Just Transitions

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Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon World

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Introduction: The genealogy and contemporary politics of just transitions

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LESSONS FROM KATOWICE

Organised in early December 2018 in the heart of Polish coal country, the Katowice Climate Conference (COP24) was billed the 'Just Transition COP' by participants and observers. As Kate Wheeling explains in the *Pacific Standard*, it 'was meant to be the one that prioritized the rights and needs of workers whose livelihoods are dependent on fossil fuels, so that they don't suffer as countries work to decarbonize their economies' (Wheeling, 2018). Given its symbolic location, COP24 was seen as an opportunity to focus the international community's attention on the justice and equity dimensions of climate mitigation and adaptation. It was a chance to counter a resurgent 'jobs vs environment' discourse and hopefully make progress in an international climate negotiation space that was struggling to deliver on the Paris Climate Agreement, especially following Donald Trump's decision in 2017 to exit the agreement. The hope for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – recently rebranded as UN Climate Change – and the host country was to use COP24 to generate 'momentum' and send strong 'signals' that the low-carbon transition was not only good for the climate and the economy, but good for workers and communities as well – and especially those whose livelihoods still depended on coal.

On the face of it, COP24 appears to have delivered on its promise. As part of the official conference, an 'Ambition and Just Transition Day' (10 December 2018) was organised and over 25 side events were devoted to the issue (Jenkins, 2019). These were opportunities for stakeholders to launch and showcase reports and initiatives, and share stories of just transitions in action. The Polish presidency of the COP, with support from around fifty governments, drafted and launched the 'Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration'. In the document, signatories 'stress that just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs are crucial to ensure an effective and inclusive

transition to low greenhouse gas emission and climate resilient development'.[1] A series of just transition-themed events were also organised on the margins of the official conference space. These included the Climate Hub, a civil society space hosted by Greenpeace, where a number of talks and presentations were organised on just transition. These and other just transition-related efforts within and around COP24 were not new but a product of the concept's mainstreaming in the UN space over the past decade, in particular following its inclusion in the preamble of the Paris Agreement in 2015. The Agreement refers to the need to '[take] into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities' (UNFCCC, 2015).

Yet, on closer scrutiny, the 'Just Transition COP', rather than providing a clear sense of how a just transition can be achieved, exposed the gap between climate policy makers' narrow understandings of just transition, and the complex and multifaceted reality of a 'living concept' whose origins and meanings lie deep in the everyday experiences of workers and frontline communities. It also exposed the gap between governmental endorsement of just transition and the reality on the ground; a reality in which the most vulnerable sections of society and least responsible for the climate crisis are either made to pay the price for low-carbon transition or used/manipulated to justify climate inaction or low ambition.

The fact, for instance, that the host country, Poland, presented itself as a champion of just transition while simultaneously backing the coal industry and calling for an 'evolutionary transformation of the power sector, instead of drastic restriction on the use of fossil fuels' (Darby, 2018), is revealing of this gap between discourse and reality. The conference organisation and venue also embodied this contradiction. The conference's main sponsors were the state-owned coking coal company, Jastrzebska Spólka Weglowa SA, the state-owned utility company Polska Grupa Energetyczna SA, which burns more coal than any other power company in Europe, and the Katowice-based Tauron Polska Energia SA, which owns coal mines. If this was not enough, the host city's official booth featured large cages full of coal and household products made of ash (Chemnick, 2018).

As the climate conference unfolded, two major events contributed to emphasise the importance of a just transition in addressing the justice and equity dimensions of climate change, while further highlighting the multiple and at times contradictory approaches to it. France, whose

1 https://cop24.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/Solidarity_and_Just_Transition_Silesia_Declaration_2_.pdf

government had officially endorsed the Silesia Declaration[2] and whose President, Emmanuel Macron, was designated 'Champion of the Earth' by UN Environment in 2018, was in the midst of what would become the greatest social movement protest since May 1968. Just two days before the Katowice COP, 'Yellow Vest' protesters hit the global headlines during a day of violent clashes with the police in the streets of central Paris. Images of burning vehicles, barricades and a ransacked Arc de Triomphe were all over the news. The movement was triggered by a tax increase on fuel whose proceeds were intended to fund the low-carbon energy transition. The 'Yellow Vests' expressed, among other things, a growing sense of anger at the fact that the country's increasingly cash-strapped and precarious working and lower-middle class, was unjustly being made to pay for the energy transition. The movement highlighted the gap between political rhetoric and the reality of French climate policies. At a press conference on 4 December 2018 in Katowice and in response to the French government's decision to freeze the tax increase following the preceding day of protests, Pierre Cannet of WWF France summed up the situation in the following manner:

> There's no viable solution to reducing emissions on the scale needed in France without a price on carbon pollution as well as complementary policies, but a process that is not developed in an inclusive manner is destined to fail. Today's announcement that the French government is freezing carbon tax shows they put the cart before the horse by not addressing the social measures necessary for a just transition. Achieving decarbonization at the speed called for by science requires political will, and equity needs to remain at the core of the discussion. (WWF, 2018)

At around the same time and on the back of the 2018 mid-term elections, the equity and justice dimensions of the low-carbon transition also came to occupy the political debate in the United States. Just weeks before the COP, on 13 November, a group of activists from the Sunrise Movement, a youth-led political movement on the left of the Democratic Party, staged a sit-in in the office of Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker, to get her to endorse a Green New Deal. This marked the beginning of a sustained campaign to persuade Congress to pass a ten-year plan to transition the United States towards a low-carbon economy. In February 2019, the newly elected Democratic Representative, Alexandria Ocasio-

2 https://cop24.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/files/The_List_of_Leaders_and_Parties_endorsing_the_Solidarity_and_Just_Transition_Silesia_Declaration.pdf

Cortez and Senator Ed Markey, presented a joint 'Green New Deal Resolution' (House Resolution 109, 2019) that explicitly referred to the need 'to achieve net-zero gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers'. Growing calls for a Green New Deal have spurred a massive debate within the Democratic Party, as well as within and between labour and environmental justice groups – such as the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) – that actively campaign for a just transition. In particular, it has led to interesting discussions on who should drive the just transition, and for whom.

ONE CONCEPT – DIFFERENT MEANINGS

What the Yellow Vest movement and Green New Deal debates highlight is that the Paris Agreement alone was not responsible for the popularisation of just transition. It is an idea that is currently being promoted by a range of actors. It reflects a growing awareness of and concern about deepening inequalities between the world's rich and poor, and how the climate and environmental crises, and efforts to address them, are accentuating them. The climate justice issue is increasingly being framed as one that cuts across national borders. The tension is more and more between a minority of super-rich individuals with high-carbon lifestyles, and a mass of poor people who are least responsible for the climate crisis but suffer the most from its effects *and* are disproportionately made to pay for climate mitigation and adaptation measures. As Oxfam showed in a report published just before COP21 in December 2015, the richest 10 per cent are responsible for almost 50 per cent of lifestyle consumption emissions, as opposed to the poorest 50 per cent, who are responsible for only about 10 per cent of lifestyle consumption emissions (Oxfam, 2015). In short, the notion of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' does not only apply between countries but within countries as well.

The current political climate marked by growing defiance towards political elites, and the ensuing resurgence of populist, xenophobic, nationalist, anti-climate, 'jobs vs environment' discourses – from Hungary to the United States, to Brazil and the Philippines – has also done a lot to raise just transition's profile. In particular, Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, following a campaign where he expressed his love affair with coal – 'Trump digs coal' – acted as a wake-up call for mainstream climate advocates. On the back of Trump's decision to exit the Paris Agreement, and in a bid to better integrate the social justice dimensions of the shift from a dirty to a green economy, various mainstream climate NGOs, think tanks, business interests and foundations – from Bloomberg Philanthropies to Greenpeace, to We

Mean Business and the World Resources Institute – appropriated the just transition concept.

The growing references to just transition undoubtedly signal a desire to further root social and equity concerns into the climate debate. While this is to be welcomed, it also complicates the task of identifying what just transition stands for, who is behind it, what are the underlying politics, and who it is for. Instead of leading to an alignment of views, the concept's growing popularity has actually turned it into a contested concept, like sustainable development (Connelly, 2007). It has created the conditions for struggles to impose a given understanding of what just transition should *actually* mean. What underlying theories of change and worldviews are associated with these various understandings of just transition? Are they mutually exclusive or compatible? Given the concept's growing popularity and centrality in the climate governance space – especially among corporate interests whose commitment to social justice is questionable to say the least – addressing these and other questions is essential for anyone who takes climate justice seriously. This appropriation of the concept is especially of concern to groups that were actively mobilising behind it long before it became fashionable in mainstream climate circles. As Jacqueline Patterson, director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Environmental and Climate Program explains, 'It's a concern when Big Greens and others are using the term and getting funded for using the term. It's become the term du jour for foundations, and those front-line communities become objectified' (McKibben, 2017).

