

Just Transitions

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Introduction

Just transition is an emerging concept of global importance for both theory (Weller, 2019; Burke, 2020; Crowe and Li, 2020; Shen et al, 2020) and practice (ILO, 2016; FoE, 2017; Presidency, 2018; European Commission, 2020a). Just transition is defined here as ensuring a fair and equitable process of moving away from fossil fuels and towards the adoption of renewable and low-carbon technologies, disrupting, reconfiguring and usurping the prevailing carbon-intensive global regime. It is a less studied area for justice theorisation in comparison to environmental or climate justice, borrowing similar conceptualisations and frameworks. Just transition has a unique grounding within the trade union movement (Stevis and Felli, 2015; Mayer, 2018). This means at the centre of its usefulness is its critical reflection on workers' rights. As explored in more detail in this chapter, it has two distinct phases of historical development, one from the 1980s when it focused almost uniquely on employment to a resurgence in both theory and practice. Since 2015, its gaze expanded to include both workers' rights as well as an interest in inequalities emerging across the transition away from fossil fuels.

The contemporary use of the just transition concept is now firmly rooted in its ability to encourage critical reflection on the societal and environmental implications of the transition away from fossil fuels (McCauley and Heffron, 2018; Heffron and McCauley, 2019; Cha et al, 2020; Lawrence, 2020). This transition necessarily involves the adoption of renewable and low-carbon industries. Both moving away from fossil fuels and towards renewables are of concern to scholars and practitioners in just transition. Its most recent emergence is driven by international agreements on the need to transition away from fossil fuels, especially since the Paris Agreement of 2015 (UN, 2020). Environmental, climate and the newer area of energy justice tend

to avoid explicit reflection on the reality of this transition. Just transition is used increasingly to focus our attention back on this journey.

Overview of approach

Just transition scholars are predominantly concerned with workers' rights. Work in this area involves a wide range of related issues from industrial relations to human resources policies. It tends to emphasise the impacts of lost industries such as coal. The replacement or relocation of industries mean a loss of employment opportunities for affected communities. This brings into play several relevant foci. The first is the nature of what is meant by transition. The restoration of a sense of fairness in affected communities is a second consideration. This has, third, led to scholars considering the wider implications of the transition, directly on workers' rights as well as more indirectly on the community at large.

What is just transition?

The transition is explicitly defined within the context of moving away from fossil fuels. Within this context, scholars argue reflection is needed on employment impacts (Evans, 2007; Swilling et al, 2015; Goddard and Farrelly, 2018; Cha et al, 2020; Crowe and Li, 2020). In this way, the term is intimately associated with employment considerations in the transition away from fossil fuels. This presents a high degree of conceptual separation from other existing justice scholarships such as climate or environmental justice, which are less concentrated on the employment aspects of the transition (see Chapters 9 and 10). Energy justice and just transition are, for example, two related but distinct concepts. Energy justice refers to the fair distribution of benefits and costs associated with energy production and consumption, considering social, economic and environmental factors (see Chapter 11). Just transition, on the other hand, is a framework for ensuring that the shift to a low-carbon economy is equitable and inclusive, particularly for workers in industries that are being phased out. While both concepts concern equity in the energy sector, energy justice focuses on broader issues of fairness and access, while just transition deals specifically with the transition to a sustainable future. The past, current and future use of the just transition term must appreciate the centrality of livelihoods and employment to retain its central focus. This should not, however, hamper its conceptual development to include other factors to make the concept more robust and adoptable (Heffron and McCauley, 2018; McCauley and Heffron, 2018). I see this process in action in the section on 'Debates in just transition', in which I investigate critical debates in the field.

