

Future directions for post-carbon inclusion

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<1> 14. Future directions for post-carbon inclusion <1>

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Ecological modernization and business-as-usual approaches to decarbonization are dangerous. They mainly exacerbate inequalities and fail to address challenging social questions related to contemporary governance, technologies, and economies. Helping homeowners to decarbonize their homes along current market-oriented lines, such as subsidies for purchasing new ‘green’ goods and services, only drives further inequity in housing and transport systems. Increasing inequity not only jeopardizes the lives of the dispossessed but also means that those on lower incomes have more pressured and precarious lives. Alienating these major sections of society from the universal change required places in peril the whole decarbonization project (Chapter 12). As such, the importance of incorporating inclusion within the post-carbon imperative cannot be overestimated, as this whole collection has sought to illustrate.

A normative focus on economic growth and technology over wellbeing and socially determined limits marginalizes ‘alternatives’ to the status quo to fringe experiments. In fact, such alternatives attempt to challenge precisely those mainstream practices which hamper effective decarbonization. Current settings allow overconsumption by those most able to purchase green goods and services (Chapter 11). Moreover, they background degrowth, which is potentially a transformative pathway towards post-carbon inclusion (Chapters 10 and 13). Illustrating the possibilities when inclusion is centre-stage, Chapter 5 offers an alternative framework for ‘just transitions’ to promote the virtues of generosity and care as foundations for achieving justice. In concert, these virtues have the potential to bridge communities

(Castro, 2021). Furthermore, the alternative values that they uphold can shape transitions and justice from the starting point of genuine concern for the wellbeing of others.

This chapter presents a forward-oriented agenda drawing upon the insights of contributors to this volume, as they explain the dangers of business-as-usual decarbonization policies and programs, analyse their implications for research and practice, and present potential routes to post-carbon futures.

<2> Dangers of business-as-usual decarbonization <2>

This book engages with questions of justice, inclusion, and transformation to explore possible changes to currently sedimented societal, economic, and infrastructural histories and trajectories. In doing so, we enter deeply politicized territory (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Armstrong and McLaren, 2022). To call for post-carbon inclusion in the terms we establish is not a neutral act that can be neatly bundled into techno-managerialist terms, seeking change without disruption to ongoing accumulation strategies and societal order. *Politics is central.*

Yet, contradictions and alignments of political positions and arguments flowing through current transition and net zero debates are often complex. They can take quite unexpected forms, presenting distinct challenges as well as opportunities. Recent interest in degrowth by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Chapter 1) and the European Commission (Deconinck, 2023) is a case in point. Degrowth challenges the central growth ideal of contemporary economies and states. Chapters 10 and 13 are devoted to exploring degrowth interventions, veritable disruptions to commonplace socio-material boundaries, incumbencies, and power relations. However, as policymakers and politicians are attracted to this new

movement calling for limits, so the risks of contortion and co-option of degrowth principles accumulate, as apparent in capitalist-inclined ‘postgrowth’.

We might normally expect climate activists’ concerns for inequality, justice, and inclusion to align with progressive perspectives on the political left or centre ground, positions seeking simultaneous attention to climate and social objectives, from local through to global scales.

However, in recent years, populist and radical right proponents have opportunistically supported the cause of those disadvantaged by the impact of decarbonization policies.

Typically, they assert that households and communities on low incomes cannot afford the service costs of rapid and substantial carbon action, as in requiring a turn from non-renewable energy sources (gas and coal) to renewable ones (wind and solar) and cannot purchase expensive (as such ‘middle-class’) goods, such as heat pumps and electric vehicles.

At first sight, such popular and radical right arguments mimic progressive political ones and related legitimate concerns raised in various chapters in this collection. However, more often than not, mobilising inequality objections is a political right tactic seeking to delay and disrupt climate action, rather than a call for policy synergies and ways forward towards post-carbon that promote justice and inclusion. Various commentators note a shift in the discourses of climate sceptics and denial towards narrating a strategy of delay and obstruction (Lamb et al, 2020; Low and Boettcher, 2020). In their analysis, ‘concern’ for the distribution of costs and benefits, and burden on those already disadvantaged, is just one of a series of moves to slow down climate action, muddy the political waters, and promote political fragmentation. Such developments lead to disarray and friction, just when strong and concerted political action to decarbonize is most needed.

In particular, the chrono-urbanist concept of the ‘15-minute city’, engaged with in a United Kingdom (UK) context within Chapter 4, shows further ways in which climate action and inclusion can become ensnared in some of the worst excesses of right-wing populist politics. The idea of enabling easy accessibility via walking and cycling to services through planning for mixed, liveable, and green neighbourhoods offers co-benefits of various forms to urban communities and draws on long, largely uncontroversial, traditions of land use and transport planning. Risks of gentrification and exclusion identified in Chapter 4 do not undermine the 15-minute city proposal or intent but, rather, call for attention to managing in socially responsible ways who benefits and exactly how ‘15-minute’ and related policies are applied.

