

## Rational and Irrational Rationing in the Age of Energy Descent

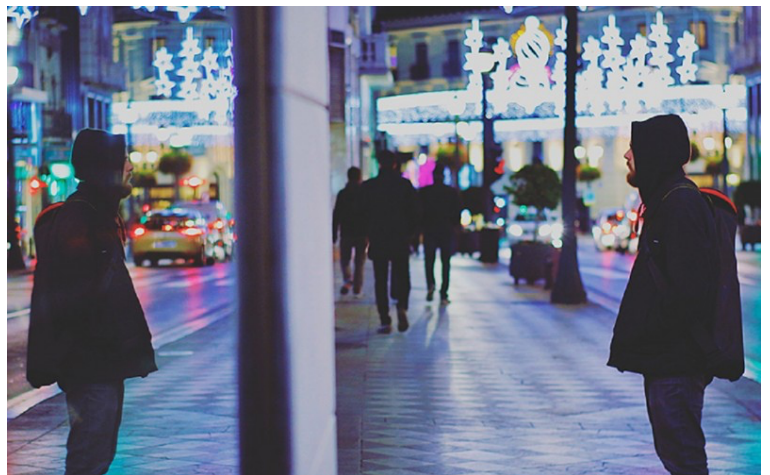
*We have to decide what our priorities are: energy waste or fuel for tractors and harvesters, casinos or hospitals, Amazon or neighbourhood shops.*

Antonio Turiel – Juan Bordera

**I**magine a tough night ahead. You have four children, only one loaf of bread and two choices: ration it equally or let the strongest one eat the piece he wants, even if the others starve to death. The humane, honest thing comes first, doesn't it? Needless to say, anyone would do the same. Well, not anyone.

Some political leaders are proving that Einstein's intuition that human stupidity is the only thing that knows no bounds is correct. These leaders are on thin ice. The main reason is that degrowth can no longer be hidden behind a flag or a shining mirage. People do not eat flags, and we know what is wasteful. Hence the efforts of the major economic powers to invest in and control media that distort reality so much.

But the spectacle is becoming harder to hide, and more and more articles, journalistic and academic, good and bad, are appearing, commenting on and demonstrating an undeniable reality: both [climate change and scarcity are breaking the degrowth taboo](#). Even presidents like the Finnish president have not hesitated to put it in crystal clear terms for anyone who will listen: [people in Finland and other EU countries will have to get used to the fact that the economy will not grow every year](#).



A young man looking at his reflection in a shop window.

HELENA CALLEJÓN

This is why the energy-saving measures proposed by the government and approved by the Council of Ministers,

*It is not much of a sacrifice to limit the number of hours the lights are on or the air conditioning temperature.*

while going in the right direction, will in reality fall short of what is needed. This must be accompanied by more far-reaching measures to

redistribute wealth, otherwise there will be problems.

In the [era of energy descent](#) that we are beginning to enter, these measures - which are not unique to our country - will be normalised and extended over time, and we would do well to adopt them quickly.

It is not much of a sacrifice to limit the number of hours the lights are on or the air conditioning temperature. But of course, there is another option for those who claim to be "freedom-loving" at all costs. An obviously perverse option: to let the invisible hand of the market allocate scarce resources efficiently. Is there less energy? Well, for those - fewer and fewer - who can afford it. Because some waste fossil fuels or make extraordinary profits, others can't even heat a bowl of soup. Freedom! Since the world was a world.

It is curious how the word rationing means different things depending on where you are. In Spain, it is synonymous with poverty and, for many, defeat. The fact that rationing lasted so long - bread was rationed until 1952, in a post-war period that was eternal for those who suffered it - while it did not exist in the rest of the Western world reinforced the feeling that it was an episode to be forgotten, never to be repeated. Far-right pamphlets stir up this ghost, and the dreaded and unwanted rationing (which came from their own hands) returns. But there are other cases: the British remember rationing as something more favourable because it helped them to "defeat" the Nazis. Experiences are not just what they are but what they mean.

Perhaps that is why bad politics all too often appeals not to the rational but to the emotional. They try to use what is emotional to camouflage the irrational and unjustifiable nature of many of their decisions: corruption? Deaths in care homes? Hospital closures and the deterioration of essential public services? None of this matters: the important thing is that the government does not take away your freedom, men of little faith.

But between the jokes, the truth emerges: it is not who they would have you believe is threatening your freedom. It is not Agenda 2030, nor is it social communism. It is the market, my friend. In the defence at all costs of increasingly dysfunctional neoliberalism lies the inevitable destruction of the public sector. In times of less available energy, following the usual neoliberal recipes will only exacerbate the problems by the very nature of the system that created them.

