drift for transition

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Struggling with justice in transitions

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authors

Frank van Steenbergen
Karlijn Schipper

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INTRODUCTION

Who are the winners and losers of a certain transition? How are costs and benefits of a transition distributed? Is this distribution desirable? And what, if anything, should we as transition scholars do about it? Such questions are inherently connected to why transition professionals advocate a certain (direction of a) transition over another, but are barely asked. Thus, the answers and preferences often remain implicit, since normativity is perceived as a slippery slope not only in the academic field, but also in the practice of transition management. However, when dealing with transitions one is automatically entangled in moral and ethical questions, e.g. in terms of distribution of costs and benefits and the recognition of different voices. This essay explores how the concept of justice can help transition scholars to grasp and adequately address such questions.

In the first section we address why there is a need for a more comprehensive focus on justice in transition studies. Secondly, we explore the concept of justice and its applications and implications. In the third section we delve into how justice is used and conceptualized in transition studies and related strands of literature (such as climate justice, environmental justice, etc.). Based on this exploration, we state that the concept of justice can be a bridging concept in transition studies and also has the ability to (re)politicize current discussions in for example the energy transition. In the fourth section we put forth the ways the concept of justice can be integrated in both transition theory and governance.

DEALING WITH POLITICAL STRUGGLES IN SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

Transitions are often conceptualized as building a new status quo within a certain system. Dominant structures, cultures and practices are being replaced by alternative ones. Thus, something has got to give. As stated by Loorbach (2014) this replacement includes processes of destabilization, destruction and breaking down and phasing-out certain dominant structures, beliefs and practices. By highlighting the process of destabilization the question who loses in a certain transition becomes more prominent. Yet, transition scholars have always focused more on the winners (the 'promising' and/or 'radical' niches and frontrunners) and their 'enemy', the 'regime' they are fighting. This caricature is often criticized, but the answer was often to nuance the opposition in terms of e.g. niche-regime interaction. In other words to not analyze these dynamics in terms of a fight between David and Goliath.

Additionally, the focus in transition studies has shifted towards conceptualizing transitions as 'power struggles' and as 'evolutionary revolutions'. However, such struggles and revolutions inherently imply that the outcome of transition policies and strategies could be more profitable for some than for others. Despite the growing attention to power and political dimensions of transitions (e.g. Avelino et al 2016) several authors claim that transition scholars have actually

very little to say about equity and justice, and the political economy of transitions (Swilling & Annecke, 2012; Eames & Hunt, 2013). Recently, transition scholar Jhagroe (2016) has called for more reflection on the ethical and democratic dimensions (or the lack thereof) in transition studies when it comes to winners and losers in transition processes. His call raises questions on the impact of transition policies and interventions: which voices are included and excluded? Who is able to participate in certain discussions and discussions? Who is effected in what way by certain transition policies? And how are costs and benefits (in social-economic but also ecological terms) (re)distributed?

In sufficiently dealing with these inherent political aspects of transitions – especially in phases of the destabilization and the breakdown of a certain regime – we must also question the societal desirability of the outcomes of these questions. Transition scholars often use the concept of 'sustainability' as a compass to discuss the desirability of a range of different directions of transitions. However, over the years transition scholars have also criticized the notion of sustainability for it is falling short in addressing political questions of democracy and (re)distribution. Firstly, some authors argue that it is a vague concept and conceals many fundamental oppositions (see Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien 2005) and secondly, others claim that 'sustainability' has become part of regime strategies. Loorbach (2014) for instance writes that: "the concept of sustainability and its associated visions became part of optimizing societal systems, contributing to an over-all lock-in of modernistic and unsustainable regimes" (Loorbach 2014: 51). Also, Jhagroe (2016) criticizes that sustainable development is often translated in 'neoliberal-technocratic' interventions that are fueled by 'green techno-capitalism', and thus is blind for fundamental socio-economic inequalities and struggles.[1] He therefore proposes to replace sustainability with the notion of solidarity and/or justice for making possible radical and transformative democratic change.

This bold proposition raises the question to what extent the replacement of sustainability with justice as a guiding principle for transitions, will really bring about radical democratic change and is not a mere word game reproducing similar limitations. One similar limitation could be that it replaces the blind spot for socio-economic inequalities with a blind spot for ecological issues[2]. A relevant question since both the strength and the struggle of the transition perspective and practice lies particularly in acknowledging equity and ecological sustainability as two sides of the same coin (see Swilling & Annecke, 2012).

