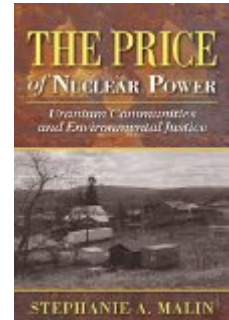




Stephanie A. Malin. *The Price of Nuclear Power: Uranium Communities and Environmental Justice.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015. 238 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-6978-9.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In *The Price of Nuclear Power: Uranium Communities and Environmental Justice*, Stephanie A. Malin delivers a well-researched and impassioned plea to hear the voices of rural communities in the Colorado Plateau that have been in the middle of uranium production in the United States. Malin's ethnography includes in-depth interviews conducted between 2008 and 2011, archival documents, and survey responses of residents in three rural communities on the Colorado Plateau. These mixed methods serve Malin well as she presents an objective and well-rounded view of the different sides and perspectives involved in the complex issue of uranium development in the United States. Overall the book contributes to our understanding of the tradeoffs involved with uranium development in the United States and provides an interesting glimpse into the personal, on-the-ground motivations involved in the conflict over the prospect of a uranium development renewal in rural communities in the United States.

Malin documents the history of uranium production on the Colorado Plateau and the more re-

cent nuclear renaissance underway as the United States and the rest of the world pursue nuclear power as a possible partial replacement for fossil fuels in order to limit global warming. The stakes of this debate could not be higher as the world transitions away from fossil fuels and towards a decarbonized global economic system. Most attention concerning the debate over nuclear energy thus far has focused either on the prospect of nuclear reactor meltdowns or on the controversy over where to store nuclear waste disposal. Malin's book focuses our attention instead on the front end of the process of uranium extraction and production. As she ably documents, this debate is no less contentious as activists fight both for and against a renewal of uranium production in the United States.

The main strength of the book lies in the personal perspective of the people in the rural communities who will experience both the benefits and costs of uranium renewal. Malin's interviews and surveys document that social and cultural cleavages are largely responsible for the conflict

between what she calls “sites of resistance” and “sites of acceptance.” For some rural communities such as Nucla and Naturita in Colorado, persistent poverty, spatial isolation, and resource dependence become a way of life in which the perceived benefits of economic development outweigh the perceived environmental and health costs. On the other hand, for more well-off rural communities that have successfully transitioned to a tourism-based economy, such as Telluride, CO, the perceived costs of renewed uranium production outweigh the perceived benefits.

However, there are two minor weaknesses of the book. The first concerns Malin’s use of the term environmental justice to describe her study. It is clear that the rural communities on the Colorado Plateau have historically suffered environmental injustice by the federal government, as Malin clearly documents. However, her research shows that the impoverished rural communities in her study are now mostly supportive of a renewal of uranium production. According to a survey conducted by Malin, 87 percent of residents near a proposed uranium mill are supportive of the construction of the site, mostly for economic reasons. It is therefore unclear why this is now a question of environmental justice, since in the environmental justice literature the term is typically used to describe situations in which people fight against such projects, or in Malin’s terminology, “sites of resistance.” Malin’s study does not seem to be so much about environmental justice as it is about a more complex phenomena in which in some cases communities are willing to accept the environmental and health risks in order to reap the perceived economic benefits of industrial projects.

The second weakness of the book is the author’s attempt to weave into her narrative the concept of neoliberalism. Malin uses the term in the sense of deregulation, de-evolution of power from the federal to the local level, and trust in market-based logic. According to Malin the shift to

neoliberalism leads to sites of acceptance and prevents sites of resistance from enacting transformative change. However, Malin documents how the federal government committed environmental injustice during uranium development in these communities before neoliberalism took hold. So why should these communities trust the federal government to protect their environment and health when they failed so miserably before? In fact it seems rational that these communities would place more trust in the local policymakers and business leaders to protect their health and promote their interests since they would presumably have more opportunity to influence these more locally based leaders. It is difficult to understand why, in Malin’s words, the “hegemony” of neoliberalism at the macro level is to blame when in fact the people in these impoverished communities are the ones advocating for such a de-evolution of power in order to have more control over their lives. It is also unclear why this is a result of neoliberalism, as her explanation for the connection between the historical turn towards neoliberalism at the macro level and support for renewed uranium development in the rural communities she studies is weak.

Despite these minor weaknesses, Malin’s study vastly improves our understanding of the complexities involved in energy production in impoverished rural communities. As Malin documents, these rural impoverished communities are in many cases willing to accept the environmental and health risks in order to reap the perceived economic benefits from such development. These “sites of acceptance” are a critical part of the reason why industrialization continues to spread throughout the world, as people are often willing to accept the environmental and health costs for the perceived economic benefits of such industrialization. We often blame corporations or governments for the environmental and health degradation involved with such industrialization. Malin’s study makes clear that the affected communities are at times at the frontline of advocating for such

development for their own perceived benefits. Thus this is not so much a case of an environmental injustice or a consequence of a top down neoliberalism hegemony, but rather an example of how in many instances people are willing to accept the environmental and health costs to reap the perceived economic benefits of industrialization.

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