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FUTURES BORN OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

Building transitions as collaborative projects of justice

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The problem: Energy transitions risk replicating the exploitative relations and growth imperatives of the fossil fuel economy, minimizing any positive climate impacts.

The solution: More expansive approaches: reframing transitions as sociopolitical processes where collective action, centered on consent and reciprocity, is allowed to thrive; and supporting diverse initiatives that are already underway, particularly those that reframe climate-focused transitions as opportunities to radically redefine, redistribute, and relocate power.

Where this has worked: Radical rearrangements of social, economic, and environmental relations toward justice objectives already working include the Transition Towns movement in the United Kingdom; farmer-run solar cooperatives in India; land reform–led energy initiatives in Scotland; localized solar generation and "energy reparations" initiatives in New Orleans; "energy democracy" activists in New York City and elsewhere engaged with the Solarize model of community energy.

This chapter draws on our work on the social and environmental effects of changes to energy systems at local, regional, and global levels. We examine how different groups think about and build multiple forms of energy transition. We highlight how there is no single "right" way to organize energy nor to change it from its current reliance on fossil fuels to new energy sources.

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Some of the broader goals of energy transitions are clearly established, such as aiming to build energy systems that

- minimize environmental harms,
- address rather than exacerbate social inequalities, and
- reduce use of fossil fuels.

However, the specific dynamics of transitions remain up for debate. Specifically, *who designs, constructs, and controls processes of transition are open questions*. Social movements are often forced to compete against companies and governments involved in energy transitions who see themselves as the parties in charge of organizing these goals as a single transition focused on profits (Partridge 2022).

In our work, we focus on transitions as opportunities to think differently about or dismantle dominant political, economic, and social institutions (Howe and Boyer 2016). This chapter therefore highlights diverse forms of resistance to the ways those in power are co-opting energy transitions. As social scientist Larry Lohman has noted, those advocating for reorganizing energy systems need to be critical about the fossil fuel industry's goals:

> As their reports and advertisements frankly reveal, most oil companies, banks and industrial corporations see energy transition not as a process that will replace fossil fuels, but as a process that will supplement them . . . as a way of delivering better returns on investments that, at bottom, will go on being organized around oil, coal, and gas. For them, an energy transition is a way of diversifying and intensifying the same type of labour exploitation that fossil capitalism made universal. Climate activists need to be careful lest their own advocacy of "transition" merely plays into this dynamic.
>
> *(Lohmann 2015:6)*

Countless cases globally show how much industrial-scale "renewable" energy development exacerbates exploitative relationships with the earth and with workers (Dunlap 2019).[1] Market-led and consumption-based transition initiatives prioritize the bottom line, which threatens to deepen rather than alleviate environmental injustices experienced by the world's most marginalized populations. In China, for example, farmland has been cleared for new industrial parks to manufacture solar panels, leaving many farmers with no choice but to accept exhausting, poorly paid manufacturing jobs (Chen 2013). Consumption-led transitions also lead to an ongoing expansion of electricity production and resource use (Kallis et al. 2020; York and Bell 2019).

Yet, at the same time, a rising global movement is mobilizing against neoliberal (see Chapter 8 for an explanation of neoliberalism) and extractive energy transitions – highlighting the analytical goal of re-politicizing energy debates that are increasingly dominated by apolitical, technocratic, and growth-oriented economic

frames and objectives (Avila-Calero 2017). By paying attention to how histories of both resource extraction and political mobilization shape the immediate potential for building less destructive energy systems, we examine what actions generate *energy transitions as collaborative projects of justice*, that is, as "socio-political processes where collective action, centered on consent and reciprocity, is allowed to thrive" (Partridge 2022:47). In this examination, we emphasize the importance and influence of place-based histories. We consider transitions to be always in relation to theories of change and visions for the future that help build social movements – particularly when articulating and acting toward shared visions that refuse the imitation and replication of elite values (Fanon 1963; Maeckelbergh 2016).

