Sandeep Vaheesan
Democracy in Power: A History of Electrification in the United States
Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2024
ISBN 978-0-226-83638-6 (PB), $45.00. 400 pp.

Energy transition represents a major environmental event, one that entails a profound redistribution of property and power. It provides both an opportunity to realise energy democracy and a potential driver of social inequality. In Sandeep Vaheesan's recent book, *Democracy in Power: A History of Electrification in the United States*, he examines the history of American electrification from the late nineteenth century onward. Within this long trajectory of institutional and market evolution, he seeks to identify possible pathways towards achieving energy democracy in the current process of decarbonisation. By situating the contemporary challenges of energy reform within a deep historical perspective, Vaheesan offers a coherent and well-reasoned interpretation of the American electricity sector's past and its present predicaments.

Vaheesan is not a professional historian but a scholar long engaged in the fields of law and public policy. He formerly worked at the American Antitrust Institute and currently serves as the Legal Director at the Open Markets Institute, where his research focuses on antitrust, market regulation, and energy justice issues. This professional background enables him to revisit the history of the American electricity industry through the lens of institutional history, exploring the enduring tensions between the power system and democratic governance.

Motivated by a strong awareness of contemporary challenges, Vaheesan deliberately avoids limiting his inquiry to a particular period or geographical context. Instead, he offers a longue durée account of American electrification from the late nineteenth century to the present, organised around the evolving struggle between public authority and financial power. His historical reconstruction is ultimately driven by an engagement with the democratic dilemmas posed by the United States' ongoing pursuit of decarbonisation. For him, the crucial political question concerns who determines the pace and direction of decarbonisation – a question that ultimately shapes whether the country can achieve a 'just transition' towards a zero-carbon society. Yet, in the prevailing pathways towards 'net zero', decisions over decarbonisation and the allocation of resources remain largely concentrated in the hands of a small group of corporate executives and financiers, leaving scant room for public participation. In Vaheesan's view, this concentration of authority risks engendering what he terms a form of 'net-zero oligarchy'. Through his historical reconstruction, Vaheesan shows that the history of electrification in the United States is, to a considerable extent, a history of how ordinary people have sought to claim and exercise political power. In particular, the two major restructurings of the electricity sector – during the New Deal and again in the late 1970s – revealed

to Vaheesan the industry's inherent malleability. Building on this insight, he advances an optimistic argument: decarbonisation should be seen not only as a challenge in addressing the climate crisis, but also as a historical opportunity to reshape the country's energy structures and relations of power – ultimately determining who will control the energy systems of the future.

The book is clearly structured and organised chronologically into three parts: Past, Present and Promise. In the section on the Past, Vaheesan traces the history of electrification, modernisation and the public power movement in the United States from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Chapters One and Two focus on the rise and subsequent obstruction of the municipalisation movement, as well as the struggles of the 1920s public power campaigns amid corporate monopolies and regulatory failures. Chapters Three and Four turn to the New Deal era, examining how the federal government, through such key legislative measures as the Public Utility Holding Company Act and the Federal Power Act, redefined the relationship between the state, capital and society, thereby establishing a national framework for public electricity. Here Vaheesan exposes the tensions between electrification and social modernisation: while public power lowered electricity prices and fostered rural development, it failed to eliminate – and in some respects even deepened – racial, gender and class inequalities.

Vaheesan's historical account of the American electricity industry is both comprehensive and systematic, providing a general history of American electrification. Nevertheless, his study appears somewhat conservative in terms of source material and historiographical innovation. Much of the narrative is built upon compilations of existing research, with frequent references to the same secondary works (pp. 52–54, 70–73). Compared with the classic studies in the history of electrification, the book's treatment of empirical detail and analytical depth remains comparatively limited. Drawing on his legal expertise, Vaheesan offers several illuminating institutional analyses. For example, he reinterprets Samuel Insull's proposal of state regulation as a 'third way' between municipal socialism and acute competition, arguing that this model effectively transferred the governance of the electricity industry from the sphere of local democratic control to that of technocratic management, thereby producing a form of regulation detached from the citizenry (pp. 28–34). He also traces how judicial intervention and the expansion of holding companies further undermined the efficacy of public oversight (pp. 42–46), and how the Roosevelt administration sought to dismantle the utility holding company system through landmark legislation such as the Public Utility Holding Company Act and the Federal Power Act (pp. 87–97). This legal-institutional approach provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the mechanisms of power reproduction within energy politics.

One of the book's principal strengths lies in Vaheesan's critical reflection on the contemporary American electricity system, through which he traces the

historical roots of its institutional, political and social predicaments. He argues that, despite the reforms of the New Deal and subsequent waves of market restructuring, the industry remains suspended between democratic aspiration and technocratic governance, between the demands of public purpose and the imperatives of private capital, and between the ambition of decarbonisation and an enduring dependence on fossil fuels. Chapter Five exposes how the failure of grassroots democracy was a structural outcome of early public power reforms that never realised genuine public participation. Chapter Six examines the dilemma of regulatory agencies that continue to 'serve two masters' – financial interests and the public good – demonstrating the endurance of the New Deal–era model of private monopoly under public regulation. Chapter Seven shows how the continued dominance of fossil fuels reflects the reproduction and consolidation of institutionalised industry power, embodied by investor-owned utilities and fossil-fuel alliances, within the political economy of climate change.

Building on the interplay between historical precedent and contemporary reality, Vaheesan, in the third part of the book, Promise, outlines an institutional blueprint inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt's metaphor of the 'birch rod'. He envisions the creation of a public power for the entire country – locally accountable, democratically governed, and fully decarbonised – through a system of federal chartering that would re-establish public control over the energy sector. Vaheesan conceptualises the possibility of public takeovers as the 'birch rod kept in the cupboard': even if such intervention is rarely exercised, its mere presence functions as a deterrent, compelling utilities to improve performance, moderate prices, and accelerate decarbonisation. In his view, this institutional mechanism represents the key to achieving energy democratisation in the twenty-first century. Vaheesan further proposes an upgrade of the existing federal power framework by addressing its uneven regional coverage, limited authority, and fragmented governance. He advocates the establishment of regional public power authorities endowed with comprehensive powers of generation, transmission and planning. At the same time, he emphasises that these authorities should be required to adopt participatory procedures to ensure genuine grassroots democracy. This vision lifts the book beyond the boundaries of institutional history and into the realm of environmental political philosophy.

Democracy in Power may not be the most groundbreaking work in the history of electrification, yet its intellectual and practical contributions should not be underestimated. With a pronounced sense of public concern, Vaheesan bridges the history of electrification with contemporary debates on energy democracy, offering a valuable historical dimension to our understanding of the institutional challenges shaping the current energy transition. The book ultimately reminds us that history not only chronicles humanity's enduring

pursuit of democracy but also offers interpretive insight for grappling with the structural dilemmas embedded in today's energy regimes.

HUIXIN HUO
University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences