

And yet the just transition might indeed be the most interesting idea of the early 21st century, as the twin crises of inequality and the biosphere feed one another—provided we embrace its full meaning.

Éloi Laurent,
«Reimagining Just Transition» (2020)

It is not a new insight that social/income inequality and environmental degradation are elements of the same crisis, and should therefore be addressed together. This notion was already present in the U.S. environmental justice and labor movements in the 1980s (Farrell, 2012; Morena *et al.*, 2019), which attracted much scholarly research and moved to the global policy level in the 1990s with the Rio Declaration. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) highlighted the link between justice and ecology for the first time during the Synod of Justice in the World in 1971: «Its line of thought suggested a close link between concern for the poor and a concern for the earth, the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth» (Turkson, 2020, p. xiii). What is new today is the global scientific consensus regarding the anthropogenic causes of climate change (IPCC, 2021; Powell, 2017), more accessible green technologies, a more aware global public, and globally coordinated policy efforts to address climate change threats. In addition, many countries have started transitioning away from fossil fuel energy systems towards more sustainable energy systems.

When it was realized that this shift would exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities and create new losers and winners, the concept of *just transition* gradually moved to the center of political discourses, social dialogue meetings, sustainable business, investment strategies (WBA, 2021), and civil society demands. Although there is no universally-agreed definition of «just transition», the central idea underpinning the different understandings is that the transition to a green economy must also entail a commitment to address widening social inequalities (Swilling – Annecke, 2012). Probably the most widely-used global definition of the concept is included in the ILO's 2015 *Guidelines for Just Transition*, which states that «a just transition for all towards an environmentally sustainable economy [...] needs to be well managed and contribute to the goals of decent work for all, social inclusion and the eradication of poverty» (ILO, 2015, 4).

With its origins in the U.S. labor movement of the 1970s (Morena *et al.*, 2018, 2019) the concept of just transition through internationally-organized labor effort has

been mainstreamed and included «in U.N. processes and agreements» (Cahill – Allen, 2020, 4), attracting a great deal of scholarly research. Attention to just transition will undoubtedly continue to grow because we are entering a period of climate policy implementation. This process, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, will gradually disclose the enormous complexity of the task and intensify the debates between alternative visions of just transition. The concept's adoption by different groups will diversify its meanings even further. Academic literature on just transition and its practical implementation points out several problematic aspects of the quick proliferation of usage and meanings of the concept. First, it has become «so ambiguous and with so many different meanings that communication and debate have become difficult» (Wang – Lo, 2021, 2). Hence, there is a need for urgent conceptual overview and reflection on different paradigms of just transition. Second, scholars agree that the most challenging task in the practical implementation of just transition is a necessity to «step out of existing institutional and epistemic boundaries» (Escobar, 2015, 4). However, such a shift is a slow and complex process, especially when genuine alternatives supporting «value shifts and behavioural changes» (Christie *et al.*, 2019, 1344) are unavailable or not taken into account. Third, the proliferation of academic and policy discourses about just transition can be interpreted as an expression of a difficulty to abandon an epistemology of the current modernist «technocratic paradigm» (Francis, 2015, 107). Finally, the slowness of climate change action calls to a reassessment of our theories (Winkler, 2020). Therefore, the search for and adoption of radically new «patterns of thinking» (Swilling – Annecke, 2012, xiii) will inevitably need to precede the search for just transition solutions.

CST could play a unique role in the above-mentioned challenging quest for new paradigms of just transition. Even if it does not use the term «just transition», the concept is present in CST on integral ecology. For example, CST warns against perpetrating further injustice «under the guise of

protecting the environment» (Francis, 2015, 170) and calls for distributing the burden of limiting global warming in an equitable way (Dorr, 2016). It also reminds us that each new project from the very beginning should be debated and developed by all «interested parties» and consider its environmental and social effects (Francis, 2015, 183). *Laudato si'* states: «we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation» (Francis, 2015, 48). All these examples indicate that just transition principles are encompassed within CST.