Our title here echoes a widely read text from 1913 that emphasizes how any contemporary action or innovation builds upon societal precedents and is impossible without the work of global majorities. The very conditions of possibility for enacting an intentional energy transition (or transition of any kind) are shaped by prior histories of many different kinds, including distinct sociopolitical and geographical histories of collective organization, industrial production, social mobilization, and resource extraction, among others. The text in question by Kropotkin reads:

> Millions of human beings have labored to create this civilization . . . Other millions, scattered through the globe, labor to maintain it. Without them nothing would be left in fifty years but ruins. There is not even a thought, or an invention, which is not common property, born of the past and the present . . . Thousands of writers, of poets, of scholars, have labored to increase knowledge, to dissipate error, and to create that atmosphere of scientific thought . . . They have been upheld and nourished through life, both physically and mentally, by legions of workers and craftsmen of all sorts. They have drawn their motive force from the environment.
>
> *(Kropotkin 1995:15)*

Our goal here is to apply these insights in reconsidering how energy transitions are framed and discussed in the face of unfolding climate crises – underlining how visions for the future are 1) shaped by the past and 2) emergent within ongoing, place-specific struggles for social and environmental justice.

The past is still with us

There are many global practices and concepts that explicitly orientate visions for the future around a deepened understanding of the past. One example with roots in West Africa is embodiment of *sankofa*, a word used in Akan wisdom and philosophical life that is conventionally translated into English as "go back and fetch it," "return to your past," or "it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost" (Temple 2010:127). The idea inspires multiple forms of resistance. Recovery, repair, and reclaiming control over what is yet to happen begins

with reclaiming what has been lost, or stolen, before now. Anishinaabe writer Patty Krawec (2022) specifically calls for collective action today to be rooted in "unforgetting" histories of resistance and struggle – particularly when renewed relations among and between groups, including human and nonhumans, serve to help disrupt histories of violence and denial of rights. That said, reading such practices as a form of traditionalism, or as a *return* to an imagined past, is a mistake. Rather, this orientation is closer to what Ariella Azoulay explores as unlearning imperialism – that is, making explicit the ways in which our thoughts, actions, and modes of existence are shaped by processes of imperialism, then refusing those forms of violence, and committing instead to processes of repair (Azoulay 2019). In other words, collective futures are rooted in the present: they emerge in the organizing, remembering, resisting, and mobilizing taking place right now.

This re-presenting of the future is an orientation found also in other political movements, albeit in somewhat different forms. Stuart Hall maintained that committing to the construction of a new political will must be grounded in analyses of the present that are neither "rote" nor "celebratory" and which attend to "things as they are, without illusions or false hopes" as the basis for actions that help us "transcend the present" (Hall 1988:13–14).

The grassroots collective of co-researchers, Colectivo Situaciones, incorporates a similar ethos into their processes of militant/activist research. In their practices, they enact the possibility of liberation in the present by working from

> the power (*potencia*) of what is and not of what "ought to be" . . . Research militancy does not extract its commitment from a model of the future, but from a search for power (*potencia*) in the present. That is why the most serious fight is against the a priori, against predefined schemes.
>
> *(Colectivo Situaciones 2007:84)*

Elsewhere, this approach further underlines the power of potential, lying in uncertainty, possibility, and openness to alternatives: "it's not reasons that make revolutions, it's bodies" (The Invisible Committee 2017:7). One way to engage with such approaches is to identify and challenge how histories of suffering and exploitation curtail contemporary action (Barandiarán 2022; Frazier 2007). Meaningful transitions need to work to dismantle and overcome those curtailments.

Specific cases directly address the role of energy in such transitions. Andrew Curley opens his book, *Carbon Sovereignty*, with the observation that

> energy transition is not simply an ideal for the future; it is also empirically a series of past events. Included in energy transition are the marginalization of tribal places, the expansion of unsustainable cities, and the slow violence of toxic spaces. Transition is not just a political rhetoric or rallying point; it is made violent by its implementation on already existing colonial landscapes.
>
> *(Curley 2023:5)*

Curley examines the clean energy campaign of Diné environmental activists that centers *transitions* around Diné lifeways, land, and alternative visions of survivance (Curley 2023:28). The latter is a term that Gerald Vizenor describes as "an active sense of presence over historical absence, deracination, and oblivion" (Vizenor 2008:1). The complexities of Diné histories of coal extraction and emergent energy politics challenge any singular understanding of "transition." Amid debates about what kinds of politics might better sustain Native economies, ecologies, and communities, significant work has been done to articulate "an environmental politics in which transition *away* from large-scale extraction of natural resources can go hand-in-hand with transition *toward* a more autonomous, self-reliant, sovereignty Native Nation" (Powell 2017:223). In this sense, transitions as collaborative projects of justice require energy projects, energy relations, and infrastructure development to be designed so that they further collective goals, even while those objectives (and the specific means for achieving them) may remain contested.