However, as transition practitioners at DRIFT we struggle to address political questions about equity and the (re)distribution of costs and benefits of sustainability transitions. In particular, this is the case in transition projects in the socio-economic spectrum, which revolve around poverty, social exclusion, social security and health- and welfare systems. For example, the work we do in

[1] Agyeman (2008) makes a similar claim saying that within sustainability discourse and practice little attention is paid to (in)justice, racism, inequity, etcetera.

[2] Although one could state that the conceptual development of 'social sustainability' does considers topics like equity, community development, social capital, and labor and human rights. See for example Littig & Grießler (2005) for the different conceptualisations of 'the social' of sustainability as well as a reflection on the practical and conceptual problems of the three-pillar discourse. Nevertheless, also in sustainability discourse the ecological issues remain the most dominant.

'deprived' urban neighborhoods[3] or projects that are focused on the exclusion of homeless youth[4]. The same goes for our research on energy cooperatives and new economies. For instance, if systems are destabilized this can have a severe impact on the availability and affordability of e.g. energy, mobility, and food. Moreover if prices increase this can especially be disadvantageous for already marginalized positions in society. It thus raises question in how far e.g. basic access to clean and affordable energy is a basic human need and thus should be a right (and not a privilege). Such questions are inherently political, since they also address what kind of social (in) equality is acceptable as a society and what kind of equitable distribution is desirable.

This realization inspires us to push the conceptual boundaries of sustainability transitions a bit further and turn to the timeless concept of justice. The goal is to grasp the ethical and political dilemmas in dealing with phases of destabilization and (re)distribution in transitions and to explore how the concept of justice is used and can be used in sustainability (transition) discourses and practice. In order to do so, we have to first have a basic understanding of the concept of justice.

THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE

Justice is an inherently moral concept in that it connotes a value judgement of what is right and wrong. It has a long tradition in moral philosophy, ethics and Western political thought dating back to Aristotle and is also part of non-Western political thought and philosophies. As such, it is a rather universal and timeless concept. Throughout the 20th century, different understandings emerged to understand the notion of justice. These various perspectives help in grasping the dominant frames and practices in various societies and contexts, and show what are important aspects to take into account when thinking about justice. For instance, it points out that justice is not only an individual virtue, but also links the individual to the collective (via e.g. the social contract theory). In addition the moral understanding of justice influences the way political and legal systems of a nation-state are organized, based on the question of 'who deserves what'. Hence, the close relation between justice and discussions of democratic systems, welfare state arrangements, equality and equity.

Silveira (2016a) describes five different lines of thinking or moral understandings of justice in the political context of the liberal 'nation-state'. From a utilitarian perspective, justice revolves around those rules and institutions that maximize the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. On the contrary, the liberal equality perspective puts individual wellbeing and freedom at the forefront. Those proponents start from the notion that there are 'social minima' that should be protected by basic rights. Thirdly, the 'equal opportunity' perspective on justice accentuates equal opportunity based on individual liberty and favors distribution through market mechanisms. The egalitarian perspective focusses on fundamental human needs and that justice means that those needs are met according to individual's abilities and definitions. The last

[3] For more information, see: https://drift.eur.nl/cases/veerkracht-carnisse/
[4] For more information, see: https://drift.eur.nl/cases/off-the-streets/

perspective, represented by the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, approaches justice as "the human freedom to act in accordance with one's own values and objectives" (p 2016, p.4). If we, for instance, apply these perspectives on the energy transition, the desirable outcome of a transition in a particular city could be completely different. For example from a utilitarian point of view the more people who have access to alternative and clean energy, the better, but from a an egalitarian perspective the ability to acquire this type of energy (which is considered a basic need) is at the forefront.

Although these different understandings are helpful as analytical tools in e.g. identifying certain political stands, the sole focus on a distribution of basic services is too narrow in order to make sense of justice (in transition). That is why scholars generally underline the importance of a broader conceptualization. This encompasses not only distribution, but also a focus on recognition, procedural justice and capabilities as important elements (e.g. Heffron & McCauley 2017; Schlossberg 2013; Silveira 2016;)[5]. These dimensions relate for example to the recognition of a plurality of voices and participation in decision-making processes. When looking at social movements it becomes clear that justice (and its different understandings) have proven to be a powerful discourse, rationale or compass to formulate arguments, make claims and guide local collective action (see for example, Broto & Westman 2017). Overall, the need to perceive justice not only as a matter of fair distribution stems from the awareness and attentiveness to the political dimension of justice.

