From climate change to acid rain, contaminated landscapes, and biodiversity loss, the origins of many of our least tractable environmental problems can be traced to the operations of the modern energy system. A scan of nightfall across the planet reveals a social dilemma that also accompanies this system’s operations: invented over a century ago, electric light remains an experience only for the socially privileged, as two billion human beings—almost one-third of the planet’s population—receive evening light by candle, oil lamp, or open fire, reminding us that energy modernization has left intact enduring social inequalities. Recent energy price spikes point to nearly 35 years of policy failure on sustainability and social equity grounds. A reexamination of energy-environment-society relations and a rethinking of policy strategy are needed.

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Global Institute of Sustainability, Tempe Center, Room 158
Arizona State University, Tempe campus

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