A further consequence of this orientation toward transitions is that collective work toward building futures involves *both* looking forward and looking back: not only anticipating the diverse desired futures of transitions and climate resiliency but also addressing ongoing historical injustices and scrutinizing their effects. For example, elsewhere we have argued that to achieve the dual goals of minimizing global pollution and meeting diverse demands for environmental justice, energy transitions need to also involve the safe decommissioning of older energy infrastructures and management of their toxic legacies (Partridge et al. 2023). For impacted communities, energy transitions will only be effective when, for example, the air and water contamination caused by nearby leaking oil wells has been addressed. The scale of this problem globally continues to grow – and many communities are put at increased risk as the owners of oil and gas wells go bankrupt or become elusive now that the wells are no longer profitable. Even contained and seemingly well-run decommissioning operations, like that at Rincon Island off the central California coast, leave communities with the conundrum of what comes next (Barandiarán et al. 2022; CREW 2023). Expanding the temporal frame of analysis around transitions emphasizes that time does not necessarily pass in simple, linear ways; responses to climate change must address processes that can be slow, fast, sudden, or all at the same time. The specific needs of societies to safely and equitably decommission multiple forms of old or abandoned fossil fuel infrastructure is a case in point. Both locally and globally, we will have to live with the polluting legacies of "legacy" fuels for countless years to come.

A word of caution here. The concept of transition implies epochs, or very long periods of time, and different rates of change from one epoch to another (Curley 2023). Particularly in places shaped by histories of resource extraction, demands for an end to ecological disruption may envision transition as a "post-extractivist rupture" – a defiant assertion that fossil fuels are not an inevitable basis for human life – even while the process(es) of enacting such a transition take time (Powell 2017). Climate change is routinely framed in terms of urgency

and the immediate need to achieve a rupture with fossil fuels. This urgency, however, is also used to justify energy policies that may help meet short-term targets to reduce emissions but do nothing to address underlying systemic injustices that require long-term social change (Barandiarán 2019; Partridge et al. 2018). Much transitions discourse is similarly troubling, focusing *only* on the present while overlooking histories of struggle and change. This results in proposals that diagnose, at a particular moment in time, social and environmental faults with certain components of energy systems, yet put forward only limited modifications in response – all framed in the language of crises, problems, and solutions (Partridge 2022). Too narrow a focus on the present means a risk of replicating ahistorical analyses and policies.[2] This is analytical "presentism": focusing on the urgency of injustice without also demanding the radical, long-term, and structural transformations that would serve to dismantle colonial power and end violence against marginalized groups (Whyte 2021). As with the language of urgency, the language of crisis risks obscuring from view underlying causes of social and environmental injustice.

When a discourse of crisis is amplified (typically followed by innovation as the best response), analytical presentism fails to recognize how past experiences of violence shape differing degrees of power for enacting more autonomous and just social and energy systems (Whyte 2021). No amount of urgent action, implemented today, can change the fact that Indigenous peoples have inhabited a "postapocalyptic world" since the invasions of colonialism began – an epoch also characterized by resistance, kin-making, and resurgence (Dillon 2012; Gross 2014; Partridge 2022). For many people, it is likely already too late to avoid the dangerous effects of climate change, but the struggles for justice continue (Whyte 2020). Yet much energy research writing on transitions uncritically adopts an institutional perspective on social change. Such authors assume that powerful actors will do the right thing when presented with sufficient information (Healy and Barry 2017). Or they assume, again falsely, that extant political and judicial systems can deliver justice for Indigenous and marginalized groups even when such systems "routinely denigrate and discriminate against those same people and communities" (Partridge 2022:56). By contrast, transitions as collaborative projects of justice build on processes of unforgetting and repair, building presence and survivance, and foregrounding the role of diverse resistance movements who are already engaged in struggles for survival.

