

Summary

Clean energy would provide many benefits for society. But it is unrealistic to expect any energy source to provide unlimited power at no cost. If that's what "energy abundance" is supposed to mean, it's really a non-starter. What clean energy can do is to power society affordably while improving public health and curtailing global warming.

Matt Yglesias, as you probably know, is a leading voice in the Abundance Movement. I follow him on Substack and find many of his posts informative and insightful. Like Yglesias, I believe it's imperative to build clean energy infrastructure in place of fossil fuel technologies, which is why I [advocate](#) green industrial policy. But I found a recent Yglesias [post](#) on "the case for clean energy abundance" disturbingly off pitch.

One reason is that the post seems unduly dismissive of environmental harms. It is dismissive of objections to a proposed ultra-large solar project that would destroy what Yglesias describes as a "bunch of forest." Maybe this project would be warranted, but it's not wrong to consider the environmental cost. Yglesias also opposes efforts to restrict fossil fuel production. This is partly on political grounds, because it makes it hard for Democrats to win in places like Louisiana, and partly because he doesn't think those efforts accomplish much anyway. Yglesias could be right about the benefits of a more hands-off approach to fossil fuels, but it would be nice to see some acknowledgement of their harm to public health and the environment. Instead, he describes the only problem with coal as being "smoggy," which underplays coal's serious public health and environmental harms.

The more fundamental problem is the way Yglesias frames energy abundance. The desired endpoint, he says, is electricity that is "too cheap to meter." He brushes aside methods like energy efficiency that reduce the need for new generation. In his view, the goal should be to have so much electricity that we wouldn't care about waste. He foresees a world of "*Limitless clean energy for everyone.*" (His italics.) Thus, the world of abundance is seemingly one where economics becomes irrelevant because scarcity is no longer a factor. While economics says there's no free lunch, Yglesias portrays an endless all-you-can-eat buffet.

This is all unhappily reminiscent of the tech bro view that we shouldn't worry about any actual human problems because they will all be swept away in the AI

Singularity. Yglesias normally doesn't seem to think like that. This is all very different from the analytic "slow boring into hard wood" that gives his substack its title.

Challenging environmentalism seems to be a high priority for Yglesias, so much so that he loses his normal analytic cool. Of course, it's not uncommon for people to invest their energy in distinguishing themselves from others whose views are relatively similar and who therefore compete with them for support. Beyond that, Yglesias may view environmentalists as the party of "no," automatically opposing any new initiative. And some environmentalists do seem to be opposed to economic growth in principle. But it would be a shame for him to abandon his real strength, hard-headed pragmatism, because of annoyance at competing viewpoints or for the sake of dramatizing his views.