The inclusion of just transition in the Paris Agreement, while raising awareness of the social dimensions of the low-carbon transition and contributing to the concept's popularisation, has also paradoxically contributed to de-historicise it and to – conveniently? – separate it from the frontline communities and labour unions that originally developed it and continue to mobilise around it in their day-to-day struggles. The risk is in losing sight of the fact that current references to just transition in the Silesia Declaration, Paris Agreement and Green New Deal are the outcome of four decades of debates, campaigns and hard-won struggles by workers and frontline communities at the local, national and international levels. By paying lip service to the concept's history and embeddedness in the labour movement and frontline communities, policy makers and climate specialists 'uproot' the concept and empty it of its transformative, emancipatory and subversive potential that essentially comes from the fact that the just transition is both aspirational and grounded in people's everyday lives and struggles. As various contributions to this volume highlight, just transition acts as a beacon to guide

collective action and simultaneously gives rise to tangible alternatives on the ground.

This process of 'de-historicisation' and 'uprooting' of the concept through appropriation is not restricted to stakeholders in the climate debate but also characterises certain academic analyses. Indeed, as we will see in the following section, a significant part of the burgeoning academic literature tends to present just transition as a rigid, ahistorical concept for policy makers, and to downplay its essential function as a mobilising tool for the disenfranchised. Much of the research pays lip service to the decisive and historic role of labour and frontline groups in conceiving, nurturing and developing the concept over the past forty years, as well as their motivations for doing so.

JUST TRANSITION IN ACADEMIA

While academic research on just transition is fairly recent, there is a long history of applied and programmatic research on the topic, for the most part conducted by activists and organic intellectuals from within the ranks of the labour movement and associated groups and organisations. Union-friendly publications such as *New Solutions* in the United States – launched by union leader Tony Mazzocchi and his networks in 1990 (see below) – as well as the UK-based *Hazards* magazine, played an important role in hosting analyses and debates on the strategy of just transition (Slatin, 2002, 2009; Bennett, 1999). Rather than providing an analysis of this work here, we feel that it is more relevant to integrate it into the historical account that follows so as to better grasp its embeddedness and function for just transition advocates.

In the early 2000s, a handful of academic articles referred to the just transition concept. Noteworthy examples include an article on labour environmentalism in the United States (Gould et al., 2004), another on Australia with a focus on coal (Evans, 2007) as well as reflections by people directly involved (Bennett, 2007). Towards the beginning of the present decade, a larger body of academic research – in the field of labour environmentalism (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2013) – began to more systematically refer to and, on fewer occasions, focus on just transition (Räthzel et al., 2010; Snell & Fairbrother, 2011; Stevis, 2011, 2013). It is also worth highlighting the precursory role of a small group of Australian and South African academics (Cock, 2011, 2015; Snell & Fairbrother, 2011, 2013; Goods 2013).

While most early research was rooted in the experience and politics of the labour movement, a 2012 volume by Mark Swilling and Eve Annecke, entitled *Just Transitions: Explorations of Sustainability in an*

Unfair World presages a different approach that combines sociotechnical transitions with social justice and transitional justice approaches – in this case in South Africa (Swilling & Annecke, 2012). This has led Peter Newell and Dustin Mulvaney (2013) to argue in their much-cited article that '[in] academic circles the [just transition] term derives from a set of literatures on "socio-technical" transitions … that are also increasingly being applied to questions of energy politics and policy' (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013:133). While some of the more recent research on just transition may in fact draw from the field of sociotechnical transitions, such an affirmation does not do justice to the fact that most just transition research was and has been grounded in labour environmentalism and, more problematically, contributes to obscure the concept's origins. Instead of sociotechnical transitions, a more appropriate connection would have been with sociotechnical systems, an approach developed after the Second World War to deal with the design of work in UK coal mines but which is not acknowledged by sociotechnical transition analysts (Cohen-Rosenthal, 1997; Cohen-Rosenthal et al., 1998). Additionally, just sustainability transitions have more affinity with just transition (Agyeman et al., 2016).

Swilling and Annecke's book fits into a first category of literature that focuses on broad topics or issues, such as sustainable development, justice, or energy transitions, but tends to leave out or downplay the role of organised labour or other specific actors. This body of work refers to just transition in a rather generic manner and with little to no references to the concept's history or to research – especially from labour environmentalism – that adopts a historical approach (Swilling & Annecke, 2012; Jasanoff, 2018; Heffron & McCauley, 2018). Within this category, some analyses, especially on energy transitions and environmental justice, do include limited references to the concept's origins and history (Farrell 2012; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Routledge et al., 2018). Such research can contribute to a broader understanding of just transition provided it does not strip it of historical agency – whether unions or other social forces – and does not downplay the importance of the research and analysis produced by unions and their allies over the years.