Support for the work that is already being done

Along with (re)framing transitions to cover more complicated temporal frames, it is necessary to support diverse place-based struggles toward sustainability – typically mobilized in response to historical dispossession – rather than hoping that new technologies alone will provide solutions or expecting equitable results from reformist rearrangements of resource-intensive systems of production and

consumption. Technologies may of course play a role but tend to have more long-lasting positive effects when they are designed and used in response to specific local needs. For example, in our own work in Dhundi village in India, a community-led and nongovernmental organization–financed project established a "solar cooperative that produces Solar Power as a Remunerative Crop" as a holistic energy initiative: combining localized solar energy generation with groundwater management and income support for farmers (by replacing diesel pumps with solar power and making surplus energy available for sale to the state grid, thus incentivizing a reduction in overall water extraction) (Partridge 2022). What began as a pilot project has built on its success and continues to grow its community of solar farmer participants.

Still, there are no silver bullet solutions. Instead, the reframing of transitions we are describing places the focus on how different communities, at different scales, can reassess and redesign relations with the fossil fuel industry by challenging the underlying imperatives of contemporary extractive economies (Partridge 2017b). By redesigning how the products and practices of fossil fuel extraction are avoided or integrated into everyday life, future-oriented action can be primarily rooted in the resources and realities immediately at hand – actions which, in many contexts, begin with communities reclaiming control over land and political processes (Kenrick 2011; Partridge 2017b). In certain parts of Europe, these strategies have been fundamental to building awareness around the transition concept.

For almost 20 years, the Transition Towns movement has encouraged communities to creatively explore strategies for building resilience, tailoring coordinated actions to place-specific social dynamics and ecosystem relations (Hopkins 2008; Partridge 2022). The movement grew from a collective, pedagogical permaculture project that was published in 2005: "Kinsale 2021: an Energy Descent Action Plan" (ibid.). As cited elsewhere (Partridge 2022:52), suggested principles to support "energy descent" include

1) localizing production of food, energy, and building materials wherever possible;
2) designing projects and enterprises that are low carbon with regard to both inputs and outputs;
3) bringing assets (such as land, businesses, energy generation, buildings) into community ownership;
4) creating a vision of abundance for the future while recognizing that our world is one in which credit, resources, and the materials that support energy systems are finite; and
5) endorsing business models that are not purely for personal profit (such as social enterprises and cooperatives) (Hopkins 2008; 2019).

The breadth of focus of these proposals reflects how differently they might be enacted and realized in diverse global contexts. Each approach plays a part in supporting locales and communities in their efforts to endure, respond to, and

hopefully survive the effects of global climate change. Addressing and reducing overall energy use remains central to these efforts.

The many diverse goals of transitions as collaborative projects of justice are thus based in radical reimaginings of place. This means reconnecting energy transitions with a politics of conviviality (Illich 1973), with the politics of degrowth and radical global redistribution (Kallis et al. 2020), as well as abolition and gender justice (Heynen and Ybarra 2021). Abolition ecologies draw on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *abolition geography* and the foundational premise that "freedom is a place" (Gilmore 2017:227). Abolition, understood here as "the destruction of racial regimes and racial capitalism," entails

> not only the end of racial slavery, racial segregation, and racism, but also the abolition of a capitalist order that has always been racial, and that not only extracts life from Black bodies, but dehumanizes all workers while colonizing indigenous lands and incarcerating surplus bodies
>
> *(Johnson and Lubin 2017:12)*

Place-making processes, thus engaged with abolition, are about more than resource management and localization (both of which are practices that can be fundamental to rebuilding collective political power, as is the case with many commons-based initiatives) – they are processes that amass and align collective powers to end oppressions experienced by specific communities in specific locations.

These are powerful actions that urge a deeper reframing of climate-focused transitions as opportunities to radically redefine, redistribute, and relocate power. Drawing on abolition ecologies, Black radical thought, and oral histories in Washington, DC, Ranganathan and Bratman (2021) describe abolitionist climate justice as a radical reimagining and reorientation of resiliency not toward adaptation to "future external threats," but instead as an ethics of care, mutuality, and healing – an approach to climate justice which analytically centers ongoing historical oppressions and the "intersectional drivers of precarity and trauma" experienced by people who are most exposed to climate change impacts (Ranganathan and Bratman 2021).

