



The politics of transition: From ecology to money ... and back

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Introduction

This text is a transcript of a keynote held at the conference: *Economy, people and planet – Towards a new economic paradigm*. The conference is an annual joint venture between Copenhagen Business School and the Danish network of transition activists Omstilling.Nu. The stated goal of the conference is ‘to qualify the economic thinking and discourse in the light of the current sustainability challenge.’ The transcript has been lightly edited for readability but the verbal style of the text is retained:

What I can offer you are some thoughts that I am still trying to figure out. I am not through thinking about them and as a result some of these thoughts may be a little rough.

I believe we all share the vision of a transition. Yet, there are two questions that we must consider. The first one is this: what shall we do? I will argue that I think we know the answer to this question already. I think that many of the solutions, if not all of them, are available to us now.

Most politicians say that we have to wait for this transition until scientists and technology have come up with a solution. This may be true if we want cars that run on water, nevertheless I think we will have to wait a long time for those. In order to create the transition that we want, I do not think we need cars that run on water. I think we already have the ideas available.

This leads me to the second question that I think is very important. We need to ask ourselves, why is it that we have not made the transition already? The challenges that we are facing are not new. We have known about these challenges for decades. I believe that if we look at the political situation today, we find a paradox. The general awareness of the ecological crisis is greater than ever before. Very many people, including the politicians, know and talk about it. At the same time, it seems that the political consensus on the necessity of economic growth is stronger than ever before. All of the politicians seem to agree that we must grow.

What I will offer you is a sketch of an explanation to this disconnect. Furthermore, I am also struggling to answer the following question: why is it that we have not succeeded in creating a mass mobilization around the issue of growth itself? Even though we are many people who share a vision of transition, we have to be honest with ourselves and accept that we have not succeeded in creating a mass mobilization with the message: 'we do not want any more growth – we want something else'.

Take a look at the photo of Earth taken from space by the Apollo 17 crew in 1972, as they were traveling towards the moon. This photo was taken around the same time as the environmental movement began. Moreover, this image often appears on the cover of political papers and books about the environment, climate or sustainability. It is also one of the images that Al Gore uses and even Barack Obama has used it in his recent climate change speech. The reason why we connect this image to the environment and the climate may be that this picture gives us of a sense of global responsibility; we are all living on the same planet. However, in my opinion this image illustrates some of the things that are wrong with the way we talk about sustainability in our society today. When I use the word wrong, I do not mean factually wrong or morally wrong. I mean wrong in the terms of mobilizing people in the right way.

Now, let us play a game that I think you might be familiar with. Let's see if we can find 4 errors in this famous photo of Earth.



Figure 1: The Earth.

The first error in this image is that the earth is round. This is wrong. I believe the earth is flat in the sense that our immediate experience of the world is flat. I have never experienced a world that is round. When I walk out the door in the morning, my earth is flat. This means that my immediate and political concerns are concerns experienced in a world that is flat.

When we talk about the ecological crisis, there are a number of issues such as resource depletion and eco-systems degradation, however the central issue in politics today is the issue of climate change. Of course this issue is important, yet I am not sure that this issue will mobilize people in the right way. It is a very abstract issue and it is not something of which very many people have any immediate experience.

For example, I have been thinking that the summers are quite long now and I have wondered whether this is a consequence of climate change. Even if it is climate change in a scientific sense, I do not think of climate change when I go to the park. I will most likely think, 'Oh, what a nice day'. The issue of climate change and the idea of a round Earth lack the immediate physical experience of a problem. Most people recognize that a problem exists. Still they are not sure of what they can do about it.

Another error in this image is that there are no people. This may be a little controversial, but we need to understand it in a philosophical way. I think that this image is the ultimate ecological fantasy: a world without people. Ecology is based on the notion of an inherent balance of nature. But people, throughout history, have been constantly upsetting this balance. That is what we do. It is almost part of who we are as human beings. My point is not that people are inherently bad and therefore, we might as well not care and destroy the planet. What I am trying to explain is that although many of us believe in ecology, there are people who feel alienated by ecology. We must recognize this. I believe these people are reacting to the fact that ecology is inherently misanthropic. People are not part of the ultimate ecological fantasy, which is why many people feel alienated.

The third error is that there are no borders in the image. The image makes us believe that we are all connected and in the same boat. This is also what climate change is about. There is going to be a massive catastrophe and therefore, we must all work together to prevent this. I have been reading a number of policy papers regarding climate change. What I have found is that the word 'we' appears again and again. Every other sentence begins with 'we'. While I was reading these policies, I started thinking, and I am not convinced that this 'we' exists. The entire problem is that we are calling for a 'we' to act. Yet, who is this 'we' and how can it act?

I do not believe that we are all in the same boat. Some people are on a luxury cruise ship, other people are in a high-tech battleship and some are in a small wooden rowing boat. As a result, we are not in the same boat. We are often met with the idea that a huge catastrophe will hit us all, forcing us to work together. Yet, this is not going to happen. The catastrophes are already happening. However, they are happening at different times, to different people in different locations on the planet. In a world where there are people and borders, there are also different classes. The struggle for transition is similarly a class struggle. Talking about a 'we' and waiting for some kind of global solidarity to emerge ignores the central conflicts of interest that is standing in the way of a transition.