However, once refracted through populist politics and inflected with variants of post-COVID conspiracy theory, the 15-minute city concept has been attacked in social media as a means of exerting social control, a move to monitor what people do and where they go, as if *requiring* them to stay within 15 minutes of their homes rather than making it *possible* for them to satisfy many of their everyday basic needs quickly and easily (Calafati et al, 2023; Loader, 2023). Such wild claims have now infected mainstream politics within the UK, with the Conservative government seeking political advantage by positioning themselves against 15-minute city initiatives and related local transport planning schemes to support active travel and reduce traffic emissions (Wainwright, 2023).

In short, in seeking shifts towards post-carbon inclusion, there is copious political territory to navigate. In this febrile political atmosphere, concerns raised about potentially deepening various forms of exclusion, inequalities, and vulnerabilities risk being appropriated to the ends of those not so much seeking better climate action and decarbonisation as much less of it. Not radical and just transformation, but incremental advancement of the status quo,

protecting the interests of incumbents and seeking to keep structures of elite accumulation and mass-disadvantage firmly in place. This philosophy is illustrated in Chapter 11, which highlights a glaring, but seemingly inconspicuous research and policy lacuna around high consuming groups, a striking omission given that half of all greenhouse gas emissions emanate from the wealthiest 10 per cent in society (Hubacek et al, 2017). Focussing research attention and policy interventions on such highly influential groups remains a radical prospect suggesting how delicately a degrowth aligned research agenda is likely to be approached.

<2> Implications for post-carbon inclusion research and practice <2>

Beyond arguing that we must only contemplate decarbonisation projects where inclusion is embedded as a procedural intention and outcome, discourses in this collection present a set of related political and economic implications. Here they are grouped into three entangled and overlapping agendas, of mapping the terrain, of rights and justice, and of empowerment and agency. These agendas are envisaged as core directions for future research and policy communities working in partnership in this growing field of post-carbon inclusion studies.

<3> Mapping the terrain <3>

Currently, deep understandings of the actual nature of social life and of how capabilities and lived practices entangle with decarbonization agendas, ideas, and projects is essential yet in short supply. In advancing without such understandings, the neoliberal ecomodernist approach to decarbonisation puts in peril the whole project to save both people and planet. Working on flatter ontological and epistemological terrain, and plugging the gaps in

normative framings of decarbonization, is urgently needed. This is why contributors to this collection present opportunities to draw on practice theory and justice as ‘capabilities’.

Walker (2013: p 371) highlights that ‘successful performances of practice are distributed across populations’ and that it is crucial to recognise ‘this as a reflection of differences in the capability to perform’. Inequality is about recruitment to, and the performance of, particular practices that differ according to exclusionary societal factors, such as wealth creation and resultant poverty, minorities produced by majorities, and so on. These differences reflect differences in capability (Halkier and Holm 2021). Linking capabilities and social structures, agency and practices in this way usefully draws attention away from individual performance and behaviour towards societal changes that support broad spread capabilities and embeds social justice as central to social practice analyses (Willand et al, 2021).

<3> Rights and justice <3>

As the terrain of uneven capabilities is revealed in more ways and in more situations, it opens up scope to reframe justice rights and rules – social and otherwise. For example, as deep qualitative research reveals how energy poverty shortens lives and contravenes human rights, so ideas of universal rights to basic energy services take hold. An example is identified by Olsen et al (2018) in the Italian housing movement where campaigns have advanced from the ‘right to the city’ to the ‘right to metabolism’. The search for fairness in energy service access and distribution entails ethical, moral, and value-based work (Sovacool and Dworkin, 2014; Jenkins et al, 2016; Sovacool et al, 2016) and leads to questions about defining ‘essential’ energy (Chapters 7 and 12). Some successfully hide their energy poverty by only turning on winter heating when a care worker or other visitor is expected. As such their mortal danger, a

pernicious form of energy injustice, is hidden from friendly observation or formal support systems (Willand et al, 2023).

Access to clean air is widely regarded as a basic human right, yet brutal contraventions of this right continue to expand (Chapter 7). Deliberate greenhouse gas emissions are a violent act, given that we know the science of climate change and that human and ecological harm is underway and accelerating, indeed out of regulatory control. Protection of those most exposed to such human-induced violence is essential in an unequal world. The contradictions of systems based on greed juxtaposed to a climate emergency inevitably lead researchers and policy makers into the domains of rights and justice. It makes little sense to expect people to voluntarily limit high energy consumption while allowing the prolific existence of consumption advertising (Chapter 11). If consumption is a problem (and it is) then it needs to be policed at the points of production and distribution.

<3> Empowerment <3>

The editors of this volume are not unique in concluding that precursors to post-carbon inclusion require systematically structured, locally responsive, and relevant mechanisms for building coalitions. Intermediary functions are needed to share knowledge, connect, and mediate across experiments, regions, neighbourhoods, and initiatives. Engagement and co-design are not only contemporary methods based on principles of reciprocity and respect but also are essential underpinnings of post-carbon inclusion. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals call for leaving no-one behind, which is laudable but woefully insufficient. Identifying who is vulnerable and excluded, whose needs should be prioritized (Chapter 5), and integrating everyone into decision-making are more meaningful goals. The

opposite extremes of poverty and profligacy and the absence of inclusion in the post-carbon agenda places the planet in great peril.