The jobs argument central to the concept is focused on the differential impact of the transition across geographical locations. There is much debate about the real impact of the low-carbon transition on employment (Kenfack, 2019; E2, 2020; OECD, 2020). Some recent reports have concluded, for example, that such a transition will have a minimal overall impact on employment in Europe (OECD, 2020). Such reports often neglect to explore the variation geographically in both its direct and indirect impacts on associated sectors of employment in fossil fuel industries. As a result, trade unions have driven the development of the just transition approach globally. The European Trade Union Confederation concluded that ‘from a worker’s perspective, the transition will profoundly reshape the labour market in ways that create new employment but also in some cases destruction of jobs’ (ETUC, 2018). This has meant that scholars have turned their attention to trade union politics and their framing strategies for lobbying institutions (Rueckert, 2018). The ways in which trade unions mobilise, strategise and frame the transition has been a central focus for just transition scholarship (Stevin and Felli, 2015). Its unitary focus on employment has led to its relative marginalisation in justice scholarship when compared to climate and environmental justice, where connections have not yet been made explicit. I argue in line with others (McCauley, 2018; Weller, 2019; Crowe and Li, 2020) that its conceptual widening beyond employment provides an opportunity for more critical reflection on the transition away from fossil fuels.

Conceptualising transitions

The ‘transition’, or transitions, is a key component of this discussion. It is partly overlooked in existing literature on just transition. I respond to this gap by briefly delving into the dominant literature on transitions to provide some originality to this literature coverage. To understand what a just transition is, or could be, clarity is needed to identify exactly what I mean by ‘transition’. The dominant literature in this field is ‘social technical systems’ or ‘the multilevel perspective’ (Scrase and Smith, 2009; Mullally and Byrne, 2016; Schot et al, 2016; Sareen and Haarstad, 2018; van Welie and Romijn, 2018). It has guided scholarships around questioning and formulating sustainable transitions. Just transition and just sustainabilities are closely related concepts. Just sustainabilities is a framework that emphasises the importance of integrating social justice and environmental sustainability in decision-making processes (Agyeman, 2013). Just transition, on the other hand, refers to the need for a fair and equitable shift from an unsustainable economy to a more sustainable one. Both concepts share a focus on equity and justice, recognising that marginalised communities often bear the brunt of environmental degradation and economic transitions.

A transition is a journey and the outcome of this journey in this field is sustainability. As this volume is not focused on sustainability as such, I limit its definition to the core agreed [Brundtland \(1987\)](#) definition based on social, environmental and economic sustainability. This approach towards transition provides complexity in terms of the process for achieving this outcome. It conceptualises the transition as a process through the adoption of new technologies or ideas to achieve a change in society. It shares the same concern with temporality as climate justice (see [Chapter 10](#)), and to some extent intergenerational justice ([Chapter 14](#)). The *process* for this literature on socio-technical systems is equally as important as the outcome, sustainability. A stereotypical example of this approach to transition is the rise of electric vehicles ([Zhang, 2014](#); [Yang et al, 2018](#)). They represent a major disruption that takes place through technological adoption, resulting in the reconfiguration of transport behaviours and institutions. It is inherently derived from the consideration of technological concerns with society.

The bottom-up process of technological-based disruptions must be accompanied by reflection on the macro level of the transition. The ultimate goal is to create a system of institutions, ideologies and actors which will establish a regime leading to greater stability and above all sustainability ([Calvert et al, 2019](#)). The regime is understood to be currently unsustainable. There, elite actors and institutions are attempting to resist the positive change needed to achieve sustainability. An example of socio-technical systems involves the slow adoption of housing insulation schemes in cities and the hesitancy of the construction industry in adopting the requirement for more sustainable buildings to be constructed ([Howden-Chapman et al, 2005](#)).

Fairness, equity and justice have very recently emerged as considerations for this process of transition in socio-technical systems ([Vilches et al, 2017](#)). Its focus remains nonetheless on the variety of possible sustainable transitions and the technologies that drive them, rather than a systematic analysis of inequalities ([Jenkins et al, 2018](#)). The just transition literature is where a focus on justice is more likely. For just transition, technological disruptors are understood to be the idea of decarbonisation alongside renewable and low-carbon technological adoption. The status quo is currently viewed as fossil fuel interests that resist this change that will need ultimately to be more sustainable.