The final error is the perspective from which the photography has been taken. We may have seen this image, but we do not physically watch Earth from this perspective. It is not a normal way for people to look at Earth. It made me wonder, who is really looking at Earth in this image? I think that it could be God looking at Earth. Furthermore, this made me wonder if maybe this is a postcard from God. This of course made me curious. What is on the back of this postcard? What is He writing to us? I think there are two options. The first option is that God wrote, 'So long suckers. Screw this – I am leaving'. We have now caused so

much trouble that even God has given up on us. The other option is that God's message is, 'Do not worry, I will fix it'. Either way, the end result is the same, as both options put our destiny in the hands of God.

Now, I would like to go back to discussing the transition with the help from an image of a Danish krone. I believe that there are alternatives to the current way in which we talk and think about transition. In fact I believe that this conference signifies a new way of talking and thinking about it. The title of this conference is: Economy, People and Planet. This title is right on the money in the sense that these three elements are in the correct order. My point is not that economy is more important than people or the planet, yet if we want to mobilize people we have to start with economics. The rest will follow.



Figure 2: Danish Krone.

First of all, a money approach allows us to address the kind of problems that people who live on a flat earth experience. Money is something that we are all very personally familiar with. We all have experience with money. There are very few people who have a melting ice mountain in the backyard. If we want ordinary people to mobilize and get up and act, then we have to connect the need of a transition to their immediate experiences. What are their problems and concerns? People have and use money. They have debt and fear of losing their jobs. What money can do for us politically is that rather than having to push

forward a new agenda on to the mainstream agenda, we can take the existing agenda, recognize the problem and introduce our solutions. 'Here is another solution to the problem that you have already formulated and are immediately experiencing'.

The second advantage of a money approach is that it allows us to shift the blame of the crisis. Some of the analyses of the crisis say that there is something wrong with people. They consume too much, they work too much, and they are too greedy. This rhetoric evokes guilt and shame. In regards to mobilizing people, I am not sure that a good way of doing this is shaming people and making them feel guilty. The money approach allows us to say, 'There is nothing wrong with you. There is something wrong with money'. The reason why we are in the growth paradigm is a result of money.

Furthermore, the money approach makes the class struggle visible. As mentioned earlier there is a tendency to think of a collective 'we' when we talk about climate change. Yet, the 'we' is an illusion. We have to realize that there are certain institutions, certain groups and certain people who are screwing the rest of us. This is extremely important in terms of mobilizing people. This may be controversial, but if we look throughout history, people tend to round up when they can point to a common enemy. We tend to think that this is a bad thing. Well maybe it is not so bad if we point at the right enemy.

When we talk about class struggle, we often think about Marx, workers and capitalists. My point here is that we have to realize that class struggle and class division has changed. Rather than talking about workers versus capitalists, maybe we need to talk about debtors versus creditors. There are the people who make the money and the rest of us who need to borrow money and pay interests to become part of the economy. Global solidarity does not seem to bridge these two classes of people.

I think that money is perhaps one of the most human of all human creations. Money is in fact nothing but human. Nature has no part in the creation of money. It is a purely human and cultural creation. This also makes it very easy to change. Global patterns of consumption are difficult to change. Global patterns of production are also very difficult to change. However, money is easy to change. If we wanted to, we could do it tomorrow. It may not be politically easy, but technically it is not difficult. What a money approach does is that it points to very concrete and down-to-earth solutions.

To sum up, my point is not to forget the environment or to stop worrying about ecology. Of course we should worry about these matters. Nevertheless, I think we

should begin with the money. Once we open this issue of money and realize that we can actually change it, I think a political and economic space will open, which will allow us to solve all the other issues. What the current money system is doing now is closing the space of politics. The system makes us think that there is nothing we can do. We can merely roll with the system, because the system is too strong. Yet, if we change it, then we could have a discussion of whether we should have more economic growth or less economic growth. The terms of this discussion would be very different than from having it within the system we have today.

I would like to end with a little story, which I believe captures the structure of the political field today. The story is about a drunk who has been out at bars all night. He finally decides to go back to his house. Unfortunately, he loses his keys and starts looking for them under a street lamp.

A police officer comes by and asks him, ‘What seems to be the problem?’

The drunk says, ‘I lost my keys’. ‘Oh, I will help you find them’ the police officer responds.

They both start looking and after ten minutes the police officer asks, ‘Are you sure that this is where you lost the keys?’

The drunk then replies, ‘No no, I lost them over by the door, but there is no light over there’.

I think that this is the way that politics is structured today. It is saying, ‘Come over here. We need to invent a car that runs on water. We need to add more liquidity to the banks’. We are being led to look in the wrong places. What we need to do is to insist that we will not look where it is convenient. We want to look over by the door. Because if we look over there, what we will find is money.

the author

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