A second body of work recognises the importance of specific historical actors and relations, including labour. Within this category, a first subcategory specifically looks at the labour origins of just transition and explores union and union-ally efforts to implement just transition policies (Snell & Fairbrother, 2013; Goods, 2013; Felli & Stevis, 2014; Hampton, 2015; Snell, 2018; Morena, 2018). Drawing extensively on Felli's (2014) work on global union environmentalism, Dimitris Stevis

and Romain Felli, for instance, explore the variability of global unions' approaches to just transition (Felli, 2014; Stevis & Felli, 2015).

A second subcategory recognises the origins of just transition and the centrality of unions but also situates just transition within broader political and theoretical debates (Cock, 2011; Stevis & Felli, 2016; Evans & Phelan, 2016; Healy & Barry, 2017; JTRC, 2018; White, 2019; Ciplet & Harrison, 2019). This engaged research combines historical depth and contemporary analysis of both the just transition concept, as well as its links to broader transformations on the left (Barca, 2015a). In a recent article, and drawing on the current Green New Deal debates in the United States, Damian White offers a fascinating analysis of the possible convergences between just transitions and 'design for transitions' currents. In particular, he looks at how they could 'facilitate modes of antiracist, feminist and ecosocialist design futuring that can get us to think beyond degrowth/Left ecomodern binaries and toward a design politics that can support a Green New Deal' (White, 2019:1).

The just transition concept's growing popularity has led some academics to categorise the uses and understandings of just transition (Cock, 2011, 2015; Felli & Stevis, 2014; Stevis & Felli, 2015; Hampton, 2015; JTRC, 2018; Barca, 2015b). In their recent article, David Ciplet and Jill Lindsey Harrison, for instance, focus on the different understandings of just transition and the concept's increasingly contested nature (see also Goddard & Farrelly, 2018; Barca, 2015a). Having retraced its evolution and appropriation by environmental justice groups, they explore 'existing and potential areas of conflict, tensions, and trade offs within just transition planning and activism' that derive from this (Ciplet & Harrison, 2019:1). Stefania Barca shows how just transition demands range 'from a simple claim for jobs creation in the green economy, to a radical critique of capitalism and refusal of market solutions' (Barca, 2015b: 392).

As our brief – and necessarily incomplete – overview of the literature indicates, many academic studies of just transition either leave out or only mention the concept's origins in US labour environmentalism and its globalisation through the agency of national and global labour unions and environmental justice groups. They tend, and this is justifiable given the urgency of the climate crisis, to focus on its contemporary uses, as well as its conceptual and theoretical implications and potential. Yet, by downplaying the importance of the concept's history and the centrality of agency, they run the risk of downgrading – and even omitting – grassroots and labour contributions to debates around low-carbon transitions and further reinforcing the misleading narrative that labour and nature do not mix (for a view of the breadth of labour environmentalism

based on theory and cases, see Räthzel & Uzzell, 2013). In the following section, we seek to rectify this by providing a comprehensive history of just transition. This, we believe, is essential to fully grasp the similarities and contradictions between the different uses of the just transition concept in the different chapters of this book.

THE EMERGENCE OF JUST TRANSITION: 1980S–*C.*2001

Just transition was not the product of theoretical debates over environmental justice or sociotechnical transitions. It was developed during the 1970s and 1980s by workers in response to 'job blackmail' from capital and its allies under the increasingly hyperliberal capitalist turn unfolding in the United States.[3] Over time it expanded both geographically and to other constituencies through the efforts of national and global labour unions. Unlike various other concepts that have spread throughout the global environmental or developmental field (such as 'sustainable development' or 'green growth'), just transition's emergence was geographically and socially rooted.

The idea behind what was eventually called 'just transition' was born in the United States, in the 1970s. Most observers agree that it was the brainchild of Tony Mazzocchi – a trade unionist working on occupational safety and health at the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers' Union (OCAW). Just transition, while not initially referred to in those terms, was the product of his determined efforts to reconcile environmental and social concerns. As far back as the 1950s, Mazzocchi had been exposed to social environmentalist ideas. Unlike many fellow trade unionists, his priority was not to make all jobs safer. He acknowledged that certain jobs were too detrimental to workers, society and the environment, and should therefore be scrapped – in the case of nuclear weapons for instance – or replaced by automation (Leopold, 2007). In all cases, the priority should be to empower workers and communities, and enable them 'to know and act', especially in the face of job blackmail. This, he believed, could be achieved through the strengthening of labour environmentalism. As early as 1973, for example, Mazzocchi successfully enlisted support from environmentalists to help OCAW wage what he presented as 'the first environmental strike' over health and safety issues at Shell refineries across four US states.

3 This strategic connection should not obscure the fact that just transitions are not limited to the environment and that transitional strategies in response to various other transitions, such as offshoring or demobilisation, have been common if not satisfactory.