
How is Covid-19 strengthening the push towards a so-called "energy transition"?

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Any attempt to answer this question should embark from a critical stance toward a set of assumptions about the possibility for capitalism, as the global political-economic protocol of wealth accumulation and redistribution, to come to terms with the breakdown of the biosphere, the catastrophe it helped create.

Putting aside the strengthened interconnections among peoples' resistance to life-predatory investments across the globe, the ecological breakdown – which also brings Ebola, SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV, Flu A and the progressing SARS-CoV-2, besides climate chaos – is posing an unprecedented threat to the institutions that animate the global market. The past two quarters of 2020 witnessed what the future of the global market may entail—a turbulence which has little to do with business cycles, determined by chaos.

The usual flair in “crisis management” of the global market’s value-chain infrastructure – which includes consultancy company McKinsey, top Wall Street advisors and think tanks across the spectrum of trade blocs, the BRICS and the UN-World Bank, the thousands of corporations nested under the UN-Global Compact and its country-level tentacles, the captains of industry and robber-barons in the new emerging markets – is generating the usual responses to crisis that are almost invariably failing in the attempt to handle the loss of temporal “order” that the Covid-19 set in motion. Despite the hasty mobilisation to restart production, perhaps best exemplified by the Japanese automotive industry and Apple computer suppliers in China, which began preparing such a restart in late January, the connotations of time and space in the word future noticeably shrivels to an unspecified “after the coronavirus menace is gone.”

Amid the shaken faith in the capabilities of both market mechanisms and government, piggy-backing on the present market interruption to advertise an energy transition to a low-carbon economy sounds as bloodless as it is pathetic. Nevertheless, a transition “from fossil fuel to non-fossil fuel energy” as such is a valid proposition that deserves serious interrogation of the assumptions behind it. And most importantly, whether or not such a call would also mean a transition in the economy that it serves. Justice should apply to the ultimate social-ecological objectives as much as to the method and process of withdrawal.

Let's take a closer look at each word in the term “energy transition”. As usually used, the term tends to signify nothing more than an alteration over time in the composition of the energy sources that are a key input to the usual path of economic growth. The associated misery, exploitation and predation of life associated with that growth is ignored.

This kind of “supply- side” approach has nothing to say about pandemic industrial urbanism, the real source of demand for the energy industry. Neither is there any explicit mention of the need for a

fundamental transition away from extractivism as its cornerstone, nor a serious incorporation of justice in redefining how the term energy is understood.

Without exception, any technical advancement or re-configuration in energy conversion/generation – agrofuels, wind or hydro kinetics, geothermal, photovoltaic cells or batteries for electric vehicle and power storage – must admit their dependency on extractivism, which is escalating in its intensity, geographic coverage and ecotoxicology.

To cite an example, a 2011 statement from a Greenpeace energy-revolution package for Asia mentioned that "with its current need to be electrified, its geographical condition and scattered communities, Papua is the perfect model for decentralized renewable energy grids that are ready to be harnessed today in order to power the future". Relegating the particularity and values of the human condition and its lifescape to a set of proposed external technical objectives is at best problematic. In fact, for both sides of Papua Island and the countless small islands which flank it, energy as defined by its technical components of generation, transmission and distribution must first be redefined and understood as a social-ecological issue. This is even more important in the face of the energy industry's brutal hunt for raw materials in the region.

As is glaringly obvious in the cobalt barefoot mining of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the rare metal deserts of China, the Sulawesi-Mollucas-Papua nickel-cobalt corridor of Indonesia, or the lithium triangle of the salars of Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, a low carbon economy in the making brings with it more social-ecological depredation. Under the transformed geography of commodity production, the energy industry must also maintain its reliance on fossil fuels, including coal, gas and bunker fuels, besides land and water grabbing and toxic dumping, which are all associated with its operations.

These social-ecological burdens of such a transition/revolution also sustain the demand for an extractive imperialism: Countries with large deposits of the new golds such as the battery minerals (cobalt, lithium, nickel, graphite, and manganese) are held hostage by the requirements of the green energy technology. In reality, the labels "clean" and "dirty", or "high" and "low" carbon emission serve merely as reference to industrial or finance asset classes; in reality, they allow corporations to get away with murder.

Indonesia is an illustrative example. The country holds the world largest geothermal energy potential – and the largest disaster risks from volcanism, tectonic and geothermal-induced seismicity. In this context, the global finance and industrial capital behind the brewing geothermal rush work hand in glove not only with occupants of public offices, but also with coal industrial lobbies and politically influential environmentalist organisations. This cooperation involves privatising the country's legislative process and crafting various special purpose vehicles for investment.

Likewise, the subverted phrase "ecosystem restoration" largely refers to a type of corporate property or concession for agrofuel or pulp plantations. This has nothing to do with the wellbeing of the forests. In this light, "energy transition" or "revolution" in its common usage is ushering in a darker episode of colonialism: The biggest appetite for "energy transition" or "revolution" comes from the most industrialised countries, while what sustains it lies in nominally-independent countries rich in minerals and fertile lands.

"Transition" becomes a code word emptied of adequately specified criteria for social-ecological processes and outcomes. As with the medicalisation of the Covid-19 pestilence or the financialisation of climate-change mitigation, any political variant of a Green New Deal state-corporate-centred

campaign is not an answer to accelerating social-ecological breakdown. As “transition” refers to a unilaterally-decided sustainability of corporate industrialism, “energy”– the other half of the buzzword – continues to obscure a peculiarly savage energetics in the service of wealth accumulation by means of ruining the lives of Earth beings. Stopping the engine remains the social-learning agenda of prime importance.

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