
REIMAGINING A JUST TRANSITION

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Transitions have a bad name. Rob Hopkins, who arguably introduced the word ‘transition’ into the environmental lexicon, is said to have chosen the most neutral expression possible, so that reluctant consumers and businesses would not be frightened by the hard choices and sacrifices entailed by living in harmony with the biosphere (as opposed to blindly destroying it). Transitions are supposed to be painless.

What is worse, the French historian Jean-Baptiste Fressoz has convincingly argued that ‘energy transition’ is an expression coined by industrial lobbies in the mid-1970s to prevent the idea of ‘energy crisis’ from taking hold in western minds. Transitions are supposed to never really happen (and remain, forever, ideas for tomorrow).

And yet, the concept of transition is actually a very powerful tool to think about what we should be doing in the face of worsening ecological crisis—and to act upon it. Imagining a transition means having to answer three fundamental questions: why is the world we live in not desirable anymore, what world do we want and how to get from here to there?

Resonant idea

If you think the notion of ‘transition’ is a bit tricky, wait until you grapple with the idea of a ‘just transition’. Promoted in the early 1990s by the US labour leader Tony Mazzocchi—to resolve ‘the conflict between jobs and the environment’—it has resonated in recent climate summits, where heads of state have endorsed the need for a ‘just transition of the workforce’ in fossil-fuel industries.

Understood from the standpoint of the political cycle, however, there is a clear warning here to all governments *not* to engage in ecological transition—lest they be overthrown by the social revolt of laid-off, ‘transitioned’ workers and angry taxpayers. Just ask the French president, Emmanuel Macron.

And yet the *just transition* might indeed be the most interesting idea of the early 21st century, as the twin crises of inequality and the biosphere feed one another—provided we embrace its full meaning. It is much more demanding, unfortunately, than ‘a helping hand to make a new start in life’ for fossil-fuel workers and their families, as Mazzocchi put it (the economist Jim Boyce estimates that the cost of guaranteeing re-employment for workers, meeting pension commitments and assisting communities for the whole US fossil-fuel industry, one of the largest in the world, amounts to less than 1 per cent per cent of the investment needed in the country for low-carbon energy).

So what would be the key components of a just transition?

Unjust world

First question, first answer: what is the unjust world we don’t want anymore? It is one where inequality and unsustainability go hand in hand. One where outsourcing of environmental damage of all kinds is enabled by the gap between the rich and poor among and within coun-

tries, and where the poor become ill and die because of the damages inflicted on their well-being via the degradation of their environment. Environmental inequality—access to clean air, drinkable water, energy, food, protection from climate change and so on—is an inescapable challenge of our time. Inequality literally pollutes our planet.

This is true at the global level, with 90 per cent of deaths related to air pollution occurring in low-and middle-income countries. It is also true of Paris—city of light, love and lung irritation. Recently released maps show clearly that hundreds of thousands of Parisians in low-income and middle-class neighbourhoods and along the *périphérique* ring road are exposed to poisoning pollution, while the affluent Paris of the south and west is largely exempt from this lasting degradation of wellbeing. Inequality is a pollution enabler; pollution is an inequality accelerator.

Second question, second answer: what is the just world we desire and should be aiming for? One where human wellbeing (here and now, tomorrow and elsewhere) is improved—not growth. Yes, the growth compass is still an attractive deception to many but that is because they confuse it with social progress. And a fundamental reality is materialising before our eyes: it is not growth that creates wealth but wealth that creates growth. Growth is the superficial measure and the result of human development.

If growth is being pursued at the *expense* of wellbeing, as is so obviously the case in the US—where health, institutions and infrastructures are crumbling while gross domestic product, driven by inequality, increases by 3 per cent annually—then growth is an impoverishment. Look at Chile, where GDP *per capita* has increased by 80 per cent over the last 15 years, where growth was 4 per cent last year and 3 per cent this and yet justice (distribution rather than production) is the core demand of the protesting public.

Look at California, where GDP grows at the breathtaking rate of 5 per cent a year (almost as fast as in China) and whose ecospheres have

entered a systemic crisis so severe that parts of this magnificent region are quickly becoming uninhabitable. Isn't it obvious that the health of children is a far better indicator of development than GDP growth? Why not do what New Zealand did last May and put it front and centre in our public finances?

Just policies

Finally, how to build just policies between the unwanted world and the desirable one? By considering inequality as an obstacle and justice as a lever. Consider climate change. One of the most shocking climate numbers (and there are plenty) is not the 3.2C global temperature rise by the end of the century business as usual entails. It is the fact, rarely discussed, that even if all countries achieve their targets and pledges we are still heading for a +2.9C world.

In other words, the problem is not achieving targets—it's changing them. And this requires starting, at long last, the global conversation about climate justice (a notion only mentioned once, and misinterpreted, in the Paris agreement).

A handful of countries, 10 per cent exactly—and a handful of people and industries within these countries—are responsible for 80 per cent of human greenhouse-gas emissions causing the climate change which is increasingly destroying the wellbeing of much of humanity around the world, mostly in developing nations. On the other hand, the vast majority of those most affected, in African and Asia in their billions, live in countries which carry almost nothing in terms of responsibility but are highly vulnerable to the disastrous consequences of climate change—heatwaves, hurricanes, flooding and so on—triggered by the lifestyles of others.

Why is climate change still not mitigated and indeed worsening before our eyes? Largely because the most responsible are not the most

vulnerable and *vice versa*. Climate justice is the key to understanding and eventually solving the urgent climate crisis. It is the solution to climate change. As much as the great Greta deserves praise for standing tall in the face of stupidity and hatred, she is wrong on one important point: people will not ‘unite behind science’; they will unite behind justice. Let’s start the conversation on climate justice at COP 25 and make it the substance of a 2020 climate-justice treaty, which would be efficient because it is fair.

Social-ecological policy

This is as true at the national as the global level. As much as opponents and sceptics of low-carbon initiatives want it to be so, the ‘yellow vests’ revolt, one year old this month, did not demonstrate that environmental policies must be unfair by nature—they can be unfair by design.

It is perfectly possible, tomorrow, to introduce in France, for instance, a progressive carbon tax which would redistribute money to most households and help drastically to reduce fuel poverty. This is the typical social-ecological policy, part of a broader social-ecological state built on the justice-sustainability nexus, which will take us to the future we (still) want.

None of these three steps of the just transition is easy to take in and of itself but if taken together simultaneously will reinforce one another. Aiming to reduce environmental destruction, rather than increase growth, is reinforced by combatting inequality here and now and by taking inequality into account when designing environmental policy.

Difficult? For sure. But try living in a world that burns like California and breaks down like Chile.

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