Scholars who emphasize the political character of justice put to the forefront the question 'what is just for whom' and assume that this question cannot be answered straightforwardly. They emphasize the relational dimension of justice and that what is perceived as a 'just discourse' or 'just practice' is subjective and context-dependent, and emerges trough practice. For example, in an exploration of energy justice in the Netherlands, Rasch & Kohne (2017) found out that citizens living in the Noordoostpolder perceive renewable energy as 'just', but at the same time resist specific energy projects because they think the impact of its infrastructure is distributed unevenly. Furthermore, injustices are often multidimensional, connote a plurality of experiences and intersect with multiple social structures e.g. race, gender, age and class (Stevis & Felli, 2015; Broto & Westman, 2017). For example in the USA the unequal distribution of environmental risks has always been tightly interwoven with racial segregation. Also in the Netherlands, a recent discussion about the cost of the energy transition is tied to class and poverty[6].

In sum, justice is a timeless, yet complex and multi-dimensional notion. Besides its moral connotations it is also a contested concept in that it entails competing claims based on different values and interest of a multiplicity of actors. This makes thinking about justice in the context of transitions a daring expedition, not very different from 'sustainability' one would say. Why, then,

[5] Recognition, for instance, relates to the appreciation of political rights and culture. Accordingly, justice relates to other sociological, psychological and anthropological concepts like representation, identity, empowerment, social status, stereotypes, stigma et cetera. The procedural dimension of justice pays attention to deliberation and decision-making processes. In other words, to who does or does not have a seat at the table. Despite the realization that the distributive dimension neglects structural inequalities, Watson & Cuervo (2017) claim that it still remains the dominant paradigm.
[6] See for example: https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/12/03/het-gezin-betaalt-energiekosten-voor-industrie-a1583571

put it to the forefront? Because the usage of the notion makes ethical and political standpoints more explicit and thus has the possibility to add legitimacy to a certain course of a transition. It also opens up and connects questions that address individual choices and behavior as well as systemic critique about issues of equity, social in- and exclusion, and democratic legitimacy. The fact that history teaches us that a new status-quo, albeit being more sustainable from an ecological perspective, is not automatically also more just (see Eames & Hunt, 2013), make these questions utterly relevant. Therefore, it is interesting to see how justice is currently used in literature on sustainability transitions and related strands of literature.

SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS & JUSTICE

The issue of justice has been implicitly and explicitly addressed in different fields of study concerned with sustainability, e.g. sustainability studies, environmental studies and development studies. Interestingly, both in environmental (justice) studies and sustainability transition studies the concept of justice has its roots in the practice of social movements, and shifted from day to day struggles into science. For example, the term 'just transition' traces back to the labor unions in the USA in the 1970s. The labor unions were concerned with the fate of workers and the protection of jobs of employees within the energy transition. Either their goal was to maximize the co-benefits of policy interventions (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Stevis & Felli, 2015) or to ensure that the costs of environmental changes would be shared fairly (Evans & Phelan, 2016). Similarly, within environmental studies the attention to justice has its roots in social movements concerned with the unequal distribution of environmental risks in the USA. As mentioned earlier this struggle was from the onset strongly interconnected with issues of race, and later class.

In both cases, the notion of justice travelled globally and/or broadened. The notion of 'just transitions' was quickly adopted in different policy domains, e.g. by intergovernmental organizations, due to the labor unions becoming more active in global climate negotiations in the 1990s. This resulted in a conceptual broadening of 'just transitions' for example by including employment and resilient local economies in different subsystems like food, waste, housing, and mobility systems (Healy & Barry, 2017)[7]. Although justice has gained more attention within transition studies in recent years, it is hardly conceptualized (with the exception of the work of Silveira 2016 and Silveira & Pritchard 2016). However, within environmental studies the conceptualization of justice moved away from the narrow focus on distribution, to an emphasis on the difference in issues and sectors (climate/water/food/etc.), an emphasis on the difference in places and contexts (e.g. local and global), and an emphasis on the notion of taking into account future generations (the notion of time) and other species. Also, more recent critiques on the notion of justice in environmental studies concern the lack of promoting alternatives, the attention to the lack of interaction between social and environmental communities, a lack of focus on the material

[7]Although 'just transition' often refers to the role of labor in creating for example democratic energy systems (Healy & Barry, 2017).

experience/practice of everyday life and the lack of attention to the political economy behind environmental injustices (see for all these critiques: Schlosberg, 2013; Stevis & Felli, 2015; Heffron & Mc Cauley, 2017). These developments have led to the claim of justice being a goal in itself (see the 'just sustainability framework' Agyeman, 2008).