Debates in just transition

The adoption of just transition by societal actors at all levels is evident – and not without critique. It is both an area of academic interest as well as for practice. Unlike environmental or climate justice, the emergence of just transition in practice is not limited to environmental organisations or even civil society more generally. It is increasingly adopted in national

governments, international and regional institutions as well as in the actions and strategies of private organisations. Three critical debates emerge when considering the implications of an increasingly practised and applied just transition concept.

A concept developed by trade unions, for only trade unions?

Trade unions have led the way in promoting the concept of just transition. I see several examples throughout the world where a just transition frame has been used as a campaign tool for national and international trade unions. The first recorded use of the term by trade unions in the 1980s was in the United States (Abraham, 2017). It came in response to the US government's stated policy in 1986 to pursue the closure of coal mines. It was stated that the mining activities for many communities were to be replaced by renewable energy employment opportunities. To develop a sense of collective buying, American trade unions united around the just transition concept as a formal demand to government that each job lost in the coal mine closures would be replaced by renewable energy development (Peerla, 1999). This has actually inspired non-trade union applications, however.

It directly led to a dispute found in many countries across the world between brown and green energy transitions among civil society organisations (Evans and Phelan, 2016). The just transition term was an example of a 'brown' understanding of the transition away from fossil fuels. It prioritised social issues, in this case employment restoration, as the key priority. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a response emerged from environmental organisations which sought to use the term, albeit sparingly, in relation to a green approach to the transition (Agyeman, 2013). This led organisations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to argue that a just transition is equally about protecting the environment. It was quickly replaced by climate justice as a dominating frame for environmental organisations. It has nonetheless re-emerged among environmental organisations in unison with trade unions. WWF Germany ran a campaign for a just transition, incorporating both environmental and social concerns in relation to the sharp increase in coal industrial activity after the decision to move away from nuclear energy (Fuller and McCauley, 2016). Friends of the Earth Scotland succeeded in driving forward a nationwide campaign on just transition in relation to the decommissioning of oil and gas rigs (FoE, 2017). The just transition frame has therefore moved away from its trade union movement origins towards a more civil society-wide approach where country or region-specific campaigns are run to bring attention to emerging social and environmental inequalities.

The development of just transition as a key concern for civil society organisations has driven more recent attempts at developing national, regional or project-specific commissions throughout the world. The Scottish example

is a world-leading embodiment of such a process (Gov, 2018). A national commission for just transition was established in 2018. It involves multiple interests in society from universities to trade unions and environment organisations. These are formalised spaces for multiple stakeholder interaction designed to develop strategies for social and environmental inequalities-based action. Moreover, the International Labour Organization has succeeded in establishing a range of just transition guidelines for companies in their activities in developing nations (ILO, 2016). In summary, the just transition term is actively in use throughout the world on a range of levels, but most importantly involving both social and environmental calls to aim to tackle the inequalities of the transition.

Co-opted by international elites?

The just transition frame has also a separate and unique historical development among international institutions. This has raised the implication that it is now co-opted by international elites with the objective of undermining its original purpose. The success of trade unions, and then environmental organisations, to bring the just transition idea to the fore is critical for explaining its adoption by a range of international institutions. The key point to acknowledge at this stage is that a similar development of the concept as outlined here has not yet taken place as just transition as a concept has been absorbed into international organisations' politics and agendas. It is evident that just transition as an idea remains limited to the job replacement understanding. The first emergence of the term in an international setting was explicitly the Paris Agreement in 2015. A world-leading agreement on climate change involving 188, and now 189, nations, as well as a range of international representation, equally adopted just transition as an objective. At the time, this did not receive much attention. The International Labour Organization has claimed its critical role in ensuring that a just transition was mentioned in the Paris Agreement as an explicit objective to ensure that any move towards a post-carbon or decarbonised world involves the replacement of lost jobs. In a sense, an international reboot of the concept has taken place.