CST can offer a fundamentally different intellectual framework for the reflection on just transition. Studying just transition in the light of CST would allow creating sufficient theoretical distance (cfr. Bourdieu – Wacquant, 1992) for more disengaged analysis leading to a better understanding of the different secular paradigms of just transition. Moreover, as the planning and implementation of just transitions are gaining momentum, and many countries are facing the inevitable transformation of their economies and societies, the need for compelling ethical orientation for such policies is becoming more apparent. In this respect, CST is one of the most valuable resources. It provides well-founded and well-argued insights into the roots of the current ecological crisis and guidance for principled climate action (Christie *et al.*, 2019). To sum up, bringing CST into the scholarly debate on the concept of just transition could help to overcome some of the current theoretical stalemates and at the same time create opportunities to operationalize CST principles in specific just transition projects.

In order to take one of the first steps in bringing the Church's social teaching into the scholarly debate on just transition, I will briefly overview two main approaches to just transition. Then I will compare these approaches to corresponding ideas in CST. So far, only a limited number of authors have attempted to group the multitude of interpretations of just transitions under various approaches to the idea (Biermann – Kalfagianni, 2020; Escobar, 2015; Hampton, 2015; Kreinin, 2020; Morena *et al.*, 2019; Rothe, 2020; Snell, 2018; Swilling,

Introducing Catholic Social Teaching into the Debate on «Just Transition»

Elena Šiaudvytienė

2019; Swilling – Annecke, 2012; Wang – Lo, 2021). Their input can be preliminarily summarized by distinguishing two fundamentally different visions of just transition: *eco-modernism* and the *degrowth approach*.

Eco-modernism proposes to work within the existing capitalist structures and views ecological threats as potential sources for innovation and growth. This approach believes in the possibility of «decoupling» economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions. It disregards biophysical limits, believing they can be overcome by innovation and state investment (Kreinin, 2020). Accordingly, the only limit to sustainable growth and development is «not planetary boundaries, but human system boundaries» (Ellis, 2011, 37–38). Moreover, eco-modernism either claims that understanding of justice varies globally or endorses blind market «justice». Neoliberal proponents of eco-modernism explain climate and social crises as global market failures and propose «the use of market mechanisms and the creation of new markets» to solve these crises, for example, emissions trading schemes (Kreinin, 2020, 4). Besides trusting the market mechanisms, other representatives of this paradigm rely more on government assistance in promoting innovation, institutional change, industrial action (Morena et al., 2019), and just transition. Kreinin (2020) suggests that the latter approach is endorsed by ILO, while the Just Transition Mechanism of the European Green Deal (EGD) is based on the neoliberal approach.

A standard critique advanced towards eco-modernism rejects its assumption that market mechanisms alone can alleviate social injustices, attacks its «common sense» strategy to remove alternative approaches, and points at the failure to address the causes of the current social and climate crisis. First of all, the greening of the economy can also be unjust, which does not address existing social disparities and perpetuate them even further. Another drawback of this approach identified in the literature is that it replaces political dialogue with «business rationality, market competition, and innovation», and by focusing on local, small-scale symptoms of the socio-ecological crises, fails to address «the roots of the problem (expansion of economic growth, production, materials and energy use)» (Kreinin, 2020, 5).

The second, degrowth, approach is the opposite of eco-modernism. According to the representatives of this view, the exclusive emphasis on economic growth caused overproduction, overconsumption, and the global environmental crisis. This logic sees the twin environmental and social crisis as

inherent in current dominant (neoliberal) capitalist institutions, practices and in tying development to economic growth. Hence, degrowthers take the biophysical limits (Meadows et al., 1974; Rockström et al., 2009) of the planet seriously, since they believe that «it is impossible to pursue infinite material growth within a finite biological environment as the world is» (Puggioni, 2017, 8). Consequently, just transition should reduce energy consumption and resource exploitation in a participatory and equitable way while maintaining wellbeing. People in the global North should agree to limit consumption, voluntarily consent to possibly lower income (and GDP), and enable a just transition that gives more time to low-income countries to peak and reduce their emissions (Keyßer – Lenzen, 2021). Such a scenario of just transition is very different from eco-modernism's technology-driven pathways. Currently, it may seem «politically impossible» (Kallis, 2018, 115), since it implies «significant changes to current capitalist socio-economic systems, [...] and challenges deeply embedded cultures, values, mindsets and power structures» (Keyßer – Lenzen, 2021, 9). However, proponents of this approach firmly believe that such change is possible by changing values, habits, culture, creating alternative institutions, bringing about social change from below.

