



Just Transitions

written by Anna Bettini
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November 2018. A wave of nearly 300,000 women and men in yellow vests floods France. A protest without leaders or spokespersons, rises from the poorest regions affected by the increased costs of fuel implemented with the objective of achieving a low-carbon transition. Protests marked by tension, with barricades and roadblocks on highways, roundabouts, state roads, overpasses, with burnt vehicles, culminating under the windows of the Elysée, surrounded by demonstrators singing the Marseillaise and shouting “Macron, resign”. Anger that comes from injustice to the detriment of workers in precarious conditions, who see their future threatened. Images that have shocked many and that have



opened the debate further and more publicly towards a just energy transition.

In the last years, among nations and within countries, debates have emerged about how we see and produce energy. But how can we shift our dependency on fossil fuels in our consumerist culture? What are the most effective strategies for creating an equitable system? And what are the challenges stakeholders are going to face as the energy landscape changes? *Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon World* by Morena, Krause, and Stevis, helps us navigate the future of energy, illustrating what is meant by just transitions, the origin and different meanings of the concept, as well as the uses and misuses of the term.



Just Transitions

Social Justice in the
Shift Towards a
Low-Carbon World

EDITED BY
Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause and Dimitris Stevis

The book offers a series of case studies through the voice of academics, researchers, and activists, presenting different perspectives and obstacles faced by communities and individuals with different economic and social backgrounds. We embark on a journey from Australia to the United States, from Argentina to South Africa, to Germany and Canada to understand what has worked and what has not in just transitions projects and further steps that we should take. Although the book struggles to bring us on a linear trajectory in terms of organization of its chapters, it offers critical insights on the social understandings toward an equitable, just

transition approach. The reading highlights the economic and technological complexity of energy systems and how this process represents a steep but necessary path that we ought to take.

In the first three chapters, the authors lead us into an in-depth analysis of what is meant by just transitions and events that have marked its creation and associated narrative. The notion of “just transition” emerged as a response from trade unions wanting safer jobs for workers while fighting against environmental and social injustices. Finding a space and ensuring that the voice and demands of unions



were heard has not been an easy process. This battle has triggered ideological clashes. With the early 2000s, the concept seemed to have been put on a back burner, but its re-emergence years later has led to the creation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and close collaborations with green think tank foundations. Their goal was to make sure workers' voices would be heard in policy circles such as the UN Environment program (UNEP) and that bridges would be built with other actors engaged in the international climate debate. Although nowadays the popularity of just transition initiatives are the outcome of a more positive progressive thinking, Stevis, Morena, and Krause and Rosemberg argue that, the term – just like other popular terms in the past (e.g. sustainability and sustainable development) – is often incorrectly used and often mobilised with “greenwashing purposes” (Stevis, Morena, and Krause, p.22) by corporate business and individuals not interested in greener solutions. Moussu emphasizes how the win-win rhetoric typical of a business in transition and ‘corporate just transition’ strategies, have become dominant narratives, often characterised by contradictions and ambivalences. Such an approach leaves unanswered fundamental questions on who “will bear the costs of the transition toward a low carbon economy” (p.70). The authors reflect on this aspect and on the improvements that can be made, what has worked and what has not worked over the last 30 years of just transitions approaches. A timid tone of hope pervades the book, perhaps as a result of the persisting reluctance of petrochemical companies to fully actualise a process of transition.

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Good’s account addresses this by catapulting us into the contrasting Australian landscape where a just transition approach struggles to become a reality in the country. Similarly, Alvarez Mullally, Cabrera Christiansen, and Maffei’s chapter recount struggles in the agricultural region of Rio Negro, Argentina, where the government encourages the development of hydraulic fracturing and the



continuous use of fossil fuels. Corporations' controversial and dismissive attitudes toward climate change have "weakened the counter hegemonic forces that are seeking to embed a just transition in a radical transformative agenda" (p. 90). Although the low-carbon transition appears as a distant landmark into both the Australian and Argentine horizon, Good states how a transition can be only achievable by ensuring justice for workers and their communities, and not prioritising financial interests over them. Álvarez Mullaly, Cabrera Christiansen, and Maffei encourage a change of mentality, whereby people remain at the center of just transition toward a more socio-environmental sustainable life.