The adoption of just transition in the Paris Agreement as an objective (UN, 2020) was quickly followed up most notably in the G7 annual meeting of national leaders in 2018 (G7, 2018). It explicitly stated that the just transition is defined as ensuring a fair and equitable approach to the transition away from fossil fuels for all workers. The just transition tone is placed firmly within its dominant economic perspective between employers and employees, driven by capitalist market understandings of inequality. The now famous Silesia declaration was signed by over 60 countries in the world, committing their nations to accord special attention to the loss of coal mining and associated

activities (Presidency, 2018). The formalisation of the 1980s understanding of just transition is now firmly in place. The International Monetary Fund, United Nations Development Programme and the World Trade Organization all now have just transition strategies that have been re-developed from this emergence in the international community. The real consequences of the just transition adoption, and this understanding, is most easily understood when assessing the associated financial mechanisms.

It is unfortunate that just transition has not undergone the same maturing process at an international level as it has among civil society organisations. The real-world impact of this reality is played out in a range of national and international financial mechanisms that are emerging. The primary issue is that just transition is a conduit for fossil fuel investment. This is counter to its original intended use. It has become formalised as a support mechanism for fossil fuel areas of the world that are suffering from industrial closures. Germany has set aside a specific mechanism that allocates over €40 billion to coal regions from July 2022 to 2038 (CleanEnergyWire, 2020). The rationale is to fund retraining programmes as well as community initiatives for helping affected workers and their families. A similarly impactful figure of £62 million was announced in June 2020 for affected oil and gas communities in Scotland as part of the just transition commission mentioned previously (Scottish Government, 2020). However, the most notable perpetrator of such an approach to just transition is the European Union (EU). I explore this in some detail in the next section.

Greenwashing through the European Union Green Deal?

The EU Green Deal was established in 2019 and throughout 2020 as the first multinational and international commitment to supporting the transition away from fossil fuels. It commits a much-disputed figure of over €1 trillion towards financing the transition. A central component of this deal is the just transition platform with its associated financial mechanisms. It provides a comprehensive dedicated just transition fund, investing EU and the European Investment Bank public sector loan facility as a triumvirate of ways to invest in European regions (EP, 2020). It is the most sophisticated international collaboration of just transition in the world. It involves the necessary construction of regional and national plans if financing is to be secured in each case. The approach is therefore project driven whereby organisations apply for funding for these three funding opportunities. The main issue emerges as those regions that are most affected are not necessarily the geographical locations where renewable or low-carbon technologies will flourish. In short, there is a clear threat that this investment only serves to embed fossil fuel activities and the carbon-intensive regime further in these regions.

This understanding of just transition is clearly at odds with the more mature elaboration found within civil society. The EU itself recognises this potential threat, commenting in early 2020 that ‘the just transition platform will bring together expertise from all relevant commission services to make sure that fossil fuel and carbon-intensive regions have all the information, tools and assistance they need to transform their economies in a fair way’ (European Commission, 2020a). It is questionable whether financing such regions should be the priority in following the objectives of the concept. Some have also raised the peculiarity of financing fossil fuel interests at the same time as the Commission is adopting ambitious climate change targets (European Commission, 2020b). Investing in the areas where future renewable technologies are being developed would be a more appropriate financial setup with explicit care taken to environmental impacts. Most recent events have pointed unfortunately to the opposite.

On 16 September 2020, the EU Parliament revised the just transition fund to be explicitly available for natural gas projects. This is a clear example of the dominance of fossil fuel-based interests in the just transition agenda in the EU (WWE, 2020). As one of the three key funding mechanisms under the just transition platform, the just transition fund was explicitly targeted towards cleaning coal-based activities or renewable projects. The revisions taken by the European Parliament have opened the door for gas to be positioned as a so-called transitional fuel to the detriment of renewable-based investment opportunities. As the just transition platform is at an early stage, the example of Poland is the most relevant at this stage. The most carbon-intensive regions of the EU are in Poland. The European Commission has already identified that it will be the most significant recipient of funds. It is an exemplar of the hypocrisies of the just transition fund. The regions of most significant potential are not the old carbon-intensive communities, with the notable exception of the Lublin basin. Investment is likely to go into the south of the country, where areas of greatest renewable capacity potential remain in the north. An urgent maturation process of the just transition concept at an international institutional level is required to avoid just transition funds being used to further embed carbon-intensive activities.