Knowledge, insight, and learning are all essential, but they only matter if we add agency. This points to the dual importance, firstly, of practicing post-carbon inclusion research with both near and far neighbours, activists, and those who already feel disempowered and, secondly, of working across the boundaries of the immediately practical horizon (what can actually be done now to progress post-carbon inclusion) and essential future horizons (imaginaries of post-carbon inclusion and models of future planetary governance).

Agency calls attention to both capabilities and governance, to lines of representation and accountability that genuinely empower those who have been left out from a share in the spoils of capital accumulation. Agency relies on different supports in various contexts, from socio-technical and socio-material bundles to new constellations and institutions, from fresh discourses and practices to revisions in common understandings and accepted social truths. How might such promising lines of agency spread outwards, upwards, or otherwise to become more pervasive and, in so doing, supersede existing obduracies and incumbencies?

Discussions and analyses of agency highlight the significance of experiments in living arrangements that demonstrate and test post-carbon futures. Chapters 2 and 10 offer different, arguably complementary, perspectives. The alternative concept of the solidarity mode of living is counterposed to the contemporary imperial mode of living in Chapter 13. Altogether, Chapters 5, 7, 10 and 13 argue the needs for, and show ways to, amplify, legitimise, and celebrate multiple and diverse degrowth variants, with associated virtues of empathy, care, generosity, solidarity, cooperation, dialogue and sharing.

<2> Routes to post-carbon futures <2>

Highlighted by Naomi Klein (Winship, 2016) in ‘there are no non-radical futures’, an ongoing search for post-capitalist, post-carbon futures evolves in the face of increasingly inadequate mainstream responses. Aside from tensions between needs to sustain and improve human well-being and needs to decarbonize (Chapter 9), protecting planetary health is a task beyond the narrowly circumscribed interests and motivations of markets and national states. While markets create the poverty and the social boundaries that imperil decarbonization, national governments protect national interests against planetary interests, intergenerational interests, and interspecies interests. This is especially the case given that these interests often diverge, so requiring subtle and sensitive analyses to form optimum outcomes.

The exemplary and evidentiary fact that, for example, significant land-use changes in the Amazon influence water resources and climate conditions globally, highlights the significance of ‘planetary boundaries’ defining safe operating parameters for humanity and a regenerative living planet (Rockström et al, 2009). Sterner et al (2019) point out that complex earth systems must be analysed across boundaries and synthetically as well as taking into account politics in order to govern for global carrying capacity. Can neo-classical economics, tied as it is to a modernization project that is alienated from the planet (du Plessis, 2012), be fundamentally rethought (Grubb et al, 2016)? Degrowth, as explicated and illustrated in various chapters in this volume, proposes one paradigm. As Gibbons (2020) details, ideas of regenerative science propose a co-creative partnership with nature, positioned beyond simply human sustainability, with additional layers of restoration, reconciliation, and regeneration.

Moreover, regenerative futures explore how futures thinking can promote regenerative development (Camrass, 2020).

But, who will action these grand ideas at the broad scale necessary? How will such narratives be realized? Normatively, as the corporate world engages with commodified concepts of ‘energy-positive’ buildings and ‘the green rebranding of cattle’ (Cusworth et al, 2022) the boundaries seem drawn around what is amenable to globalized mechanisms of accumulation. Can the corporate world contribute to post-carbon inclusion? Hope lies in debunking corporate myths about reinventing itself to behave better in a newly fashioned suit made from recycled fibres.

As pointed out by movements of environmental justice, degrowth, and social justice, hope lies in new forms of engagement, in new agents and actors operating in new ways. Chapter 2 finds urban experiments increasingly collaborating with arts communities to bring the necessary ingenuity to interpret and engage human imagination in addressing the climate crisis and its roots in a system that exacerbates exclusion of people and planet. Collective solidarity, respecting Earth, and political awareness, are central to this project (Chapter 13).

The planetary scale interactions of climate change and inequality open up the field of post-carbon inclusion research to interact with related social and environmental movements in creative and constructive ways. While much normative debate about decarbonization is around learning new technologies, the post-carbon inclusion project points towards mass mobilizations and engagement with the great unlearning of the ‘truths’ of late neoliberalism around wealth creation.

Contributors to this volume dipped their toes into post-carbon inclusion futures. Immediately, we found hurdles and road blocks, so much so, our chapters focus on describing the knotted nets in front of researchers, activists, and policy makers addressing the challenges of global heating, climate change, and ways of approaching a very necessary transition to modes of relational living. We as a species confront politico-economic and ecological circumstances largely of our own making and seem unable, yet, to undo and move past our predicament. However, we can change our practices, and this book has sought to identify some starting points. This makes a forward-oriented agenda a veritable beacon of hope for researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and, indeed, all of us.

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