Affected communities are not defined by the violence they suffer, however: abolition ecologies call for "attention to radical place-making and the land, air and water based environments within which places are made . . . [demanding] attention to the ways that coalitional land-based politics dismantle oppressive institutions" (Heynen and Ybarra 2021:21). Again, this connects to the immediacy of transitions as collaborative projects of justice: often the most pressing need is more substantial support for work that is already being done, more opportunities for acts of resistance to achieve their goals.

Histories of collective organizing

In New Orleans, coalition movements have made the case for localized solar projects as a form of "energy reparations" (Luke and Heynen 2020). This is

a process of "relocating control of energy systems, and the multiple forms of power associated with that control, within low-income and Black communities" both as an act of reparation and as "a forward-looking strategy for dismantling the processes of slavery, patriarchy, imperialism, and genocide that fuel a status quo defined by 'petro-racial capitalism' (Luke and Heynen 2020)" (Partridge 2022:32). The potential for redesigned energy systems and energy relations to contribute to movements for social justice is here brought into the center of transitions thinking.

In New York City, Myles Lennon (2021) documents the work of "energy democracy" activists engaged with the Solarize model of expanding residential solar energy generation through local employment and in support of community-based economies, and also as a way of reclaiming power within accountable, collective organizations. Similarly, this work places energy system change firmly within a social context – specifically one that seeks to address ongoing histories of exploitation and exclusion. These activists

> caution against a renewable-powered world where electricity continues to be controlled by unaccountable investor-owned utilities who focus on maximizing their profits on the backs of rate-payers in communities of color; where fossil fuel corporations invest heavily in industrial-scale solar and wind farms to abet – not attenuate – their extractive practices; where renewable energy developers occupy and steal indigenous lands to power the infrastructure of multinational corporations; and where communities of color continue to supply undervalued labor to the energy generation industry and see none of the financial benefits of a broad energy transition.
>
> *(Lennon 2021:4)*

By making these multiple dimensions of energy transitions explicit – and with a focus of collective activism – addressing overlapping inequalities becomes an inseparable goal of energy systems change.

Crucial to the project goals of the Dhundi solar farmers' cooperative, mentioned earlier – "to reconfigure our power economy, our groundwater economy, and our agrarian livelihoods" (Shah et al. 2017:15) – is a local history of success with cooperative enterprises. Dhundi is located in Gujarat state, home to one of the world's largest agricultural cooperatives, with the effect that "cooperative organizing, joint ownership, collective earning, and pooling resources for mutual economic benefit – these are practices that, rather than being dismissed or viewed with suspicion, are widely seen as positive and productive modes of organizing" (Partridge 2022:141). As the number of decentralized solar projects globally continues to grow, the Dhundi solar farmers' cooperative underlines a fundamental consideration for such forms of energy transition: localization projects largely depend on community labor, resources, relationships, and cooperation to succeed. And this success is greatly facilitated in communities that have prior experiences of collaboration, cooperation, and histories of collective organizing.

Today, a community of just over 100 people on the small isle of Eigg, 5 miles off the West Coast of Scotland, enjoy the benefits of a community-owned, community-run, island-specific micro-grid based on a mix of renewable energy (with backup diesel generators). Built in 2008, the micro-grid radically altered residents' relationships with fossil fuels, replacing previous energy provisioning that saw each individual property dependent on noisy, polluting, expensive, and inefficient household generators, dependent on diesel shipped over from the mainland. Crucially, in June 1997, the residents of Eigg had coordinated with other communities and land-reform activists and were successful in launching a community "buy-out" of the island – reclaiming from a single landlord collective control of the land, planning, development, and infrastructure governance while developing accountable decision-making processes. The decarbonization of electricity supplies on Eigg is thus bound up with these shared acts of collective reclamation. As a transition initiative, the micro-grid project was enabled by three mutually reinforcing factors:

1) Directly democratic and accountable decision-making
2) Community control of land and other resources
3) Collaborative organizing developed through engagement with similar communities (Partridge 2022:154)

This is another context where energy transition initiatives are inseparable from collective efforts to address historical inequalities.