Just transition: moving beyond the normative application of restorative justice?

The just transition concept lacks the philosophical maturity of more established areas such as environmental justice, making it ripe for further theoretical reflection. It has only recently emerged beyond its trade union campaign motif. I argue that its wide adoption throughout society means that it must, first, embrace a more comprehensive approach to restorative

justice and then, second, engage in core justice thinking on distributional and procedural dimensions.

Applying a comprehensive approach to restorative justice

Rather than procedural justice, restorative justice is the central notion that has influenced and been applied to the just transition concept. It is intimately associated with law. It involves deep questioning after a perceived or experienced injustice has taken place (Gibbs, 2009; Preston, 2011). It is sometimes referred to in the literature as corrective justice (McAlinden, 2011). It has been mostly applied to criminal law rather than civil. The application of restorative justice to the transition sheds light on the criminal activities of the fossil fuel industries in exploiting their dominance of the fossil fuel regimes across the world (Goodstein and Butterfield, 2010; Preston, 2011; Lawrence and Åhrén, 2016; Leijten, 2019). I have indeed seen the application of criminal law increasingly with regards to energy companies and their activities. Restorative justice is applied in just transition scholarship as job replacement where restoration means the replacement of lost employment in fossil fuel industries with new employment in the renewable sector.

Just transition scholarship has shed light on the community impacts of job losses throughout predominantly a North American context (Snyder, 2018). The closure of fossil fuel industries has not been geographically met with renewable energy job replacements. This has resulted in existing literature calling for new forms of financial compensation (Zadek, 2019) or the strategic replacement of these industries with new technologies (Pollin and Callaci, 2019). The process of restoration is not simply about direct employment but rather the widespread indirect impacts on a given community. Some just transition literature has emphasised the importance of relocation of fossil fuel industries, rather than their closure, pointing towards the inherent unfairness for communities and without any real benefit to the transition (Altintzis and Busser, 2014; Patterson and Smith, 2016; Healy and Barry, 2017). They explore the initiatives started by local governments or companies that have sought to restore a sense of justice, often considered at local community level to include ideas of environmental remediation from negative energy industry impacts, or the re-establishment of past livelihoods before energy industry employment. Another thread of literature looks at social licence to operate as a framework for restoring justice through building in post-hoc systems of recompense after an industry has left (Hall et al, 2015; Jijelava and Vanclay, 2017). Just transition in this way brings our attention to the tangible and intangible losses incurred by communities when industries move and the ways in which governments seek to alleviate growing senses of injustice.

There is an opportunity to broaden the concept further by addressing the environmental impacts of such processes. This has emerged in recent literature where both indirect and direct employment effects have been connected to observations on broader environmental impacts of fossil industries (Harrahill and Douglas, 2019; Cha et al, 2020; Shen et al, 2020). The inadequacies of post-mining environmental restoration have led to scholars using just transition as a framework to analyse the inequalities experienced by local people in relation to their physical environment (Weller, 2019). Such concerns are normally outlined in environmental and energy justice scholarship (Smith, 2013). The intimate connection with the fossil fuel industries has led trade union-based explorations to consider the wider physical environment implications of closures and relocations. This recent literature demonstrates an opportunity to expand further the remit of just transition. The social impacts of the transition are in this way intimately linked to environmental consequences. A sustainable transition necessitates consideration of both.

