

TOWARDS A CORPORATE OR A PEOPLES' ENERGY TRANSITION?

Executive summary of:

ENERGY TRANSITION. CONTRIBUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

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The energy transition is in the news. Interest in energy transition ranges from actors such as peoples in resistance, workers, academics, and public administrations, to large corporations, international institutions and governments. The paradigm of energy transition, if it exists, runs a serious risk of being coopted by large companies, of being trivialized and placed at the service of the current system of social reproduction that seeks to perpetuate existing power relations.

There are as many views of the energy transition as there are economic, political, ideological, ecological, technological and hegemonic interests.

Thus, there are proposals for energy transition with clearly diverse objectives. There are political-economic views from neoliberalism, Keynesianism, and anti-capitalism; from ecological perspectives, from the cult of wildlife or eco-efficiency (cult of technology), or from the environmentalism of the poor¹; with emphasis on weak, strong or super-strong sustainability²; by large oil industry multinational corporations, and by small citizen cooperatives.

Different views of the energy transition currently coexist, from those held by representatives of green neoliberalism and large oil industry multinationals, to those of environmental institutions or movements from the most diverse ideological streams, international organizations linked to energy, scientific teams and unions, to mention just a few.

It is important to analyze and systematize the various energy transition proposals, in order to provide guidelines to help think about the characteristics of an energy transition that is consistent with social, environmental and post-capitalist justice in the face of the extraction of natural heritage.

In this context, there are several camps that seek to impose their view of energy transition – some in an authoritarian manner and others in a people-centered manner that is in constant construction. As a starting point, two main realms can be identified. On the one hand, there are the actors who, faced with the climate situation, see in the energy transition the potential accumulation of wealth and geopolitical hegemonic positioning – with weak sustainability mechanisms and a corporate and patriarchal gaze. This could be called the “corporate environmentalism” realm, or what Maristella Svampa, in her essay “Images of the End,”³ classifies as the capitalist-technocratic narrative. This positioning encompasses what we refer to as the **corporate energy transition**.

On the other hand, there are those who support strong or super-strong sustainability and pursue an energy transition based on participatory and cooperative social and environmental justice, what could be defined as the “popular environmentalism” realm, based on the anti-capitalist and social and environmental transition narrative. This perspective would lead to what we call a **peoples' energy transition**.



Corporate Energy Transition

The corporate energy transition is not only from businesses; this view may have diverse followers, such as multinational corporations, States (countries, provinces, regions, municipalities), institutions and organizations that see this as the only possible path – or, for them, the “fastest” path – to respond to the urgency of the crisis.

Those who promote a corporate energy transition focus on a strictly hegemonic techno-economic perspective. For this realm, the main objective is to emit fewer greenhouse gases and generate a bit of geopolitical support in the face of growing public concern about climate change, within a growing process of accumulation of wealth and power through new extraction areas, maintaining existing power relations and therefore also inequality.

In many cases, they promote solutions to the climate emergencies that are highly controversial and impactful, such as the use of nuclear energy, unconventional gas and large dams.

In the corporate energy transition, most elements (machinery, projects, regulations, research and development, etc.) are controlled by, or work in favor of, transnational corporations or world powers, complicating systems and everyday life under the excuse of efficiency, and thus limiting the possibility of democratizing the use of energy and technology.

The issue of ownership and control of access to energy sources, materials and necessary technologies plays a central role in this framework. The concentration of the energy system is an inherent characteristic. Large

companies, not only private but in many cases public (although acting under corporatized criteria), hold the hegemonic power.

The main actors in the corporate energy transition promote the development of renewable energy sources from a utilitarian conception as well as an industrial frame, imagining that these could be an alternative to the planetary resource limits within the intensive extractivist model, definitively dominated by logic of fossil fuels.⁴ They believe that non-fossil energy sources could sustain the current path of unlimited growth.

In some cases, the concept of energy efficiency from a technocratic perspective also takes center stage. The potential for change is perceived only in technological efficiency and, therefore, in consumption, without suggesting that the very logic of this consumption be altered.

This corporate energy transition is configured as hegemonic, authoritarian and patriarchal. However, due to the pressure of social movements, in some cases it does include some more democratic characteristics, such as household access to the sun, the elimination of taxes on the self-generation of solar energy in countries such as Spain, or plans for access to renewable energy for vulnerable households in New York, among other examples. These variables are not a central part of the corporate energy transition, but rather the result of political pressure exerted by social movements.