On one hand, rooting thinking and action about energy transitions in place-based social projects can be empowering – fostering other related forms of resiliency and supporting work toward other related justice objectives. On the other, this orientation also exposes how much of the actual work and responsibility for creating meaningful change continues to fall to people outside the most recognized positions of power and authority.

The place-specific priorities, needs, and dynamics of any effective "solutions" to the climate crisis will vary across global and local contexts. What all such efforts share in common, as illustrated in the examples presented earlier, is a commitment to reinforcing deeply connected, reciprocal, and consensual forms of interrelation and production while also dismantling systems that depend on exploitation and exclusion (Partridge 2017a). This is the basis of (re)framing transitions as collaborative projects of justice.

Yet, as the cases described here also show, such renewed projects of collectivity – whether a solar farm, a micro-grid, or a relocalization program of the kinds seen in Transition Towns – largely rely on voluntary, precarious, high-risk, or at-risk forms of work. As with other coordinated efforts to meaningfully address social and environmental injustices, the successful implementation of revalorized or reimagined political visions at any scale ultimately depends significantly on the labor, cooperation, and social resources of particular communities – often rural, low-income, Indigenous, communities of color, or other groups most acutely affected by the

injustices being addressed (Partridge 2018). Thus, for "transitions" to be meaningful, there has to be explicit, direct, and sustained forms of support provided to groups whose labor and collective efforts are already underpinning and enabling changes to energy systems.

Conclusion

Even while certain populist leaders and other groups funded by the fossil fuel industry may continue to deny or denounce this reality, a transition – of sorts – toward increased renewable energy generation is already underway globally. As we have seen, however, there remain ongoing struggles to ensure that these processes serve the interests and immediate needs of marginalized communities – designing transition processes to not only halt harm but also to reverse historical processes of violence and exploitation. The need to support these struggles is only intensified by global inequalities and the fact that most of those suffering the most acute effects of climate change are those with the fewest resources or opportunities to protect themselves and their communities.

Already, there are branches of the extractive industries that function in a somewhat "zombie" state: effectively dead (lacking solvency or any kind of long-term future) yet outwardly recognizable as an industry and still able to function in ways that resemble their former, more vibrant, condition. As Macey and Salovaara point out (2019:879), as of 2019 almost half of all the coal produced in the United States was being mined by companies that had gone bankrupt. One result of this, seen also across the US oil industry (and reflecting other "zombie" tendencies), is that companies facing their impending demise begin to lash out – through actions that compound environmental damage, disruption, and risk (Partridge et al. 2023). That is, when faced with increasingly uncertain futures, extractive companies act to evade environmental responsibilities through deliberately opaque strategies of corporate restructuring, bankruptcies, shell company registrations, and other methods of "offloading" liabilities (Partridge et al. 2023; Grubert 2020). Again, the effect is that extant social and environmental inequalities are deepened: profits and returns to shareholders are prioritized and the costs of unemployment and industrial cleanup are shifted onto the public sector. All the while, environmental harm and toxification are intensified within already affected communities.

Reframing transitions as collaborative projects of justice creates a broad scope for radically reimagining the potential outcomes of energy transitions. This means always linking transition policies and designs to transformative actions that further support ongoing efforts to dismantle colonial power and end violence against marginalized groups (Whyte 2021). Collaborative projects of justice build on processes of unforgetting and repair, offering support for environmental and climate justice struggles that are already being mobilized – and recognizing how global collective futures are emergent within those mobilizations as well as the acts of remembering and resisting that they incorporate.

Notes

1 Also, appearing with increasing regularity in the media, are reports on how "meaningless" (or misleading, or destructive) climate policies or net-zero pledges by fossil fuel companies are. An example from June 2023 is: www.reuters.com/sustainability/fossil-fuel-company-net-zero-plans-largely-meaningless-report-2023-06-11/

2 For examples of efforts to avoid ahistorical analyses of energy futures, see the special issue of *Media + Environment* on Energy Justice in Global Perspective (Barandiarán et al. 2022).

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