Applying distributional and procedural justice in just transition

Spaces of proximity and due process are equally applicable to the just transition frame as I find in climate, energy and environmental justice scholarships. As can be seen, the relocation and geographical sensitivities of fossil fuel industries have been long considered part of the just transition area of research (Abraham, 2017). Proximity in this case offers a new way of understanding what types of inequalities may emerge in the transition, both for social and environmental concerns. The fossil fuel industry structure of centralised energy generation or extractive activities is to be replaced by decentralised smaller infrastructures that do not require the same level of maintenance and therefore direct community employment (Crowe and Li, 2020). This is compounded further by a more geographically limited opportunity for rare earth minerals extraction which is required for renewable supply chains (Burke, 2020). Reflection on the proximity argument reminds us that the transition to a low-carbon future entails a restructuring that will impact both traditional fossil fuel communities as well as non-fossil fuel communities, and not simply employment structures (Le Billon and Kristoffersen, 2020). This has led some scholars to consider the importance of national or international responses to the transition, rather than focusing on affected communities (Pellegrini-Masini et al, 2020). Ethnicity and race have been raised also in the literature around their disproportionately affected minority groups from the air, in similar ways found in environmental justice (Adelman, 2013) and water pollution (Kayir, 2017) of long-term fossil fuel industries. Such studies have considered both direct and indirect impacts from, for example, workers in the industry to those living near their infrastructures.

Distributional justice goes beyond proximity. It also involves considerations of new spaces of vulnerability, recognition, risk and responsibility. All these dimensions are equally applicable to consideration within the context of just transition and its interpretation of the transition away from fossil fuels. The central jobs focus on just transition sheds light on the vulnerability of both young and old workers to major structural shifts in the job market (Dominish et al, 2019). These are most apparent in the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery period (Cohen, 2020). In addition, gender-based recognition is critically needed for understanding the implications of the transition on under-recognised groups, as developed further in this volume in feminist justice theory (see Chapter 4). The indirect industries dependent upon fossil fuel industries are predominantly served by female employees (Wenham et al, 2020). Explicit consideration is required here. New responsibilities for communities to find post-carbon industries for employment have resulted in studies investigating the highly geographically variable rates of success. The risk of increased variation in communities that are preparing for the transition and those that are not is to dramatically increase in the coming decade (Steffen et al, 2020).

Procedural justice, or the requirement to consider due process as expressed in more legal accounts of justice, is a key consideration for just transition scholars. Most work focuses on enhancing the role of trade union representation as a potential solution to increased grievances among those affected by the transition away from fossil fuel industries (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Altintzis and Busser, 2014). I note here a critique raised in Chapter 1 on liberal justice on the predominance of such forms of justice linked to White, property-owning males often associated with fossil fuel or indeed renewable jobs. New forms of worker representation in an increasingly fragmented and underdeveloped renewable sector are of concern (Doorey, 2017). The focus here is not simply on industrial relations. It is increasingly about ensuring community-wide buy-in for major changes. One such example exists in the Netherlands where Groningen and its surrounding areas have been dominated by the natural gas industry. A series of commissions have been set up to engage those directly involved in the gas industry as well as others that depends on the industry locally to consult and engage in the new future. This led directly to local citizen assemblies that took place in 2022 and continue throughout 2023. Finding innovative ways to engage communities in employment and unemployment impacts of the transition is required in future research on just transition.

Conclusion

Justice scholarship does not sufficiently reflect upon the issue of transition. Sustainability appears to be understated in justice considerations, often

resigned to intergenerational or environmental justice. Albeit not a central point of reflection for this book, it should be stated that sustainability is crucial for driving our attention towards critically reflecting on what we mean by transitions. Indeed, just transition scholarship itself sometimes does not explicitly reflect on this. But it offers a space to consider what is meant by the transition. A starting point provided by just transition is the consideration of sustainable outcomes and processes. Just transition's own development suggests that focusing on the transition away from fossil fuels and its associated journey towards renewables and low carbon infrastructures may be a fruitful point of departure.

Restoration is normally reserved for environmental-based considerations in applied justice research. It has been a central focus for environmental justice scholarship, especially with regard to post-mining clean-up activities as well as water and air pollution from polluting industries. The just transition concept brings a new dimension to the restorative justice argument. Its primary focus on workers' rights provides a useful way of considering how the loss of jobs, both directly and indirectly, for a community can lead to different types of inequality. This area of scholarship intimately connects spaces of restoration with that of transition. The journey towards a stated sustainable outcome involves necessary shifts in employment activities, structures and processes that are worthy of consideration within the inequalities framework. The just transition approach emphasises a workers' rights dimension of restoration beyond that of any other justice scholarship.

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