process is contested and far from rational. This fragmentation in energy governance manifests itself in two ways. First, at the policy formulation level, the presence of powerful interest groups – especially the central state-owned enterprises that are actively involved in the policymaking process due to their strategic importance, control of resources and long-existing political connections with top leadership – results in policy inconsistency, confusion and paralysis. Second, at the policy implementation level, the ineffectiveness of local implementation of central policy is driven by disobedient local governments (provincial, municipal and county), which are often free to make their own policy decisions based on local policy priorities that may or may not align with the central government's pro-environment and low-carbon objectives. As a result, China's huge investment in renewable power generation brings about huge waste and inefficiency.

What, then, are the implications of China's institutional deficiency, revealed by its renewable energy development, to the discourse of authoritarian environmentalism? Certainly, it raises important questions about the usefulness of the concept in analysing environmental governance in authoritarian regimes. The idea of authoritarian environmentalism typically has two layers of meaning: first, an autonomous state that is protected from interest groups and, therefore, can form policy in a rational manner; and second, the restriction of freedom to achieve desired environmental outcomes. However, the case of renewable energy development depicts a governance approach that is far from autonomous, and freedom to pollute is not heavily restricted.

The overall picture of the policymakers at the pinnacle of power in China, such as those in the National Development and Reform Commission, is that they are not all powerful, but had to share power with state-owned enterprises and local governments. On a related point, Gang also argues that renewable energy development in China is not primarily about environmental protection or climate change, and is instead driven by the mercantile interests of state capitalism.

Gang's account reveals that the concept of authoritarian environmentalism masks more than it reveals. Does it not follow that the concept needs to be radically reformulated to enhance its analytical power? For instance, integrating the concept of multi-level governance into authoritarianism would enable the concept to go beyond a simple account of government as a monolithic entity, and consider the multi-layered central-local dynamics discussed in the book. In this aspect, it is rather disappointing that Gang did not explore the theoretical implications of his findings in more depth.

Normatively, Gang's account also raises question about the (supposed) comparative superiority of authoritarianism, especially in political efficacy, in addressing environmental challenges over liberal democracies. For example, one conclusion drawn by the author is that the lack of effective civic supervision and participation, a key element of liberal environmental governance, contributes to the governance challenges in renewable energy development. However, Gang stops short of making concrete policy recommendations, instead preferring to conclude on a rather optimistic note that the central government is noticing the problems and should be able to address the issues.

Having said that, the case of renewable energy development does not define China's overall environmental governance. There are significant differences in governance dynamics and intensity over different environmental issues, such as air pollution, water pollution, forest protection and energy conservation, and it is likely that some areas that are considered more pressing by the central government adopt a more authoritarian approach to governance. Furthermore, China's governance style is not constant and moves in cyclical fluctuations between periods dominated by top-down control and periods dominated by bottom-up politics. Recent analysis, for example, suggests that under Xi Jinping's administration, the government has taken environmental protection more seriously and has also consolidated more power at the central level, resulting in both tougher environmental policies and more effective policy implementation (Kostka and Zhang 2018). In other words, it appears that China may be a better example of authoritarian environmentalism going forward after all, and future research will be necessary to understand the meanings and implications.

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Food Loss and Food Waste, Causes and Solutions, by Michael Blakeney. Published by Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK, 2019, 225 pp, ISBN: 978-1-78897-538-4.

This book contributes to definitional, institutional and analytic understanding of one of society's great challenges and places this challenge firmly within the reach of policy instruments both conventional and novel. Its survey of a large body of literature, and the diverse stakeholder landscape, on food loss and waste (FLW) is enlightening. It provides a good entry point for the lay reader to several vexed issues (such as definition and past attempts at measurement) while providing good summaries for the guidance of researchers and policymakers (such as regulatory approaches taken and mapping of problems to policy frameworks).

An agreeable style offers short paragraphs of short sentences, with points well made. The travel-friendly small volume does however occasion a crowded page. Tables are used well, but the labelling of columns can be confusing. The chapters are of varying length, but all writing is succinct and clear. The large volume of literature available on disparate aspects of FLW, all of which claim to focus on global challenges associated with rising population and living standards, compels a summary volume such as this to select and implement a structure and sequence in presentation. This aspect of the book will disappoint some readers: the introduction examines the nature and extent of the problem before offering definitions and metrics in the next chapter; regulatory options and strategic approaches are discussed before the discussion of policy formulation around established concepts; and the very well-constructed and explained list of drivers of FLW is not formally aligned with the chapters that describe action. For these reasons, the book is a reference work rather than a compelling story advocating change. For that role it is well supported by an excellent and extensive index of topics, but in contrast the table of contents is laconic and does not cater well for the author's frequent return to topics for reiteration and application.

Definitions and metrics are vexed topics that the book progresses through gradually and informatively by addressing first the fundamental questions like 'what is food?' The reasoning and discussion is clear and well presented, although might have been improved by a graphic providing a typology or