The example of Jackson, Mississippi, illustrates how grassroots movements can be of help in shifting the current situation where the existing economic-political system has proved to be ineffective for its residents, due to a long history of oppression, environmental and racial injustices. Cooperation Jackson, an emerging network of worker cooperatives, demonstrates how "the construction of an interconnected and self-sustaining network of green worker-owned cooperatives and supporting institutions secure a just transition that empowers communities, developing autonomous, self-reliant spaces of power" (p.96) . In a city characterised by vulnerabilities, climatic and environmental risks and consequent health problems, and where the level of poverty among the black community is a lacerating reality, Cooperation Jackson succeeds through the organization of campaigns, a network of activists, and alliances, and policy efforts at a local and national level. Obstacles and roadblocks are unfortunately part of a change in people's mindset and behavior, a task that, as Akuno states, requires patience and commitment (p.111)

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The rest of the book takes us to South Africa, Germany, and Canada, and



Australia – four countries whose economy primarily relies on coal. In South Africa, the privatization of Eskom, the main company responsible for the generation, transmission, and distribution of energy, has led to increased social inequalities, with a large part of the population unable to use electricity and relying on coal as a substitute. Among the many problems identified by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, a number of problems stand out: lack of accountability toward poor communities, corruption and fraud, poor financial management, and scarce skills. Such problems still exist today due to successive governments' failure to address inequalities and a general paralysis of the political system. We need a radical change leading to a “new and more socially, environmentally and politically just electricity system” (p.146), where Trade unions can secure a fair transition for workers in the coal sector and for the population unable to tap into electricity. Finding a common agreement, uniting everyone “around a common vision of a people’s energy system” has become the greatest challenge (p.146) for both South Africa and Germany, an undisputed leader in the low-carbon movement. Despite the successful policies aimed at encouraging renewable resources, Germany seems unable to reduce its dependence on coal, as Reitzenstein, Schulz, and Heilmann argue. Coal has shaped the economic history of Germany, modified its social and cultural fabric, and has remained a fixed variable for the economic growth in the country both pre- and post-unification. The authors criticise the usefulness of a multi-stakeholder approach through a specially created commission, the Commission for Growth, Structural Change, and Employment, commonly referred to as the ‘Coal Commission’, whose mandate “was to agree on an action plan that would enable Germany to meet its domestic emission-reduction targets for 2030” (p.152). By privileging established stakeholders over new ones, the Coal Commission failed to make radical changes and bring about a transformative plan. Reitzenstein, Schulz, and Heilmann wonder whether this initiative was not a way for the German government to shy away from acting on coal “by outsourcing the problem to others”(p.167).

Mertins-Kirkwood and Hussey delineate a practical example of a just transition



model in Alberta, Canada. The Alberta province has actively intervened to implement policies and support the communities that will be negatively affected by the Government's decision to phase out coal by shutting down coal-fired generators. This will lead Canada to achieve its climate policy goals and contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This strategy can be interpreted as a way to distract from "the need to phase out oil and gas production" (p.174) given how much coal contributes to energy generation in Canada.

In the last part of the book, Snell points out how the concept of just transition and its repackaging and appropriation by different stakeholders has led to a "dilution in its original conceptualization by trade unions" (p. 198). Trade unions have instead always tried to remain pragmatic. The closure of the Hazelwood Power Station in Australia, in March 2017 is a good illustration. Through the direct intervention of trade unions, mobilised to ensure work for former employees, a series of transition initiatives have been implemented. Unfortunately, the ideological paralysis resulting from corporations' denial of climate change hinders such processes, with the government avoiding to interfere in companies' decisions. Coming to agreements is a constant struggle where one of the two parties [in this case the coal industry] tries to snatch the victory, hence slowing down policy making processes for fair and practical transitions.

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Readers willing to find the perfect formula for a fair transition in this book will be disappointed. Indeed, the authors are not aiming to provide clear cut answers to the complex issue of just energy transitions. Rather they aim to encourage involved parties to bring workers back to the center of decision-making processes, to empower affected communities to take over the environmental debate, so as to encourage workers of polluting industries to accept the need to transition, and to support green strategies. As we read the book, we realise that it



is not an easy straightforward path. A strategy that can be applied internationally is still unclear, but not impossible to achieve. *Just Transitions* tries to make us understand this. The book is animated by a social and environmental justice spirit, not idealistic but pragmatic, and takes the reader on a journey toward collective morality.

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