Thus, the corporate energy transition is based on the trivialized notion of “sustainable development”, on

Energy sources are characterized by two attributes. On the one hand their renewability or non-renewability. This attribute is a physical characteristic and is related to the possibility that future generations will have access to this source, depending on its rate of consumption and natural regeneration. Thus, for example, while oil is non-renewable, wind and sun are renewable sources. The second attribute is its sustainability or non-sustainability. In this case, this attribute relates not only to the physical aspects of the source, but to the way and the processes through which this source is utilized. It is assumed that non-renewables, precisely for this reason, are also non-sustainable. But the uses of renewable sources must be analyzed using a matrix that contemplates not only the energy benefits, but also the social, environmental, eco-systemic impacts, etc.

continuing on the path of limitless growth, exchanging fossil resources for renewables and high technology, without modifying the logic of capitalist consumption, nor questioning the distribution or access to energy of populations or citizen participation in decision-making processes.

The corporate energy transition does not represent a paradigm shift, but rather an expression of the way

A Peoples' Energy Transition

In contrast to this “corporate environmentalism” realm, we find the realm of “popular environmentalism.”

From this other perspective, there is an urgent need to collectively build a peoples' energy transition that is counter-hegemonic, based on respect for rights and socio-environmental justice. In the words of researcher Kolya Abramsky,⁵ “energy democracy – understood as an abstract vision of a future energy sector – is ‘a fantasy’. The existing balance of power under neoliberal capitalism is profoundly anti-democratic. Thus, any kind of emancipatory energy transition would require a fundamental transformation of the existing geometries of power – and, as such, would demand a concrete and ambitious political strategy for how this kind of transformation might be achieved. Therefore, we might wonder whether the more pressing question is not the precise details of what a future energy utopia might look like but, rather, how we might build collective power and organization.”

The material conditions of the planet make the idea of limitless expansion or growth impossible. This reality must be analyzed in a context of distributive ecological conflicts, whereby different actors, with different levels of power and different interests, are confronted with resource demands by other actors at a particular ecological moment.⁶

There is no possibility of imagining a world in which many worlds can exist without contemplating how to build multiple societies that can achieve happiness with much less matter and energy. This means a great dispute of power and meaning.

Many people understand energy not as an end, but as a tool to improve people's quality of life within a rights framework that is coherent with the rights of nature.

in which the capitalist system attempts to capitalize on the energy and climate crisis for a new cycle of accumulation.

From this point of view, the resulting socio-environmental conflicts are not questioned, and instead they seek to permeate the cultural values of the communities by imposing the perspective of the companies.

“The conceptualization of energy is cultural. Societies that consider oil as a resource are radically different from those that consider it as the blood of the earth. In this framework, energy is understood as something more than a physical concept, because it is a social, political, economic and cultural element.”⁷

This view of a peoples' energy transition is based on the premise of constructing the right to energy and questions the idea of energy as a commodity. It is based on the idea of de-privatization, of strengthening the diverse forms of the public sphere, participation and democracy. It is based on the imperative need to reduce energy use and, at the same time, to turn energy sources away from fossils. It is based on the struggle to eliminate energy poverty, and to decentralize and democratize decision-making processes around energy.

In this context, thinking about a peoples' energy transition requires a radical change in the energy system. The energy system cannot be reduced to the production-consumption of certain physical volumes of energy; it brings together the complex interrelationship between public policies, sectoral conflicts, geopolitical alliances, business strategies, technological advances, productive diversification, sectoral demands, oligopolies and oligopsonies, the relationship between energy and distribution of wealth, the relationship between energy and the productive matrix, relations with technology, and so on.⁸

A peoples' energy transition is synergistic with food sovereignty as a solution to the climate crisis based on family agriculture and peasant agroecology.⁹

A peoples' energy transition addresses energy poverty as a key aspect of the energy system, respecting scientific knowledge and ancestral wisdom, co-constructing

the energy transition towards societies with social and environmental justice.

A peoples' energy transition does not only deal with changing the energy matrix, or which technological options to adopt, but is centered on discussing and transforming power relations. There are no infinite energy sources or materials. On the contrary, resources are limited, as is the capacity of the biosphere to absorb the impacts of the energy.

The process of a peoples' energy transition must be promoted, developed and controlled by the working-class sectors, men and women workers, in alliance with organized social movements. A peoples' energy transition must overcome the tendency to transition towards "clean energy and dirty jobs", which was created by the corporate energy transition. The creation of new jobs and the elimination of existing jobs in relation to the energy system must take into account that the hiring, working and unionization conditions in new jobs must respond to the demands of workers to respect

fundamental labor rights and guarantee a dignified life. This requires the participation of social and trade union movements in the discussion on the conditions of this transition, especially due to the current offensive of regressive labor reforms, as well as the environmental and social consequences of extraction and generation in the territories.

A peoples' energy transition must be built on the recognition of women as political subjects, from a feminist economic perspective, which centers the sustainability of life. From this vision, it is only possible to build the transition based on the struggles in defense of territories, from the experience of those who challenge corporate extractive energy and agro-industrial projects and, at the same time, advance in the creation of sustainable proposals.

A peoples' energy transition is configured as a process of democratization, de-privatization, decentralization, de-concentration, de-fossilization, decolonization of thought, for the construction of new social relations, consistent with human rights and with the rights of nature.

Endnotes

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