At first glance, there are many similarities between degrowth views on just transition and corresponding ideas in CST. For example, CST addresses the problem of limited resources (John Paul II, 1987, 26, 34), criticizes technocratic mentality, rejects the idea of unlimited growth, and offers an alternative understanding of the quality of life. To continue, CST points to the importance of solidarity between countries, moderation (Francis, 2015, 222), and the necessity of a change in values and everyday practices (Benedict XVI, 2009, 51). The encyclical letter *Laudato si'* comes close to the degrowth idea of just transition by stating that «the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth» (Francis, 2015, 193). Likewise, it emphasizes that it is essential to implement changes in a participatory and transparent way (Francis, 2015, 183), starting from small bottom-up initiatives.

On the other hand, CST differs from the degrowth approach in some crucial ways. First, CST is proposing not only a transition from one socio-economic structure to another. It calls to the «ecological conversion» of persons and communities,

which is a theological and moral principle. To continue, the degrowth just transition paradigm is often criticized for not explaining how the sought radical change is supposed to happen and how to make it politically feasible. Even though it is often criticized for its abstractness, CST is more specific than the degrowth paradigm because it provides clear, well-founded theological anthropology and moral vision of society. Finally, CST is not as fragmented as the degrowth approach and offers a more stable normative orientation in today's world of transitions (Puggioni, 2017).

Regarding the eco-modernist approach to just transition, CST firmly rejects the extreme version, which asserts that «ecological problems will solve themselves simply with the application of new technology and without any need for ethical considerations or deep change» (Francis, 2015, 60). CST similarly criticizes the core belief of the eco-modernist version of just transition that the market alone can solve all social problems and guarantee social inclusion (Benedict XVI, 2009, 35–36). However, quite contrary to the degrowth approach, CST recognizes the importance of the market institution but reminds that the market should be subject to the principles of social justice and directed towards the common good in order to «fulfil its proper economic function» (Benedict XVI, 2009, 35). Finally, one of the central concerns of more interventionist eco-modernist versions of just transition is the need to protect affected workers and guarantee decent work for all. Standing in such a long tradition of reflection of the situation of workers, CST could doubtless offer significant and constructive contributions to this debate.

To conclude, the initial evaluation of the two main just transition paradigms in the light of CST confirmed that the concept of just transition has a corresponding idea in CST. However, since the 1970s, both traditions developed their analogous concepts in parallel with limited contacts until recent decades. Even today, when the implementation of green transitions is gaining momentum, the theoretical reflection on the concept of just transitions remains somewhat fragmented and lacks a sound ethical grounding. For this reason, bringing the social teaching of the Church into the debates and policies of just transition would greatly enrich them and help to overcome some of the shortcomings of degrowth and eco-modernist approaches. Most importantly, CST offers a well-founded moral vision of society which both secular approaches lack. As a result, it can help to «transcend» the current paradigms of just transition and

analyze them in light of a fundamentally different intellectual framework.