What the different approaches in these fields of study have in common, is that they often take *global* inequality – in terms of winners and losers, access to resources, material security, equal participation, and recognition – as a starting point of thinking about justice (Swilling & Annecke 2012; Jhagroe 2016; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). Often this is combined with a normative approach, claiming that "a transition which leaves socio-economic inequalities intact cannot be called sustainable" (Swilling & Annecke, 2012). This implies that ecology and equity are two sides of the same coin (Swilling & Annecke, 2012; Rogers et al., 2012). As such in both accounts, justice functions as a mediating concept between social, economic and ecological issues in dealing with sustainability transitions.

POLITICIZING TRANSITIONS

So what is the added value of a more explicit focus on the concept of justice in transition studies? We suggest that a focus on justice is interesting for transition studies as an overarching concept for enriching discussions on issues of equity, equality and democratic legitimacy. More emphasis on the notion of justice opens up a completely different array of questions. We showed that this is especially the case for the political struggles in transitions and in particularly in phases of destabilization and breakdown. We argue that the emphasis on justice has the potential to boost a more explicit focus on the ethics and politics of transitions (a hiatus, often expressed by critics of transition studies). Elaborating on the consequences of strategies, policies and dominant beliefs in terms of a just distribution of costs and benefits of a transition will become political in no time and thus increases the transformative potential. Especially when it concerns collective goods and/or commons, like (access to) energy, water, food and shelter. It could also open up relevant questions for the democratization of transitions, e.g. who has access and the capabilities to influence, discuss and decide about future pathways? An emphasis on the consequences of transitions in terms of just outcomes, can also open up disruptive counter-hegemonic discourses and thus it gives a podium to the radical voices and practices that are so relevant for niche trends. For example, a focus on *injustice* (and also unsustainability) could be a more radical, systemic and politically oppositional endeavor than a focus on positive outcomes[8]. Taking into account the above, a 'justice' perspective of social change implies the need to expose and defamiliarize apparent neutral processes which reproduce social injustices by foregrounding the rights of the oppressed/marginalized and change hierarchical relations (Jhagroe, 2016). It also implies the

[8] Based on Healy & Barry (2017) who follow the reasoning of Simon (1995) in: "that injustice has a different phenomenology from justice… injustice takes priority over justice". Healy & Barry (2017) state that it is actually injustice (at different scales and domains) that we currently face, thus we should focus on for example 'unsustainability' instead of 'sustainable development'. Transition practice then becomes an oppositional project.

redistribution of power and rethinking ways to connect local action and global challenges (Swilling & Annecke 2012). In sum, a more explicit focus on justice has the democratic potential to contribute to the legitimacy of claiming that some outcomes of transition processes are more desirable than others.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

In our view, the concept of justice can enrich both the theory and practice of transition studies and transition management. But what does this all mean for transition scholars? And how can the concept of justice be integrated in both theory and practice?

From endpoint to analytical entry point?

First of all, it is interesting to see how issues of justice fit within the analytical frames of transition thinking. Instead of justice being the end point of certain transition processes, it is potentially also an entry point to understand dynamics of change. This implies that the concept itself needs to be acknowledged as an essential and integral part of systemic change. To put it differently: the (process of a) replacement of a certain status quo involves a change in ways of thinking about and organizing justice as well. In this way, it builds upon the growing body of work within sustainability transitions that takes into account issues of power, roles, et cetera.

For instance an approach could be to explore how justice relates to the different transition phases. When looking at for example the energy transition in The Netherlands, the discussion about the winners and losers of this transition is becoming more popular in recent months. While beforehand, this discussion was not taking place, or was marginalized to some 'obscure corners' of the academic spectrum (e.g. in disciplines like political philosophy and ethics). Several action groups, NGO's and political parties are increasingly becoming concerned with a 'fair transition'. This has led to several publications on the ethics of the energy transition (Kooger et al 2017, Milieudefensie 2017). So, a hypothesis could be that discussions around a just distribution arise in a phase of upscaling and/or institutionalization when large scale policy measures are being implemented, and when niches are being upscaled and increasingly become an alternative to the status quo[9]. This implies for example that when things 'get serious' other actors become important, for example policy actors who share the responsibility for the common good. Along this reasoning, the phase of experimenting consisted of showcasing alternatives, making business cases and creating legitimacy and was less about raising awareness on certain unjust relations. To conclude, this example of the energy transition shows how conflicts around just discourses and practices offer a different lens to understand a certain state or phase of a transition.