The example of rationing given at the beginning is a sketch. This simplification has helped us to clarify the difference, both material and moral, between the different options. Still, in the age of energy decline, we are not really faced with a dilemma but with a trilemma: we have to choose between three options.

The first is the conjectural option. In this case, it is assumed that the energy problems are temporary, and the aim is to ration just enough to minimise the economic impact. The market economy is maintained, and everything remains the same apart from the cuts. The disadvantage of this approach is that, as the situation worsens, more and more measures of the same type are taken, each one correcting the previous one, causing scepticism, incomprehension and fatigue among the population. This is the majority approach in the world and the one advocated by the EU and the Spanish government. Within these measures, there is also room for elitist actions that

seek to cut more for those who have less. There is no need to give an example of this (with one name and two surnames), a person who is even prepared - once again - to go against his party's leadership and the most basic common sense.

The second option is to implement structural measures. In this case, it is recognised that the problems are permanent. A forecast is made of how much will be available, and a decision is taken on how it will be allocated (how much will be given and to whom). It requires a lot of additional measures, regulations, monitoring, sanctions and so on. These measures are incredibly complex and costly to implement and have the disadvantage that they will soon become obsolete if energy consumption continues to fall. For example, this type of rationing is happening in countries that have virtually collapsed, such as Lebanon or Sri Lanka.

The third option is to adopt degrowth policies. This means accepting that the problems are not only permanent but that they will get progressively worse. It, therefore, requires a flexible rationing system that adapts to changing resource availability (or unavailability). It also requires an in-depth debate with society, which is the key to understanding what is happening, so that collaboration and cooperation can be built around a common objective shared by the majority, so that essential sectors can be selected and strongly supported, even increased, but also accepting that others will have to be reduced. The priority is to share the tax burden and guarantee a minimum quality of life. Even if rationing is necessary, the good life is possible and more desirable than ever.

The problem with degrowth measures is the temptation for certain sectors to implement them in an authoritarian way, without the need to seek a democratic social consensus, since it would be easier to impose them by force, which would lead to eco-fascism rather than a degrowth rationing scheme. There is no such rationing in any country in the world, although some countries may be slipping towards eco-fascism, which - in low-intensity forms - is already simmering.

Let us be clear: no rationing option is a good one. We are talking about rationing, and rationing means limiting. There is not enough, and decisions must be made about distributing it. It is not a situation that anyone wants. But it is a situation that will not be negotiable and that we have to face as adults with the help of collective intelligence.

It is also important to realise that there are many acceptable ways to adapt to the energy descent, but they all take time. For example, one of the major problems today is the lack of nitrogen fertiliser due to the scarcity and shortage of natural gas. And while it is well known that the misuse of nitrogen fertilisers leads to soil and water degradation and that we need to move towards other forms of agriculture that are truly sustainable and resilient ([the work of CSIC researchers Marta Rivera and Eduardo Aguilera is particularly noteworthy](#)), it is also true that we cannot transform our agricultural system overnight while continuing to feed the population.

We cannot remove the enormous energy inputs from food and so many other things all at once because, like a person addicted to a drug, the sudden lack of the substance that created the addiction could do more harm than good. We need a proper phase-out plan, a slow and gradual transition plan, with a lot of work on the ground, a lot of trial and error, until we get things working on the ground, in all areas, from the primary sector to industry and services.

But be that as it may, we must wean ourselves off the fossil fuel drug before it leaves us because of geology and physics. And renewable energy will be our methadone. Essential to get us through the withdrawal symptoms, but nowhere near the same as the original drug.

As long as we get bogged down in short-term schemes, discussing which sector is more critical in terms of the amount of GDP or jobs it generates, taking for granted that we will be able to sustain ourselves in the artificial paradises created by fossil fuels, it will be much worse for us if the supply of these substances on which we are so dependent is suddenly cut off. This is the debate we have to have as a society. We have to ration, and we have no choice. And since rationing is not going to be optional, we have to try to make it as rational and fair as possible.

It is not a choice between a dark and depressing world or one lit up by thousands of watts of electricity: it is a choice between a world in which most people can live with dignity or one in which a few enjoy themselves. The majority are reduced to abject misery. And, spoiler alert, the lucky few will not enjoy an unsafe city (country, or world) very much. If the majority have a hard time, no one has a good time; that's what we need to understand once and for all.

We have to decide what our priorities are, whether it's wasting energy or fuel for tractors and harvesters, whether it's casinos or hospitals, whether it's Amazon or the local shop, whether it's the metro and essential basic services or shiny mirages that can't last. There will not be enough for everything, and that is why we must try, democratically and rationally, to choose what is best to create a new society that manages to be reborn with strength from the spoils and mistakes of the present. Nothing is lost, as some would have us believe.

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