References

- Benedict PP. XVI (2009), *Caritas in veritate*, Encyclical letter, LEV, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html
- Biermann, F. – Kalfagianni, A. (2020), *Planetary justice: A research framework*, «Earth System Governance» 6, 100049. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2020.100049>
- Bourdieu, P. – Wacquant, L.J.D. (1992), *An invitation to reflexive sociology*, 1st ed., University of Chicago Press.
- Cahill, B. – Allen, M.M. (2020), *Just transitions concepts and relevance for climate action. A preliminary framework*, CSIS and CIF. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200626_JustTransition_layout_v8.pdf
- Christie, I. – Gunton, R.M. – Hejnowicz, A.P. (2019), *Sustainability and the common good: Catholic Social Teaching and 'Integral Ecology' as contributions to a framework of social values for sustainability transitions*, «Sustainability Science» 14/5, pp. 1343–1354. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00691-y>
- Dorr, D. (2016), *Option for the poor and for the Earth: From Leo XIII to pope Francis*. Orbis Books.
- Ellis, E. (2011), *The planet of no return: Human resilience on an artificial earth*, «Breakthrough Journal» 2, pp. 37–44. <https://thebreakthrough.org/journal/issue-2/the-planet-of-no-return>
- Escobar, A. (2015), *Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: A preliminary conversation*, «Sustainability Science» 10/3, pp. 451–462. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-015-0297-5>
- Farrell, C. (2012), *A just transition: Lessons learned from the environmental justice movement*, «Duke Forum for Law & Social Change» 45/4, pp. 45–63. <https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/dflsc/vol4/iss1/3/>
- Francis PP. (2015), *Laudato si'*, Encyclical letter on care for our common home, Vatican Press. https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf
- Hampton, P. (2015), *Workers and trade unions for climate solidarity: Tackling climate change in a neoliberal world*, Routledge.
- ILO. (2015), *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*, in ILO, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_432859.pdf
- IPCC. (2021), Summary for policymakers. In *Climate change 2021: The physical science basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge UP. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM_final.pdf
- John Paul II PP. (1987), *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Encyclical letter, LEV, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.pdf
- Kallis, G. (2018), *Degrowth*, Agenda Publishing.
- Keyßer, L.T. – Lenzen, M. (2021), *1.5 °C degrowth scenarios suggest the need for new mitigation pathways*, «Nature Communications» 12/1, 2676. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-22884-9>
- Krein, H. (2020), *Typologies of "just transitions": Towards social-ecological transformation*. Institute for Ecological Economics. https://epub.wu.ac.at/7814/1/WP_35.pdf
- Meadows, D.H. – Meadows, D.L. – Randers, J. – Behrens III, W.W. (1974), *The limits to growth: A report for the club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. Universe Books.
- Morena, E. – Krause, D. – Stevis, D. (2019), *Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon World*, Pluto Press.
- Morena, E. – Stevis, D. – Shelton, R. – Krause, D. – Mertins-Kirkwood, H. – Price, V. – Azzi, D. – Helmerich, N. (2018), *Mapping just transition(s) to a low-carbon world*, UNRISD, https://rosalux.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RLS-NYC_Just_Transitions.pdf
- Powell, J. (2017), *Scientists reach 100% consensus on anthropogenic global warming*, «Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society» 37/4, pp. 183–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467619886266>
- Puggioni, R. (2017), *Pope Francis and degrowth: A possible dialogue for a post-capitalist alternative*, «International Journal of Public Theology» 11/1, pp. 7–35. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341470>
- Rockström, J. – Steffen, W. – Noone, K. et al. (2009), *Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity*, «Ecology and Society» 14/2, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-03180-140232>
- Rothe, D. (2020), *Governing the end times? Planet politics and the secular eschatology of the Anthropocene*, «Millennium» 48/2, pp. 143–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829819889138>
- Snell, D. (2018), *'Just transition'? Conceptual challenges meet stark reality in a 'transitioning' coal region in Australia*, «Globalizations» 15/4, pp. 550–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2018.1454679>
- Swilling, M. (2019), *The age of sustainability: Just transitions in a complex world*, Routledge.
- Swilling, M. – Annecke, E. (2012), *Just transitions: Explorations of sustainability in an unfair world*, United Nations University Press.
- Turkson, P.K.A.C. (2020), *The evolution of the concept of integral ecology in papal teaching*, in D. O'Hara et al. (eds.), *Integral ecology for a more sustainable world: Dialogues with Laudato si'*, Lexington Books.
- Wang, X. – Lo, K. (2021), *Just transition: A conceptual review*, «Energy Research & Social Science» 82, 102291. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102291>
- WBA. (2021), *Just transition assessment 2021: Are high-emitting companies putting people at the heart of decarbonisation?*, World Benchmarking Alliance. https://assets.worldbenchmarkingalliance.org/app/uploads/2021/10/2021_Just_Transition_Assessment_FINAL.pdf
- Winkler, H. (2020), *Towards a theory of just transition: A neo-Gramscian understanding of how to shift development pathways to zero poverty and zero carbon*, «Energy Research & Social Science» 70, 101789. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101789>