[9] In Germany, which is perceived as a global frontrunner in facilitating the energy transition, these discussion were already happening a couple of years ago. For instance, the country implemented an ethical committee for the nuclear exit after Fukushima. In this committee energy experts, where accompanied by moral representatives like preachers.

Another theoretical contribution of the concept of justice is its multidimensional and intersectional potential. It has the potential to function as a bridging concept in bringing together several strands of literature on social inequality, equity and ethics from the perspective of economic theory, social movement's theory, law and legal theory, political philosophy, critical sociology, theology, anthropology and political studies. Furthermore, it has the potential to enrich the concept of sustainability with a more socio-economic dimension. For instance by focusing on discussions on 'the commons' and 'the right to the city'. Lastly, because of the embeddedness of justice in its rich moral tradition, it could broaden transition studies with a historical perspective on the timeless struggles of our world.

From collateral to integral focus in practice?

Secondly, our exploration raises questions to what extent and how justice could be a more explicit and inherent factor to the practice of transition management. In the application of transition management there is (at best) an implicit attention to e.g. equitable outcomes and the democratic legitimacy of transition processes. It has been more of a collateral outcome, a by-catch of transition practitioners, in particular those who are schooled in social sciences (e.g. political science, sociology, anthropology, etc.). What can be gained by making justice an integral facet of transition governance? How can certain tools be helpful in addressing aspects of justice in practice?

Introducing justice to the practice of transition management could both hamper and strengthen the methodology. For instance, by also addressing justice in the pre-development and take-off phase of transitions, it prevents that actors in times of acceleration have the feeling that they have to delay and take a step back (yet again). It could also help experiments and social innovators to reflect on their 'radical core' when dealing with instrumental choices and everyday pragmatism. Another contribution to transition management is that it helps to democratize transitions: including a more diverse range of (marginal) voices in the process would not only enrich and sharpen the problem structuring and vison, but would also contribute to the legitimacy of the process and its outcomes. Consequently, addressing justice in transition management urges practitioners to rethink the tools they use and the mode of governance they promote. For instance, a sole focus on 'frontrunners' is conflictual based on the notion of recognition and procedural justice. For this, it is interesting to look at certain 'justice in practice' tools in development[10].

However, a focus on justice could also have pitfalls in practice. Next to fruitful insights and contributing to more legitimacy of certain transitions, integrating justice in practice might also make the democratic aspects of transition management more complex and its process (even) more exhaustive. For instance, it is interesting to test whether certain niche and regime actors might be less interested in talking about distributional aspects. If that is the case and such actors abort transition trajectories this could lead to relative unanimous and one-dimensional views in

[10] Like for instance the 'entire life cycle energy justice analysis' (Healy & Barry 2017) or the 'Justice in transition Toolbox' (Silveira & Pritchard 2016).

the political spectrum (because fundamental discussions across the board are not taking place). Additionally, our transition practice teaches us that considering issues of justice in envisioning pathways – to for example a CO2 neutral city with energy as a basic utility – might lead to less transformative solutions (from a technological perspective), which are possibly more prone to creating future lock-ins. Another hypothesis could be that actors in decision-making processes (like for instance policy or market actors) are wary to think about distributional aspects because it could cause delay the upscaling of e.g. the energy transition[11]. Moreover since justice is not objectively measurable (there are no clear parameters, indicators, tools, etc.) it is hard to estimate when e.g. enough voices are heard and outcomes of transition policies are fairly distributed. However, this also makes the commitment to integrate issues of justice in the practice of transition management more urgent.

THE FUTURE STRUGGLE WITH JUSTICE

This essay is a first exploratory search into how and why the concept of justice could help transition studies to grasp and adequately address the political questions around the societal desirability of dynamics and outcomes of processes of change. In sum, we conclude that the concept of justice – with all its richness and limitations – can contribute to rethink transitions as political struggles where the displacement of a certain regime and/or shift of a system has impact on all actors involved. It has the potential to open up discussions on issues of equity, equality and democratic legitimacy. Working as transition scholars at DRIFT we are committed to contribute to transformative change towards more sustainable societies. In order to do this it is necessary to reflect on this process and impact in ecological terms, but also in democratic and socio-economic terms. We think that issues of justice need to be at the forefront of transition thinking and practices, in order to remind others and ourselves that a change towards more just structures, cultures and practices is not self-evident.

[11] Following this hypothesis, an interesting research question could be how inclusivity and upscaling of niches can be intertwined.

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