The Jus Semper Global Alliance

In Pursuit of the People and Planet Paradigm

Sustainable Human Development

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Energy transitions and degrowth: an interview with Manuel Casal Lodeiro

Manuel Casal Lodeiro, Francisco Alejandro Carrasco, Miguel Ángel Villar, Alejandra Santos, Aida Quiralte

On the occasion of the publication of *Las verdades incómodas de la Transición Energética* (*The Uncomfortable Truths of the Energy Transition*), a group of Philosophy students from the Autonomous University of Madrid conducted this interview with the author, Manuel Casal Lodeiro, in the spring of 2025.

"The uncomfortable realities of the energy transition" Photo: Pau Kokura.

Francisco Alejandro Carrasco (DRK): After discovering in your book the need for a degrowth future, our attention is focused on what the actual reality of such a future will be like; it is a way of life so different from the current one that it is difficult for us to imagine. At the end of the book, you propose a series of concrete policy measures to establish more resilient communities. The book also makes clear the impossibility of private transport. But several issues particularly catch our attention (and that of many young people and adults) about the future that awaits us: how will we solve or cope with the current problem of overpopulation?

Well, first of all, we cannot talk about "an overpopulation problem" in isolation, because in reality, it is a problem of consumption by a certain population. In other words, if there are too many of us, it is because of our consumption, and if we had a milder impact on the planet, the excess would no longer be such, or at least not as great. That is to say, we have two variables: population and consumption (or ecological footprint, if you like, to include the pollution implicit in consumption). I have never been very fond of the famous formula I=P·A·T that is often used to discuss these issues in academia because I believe that the variable T (technology), for these purposes, can be reduced in terms of A (affluence), or that A and T can be reduced to a single variable H that measures the per capita consumption footprint. I reflected on these issues more than a decade ago in my essay *Nosotros, los detritívoros* (*We, the detritivores*), trying to glimpse how

many human beings could exist on the planet once we no longer exploit fossil fuels, either because we no longer have enough energy to obtain them (EROI<1), or because we voluntarily decide to abandon them before they abandon us, to curb GHG emissions.

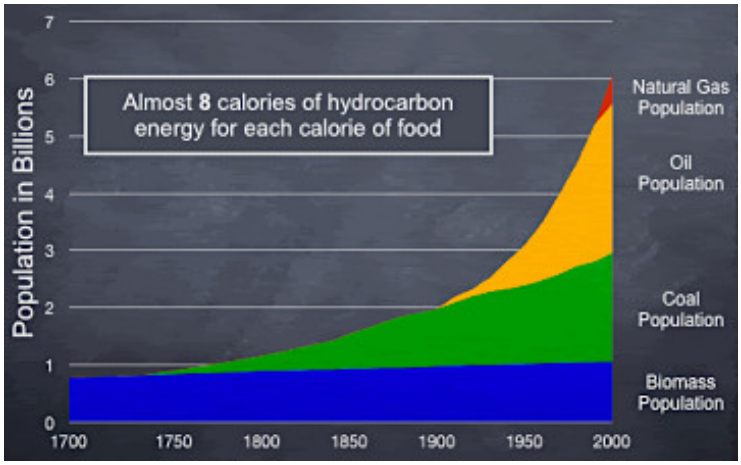
In the end, it will be a question of reducing our numbers by hook or by crook. We have known at least since Susan George's *Lugano Report* that capitalism has many millions of people too many to remain viable. This is becoming increasingly clear for various reasons. The elites will try to lead us down that path, even though they do not really care about the survival of capitalism itself: they do not give a damn if they have to switch to a neo-fascist or neo-feudal system or whatever, as long as they can float above the shit, and they will try to do so no matter who falls.

DRK: Can you explain more about Nosotros, los detritívoros (We, the Detritivores)?

In *Nosotros, los detritívoros*, I tried to highlight that even in a post-capitalist system, let us say ecosocialist, with the maximum international cooperation imaginable, with a perfect distribution of scarcity (rather than wealth, as the left has traditionally advocated), I find it highly doubtful that we would be able to sustain a population of 9 billion human beings, starting with the fact that we would not even have the necessary nitrogen molecules (the proteins needed to live) once natural gas ceases to facilitate the Haber-Bosch reaction to produce the ammonia essential for synthetic nitrogen fertilisers. How are we going to feed a population that is nine times the maximum that the planet was able to support before we started using fossil fuels? We have a severe problem in this society where no one seems to be considering how we are going to maintain a civilisation that is dependent on fossil fuels when we only have renewable energy available again, and where, similarly, no one seems to want to talk about how to feed the 8 billion extra mouths created thanks to these fuels. What is more, we will have to feed them on a planet that is so damaged that it may no longer be able to support agriculture, which depends on a stable climate that we are rapidly destroying, and where the oceans, a source of protein for a large part of our species, are also mortally wounded.

The Left Facing the Collapse of Industrial Civilisation and We, the Detritivores, previous essays by the author. Photo: Félix Moreno.

Several ideas are being discussed in degrowth debates about how to make this population reduction as humane as possible. However, there are many doubts, even in theory—let alone in practice—that such eco-socialist and voluntary population control measures will arrive in time to prevent mass mortality, or what is known as die-off. And that is without taking into account ongoing and future wars, which, historically, our species has resorted to —more or less unconsciously but systematically —to reduce its population. In other words, numerous factors are pushing us towards a sudden and tragic reduction (climate chaos, destruction of the biosphere, militarism, authoritarianism, fierce international competition,



Population growth thanks to fossil fuels. Source: PostPeakLiving.com, based on Graham Zabel's "Population and Energy".

decline in energy resources, minerals, fertile soil, water, new pandemics, etc.), and very few that point to the possibility of a peaceful, gradual and voluntary reduction, based mainly on the empowerment of women and having fewer children. In fact, in countries like ours, the opposite is being done, encouraging people to have more children! But we must continue to defend a global and peaceful population reduction (inseparable from a fair and equitable distribution of resources), putting this issue, so uncomfortable for the left, on the table. We must force them to show their true colours, because I am seeing more and more of the supposed left-wing parties turning red-brown, if not the emergence of parties blatantly positioned in that ideological camp. It would not be surprising to see socialism within our borders maintained based on neo-colonialist and exterminationist militarism towards the outside world. Right now, we have the EU rearming itself with Putin's excuse, but with its predatory eyes set on Africa. The trend that is accelerating in the European "garden" of "values"[1] is simply terrifying.

DRK: Will we be able to have more efficient and interconnected public transport despite having less energy available?

The answer is easy: no —we will not, at least not on the current scale. But first and foremost, we must change our values while trying to maintain public transport during the inevitable decline of private transport. What I mean is that efficiency is not the most important thing, nor is interconnection or mobility per se, but rather accessibility, having access to what you need, where you need it, and this can be achieved by first reducing the need for transport and bringing the satisfiers closer to the people, or the people closer to the satisfiers. Economic and social relocation would make this possible. It would also allow a large part of the urban population to return to rural areas, so that they could have access to as many basic necessities as possible within a radius of a few kilometres, as has been the case throughout most of human history. This is because transport needs are the result of the way we inhabit the territory, which is anything but efficient and certainly not resilient. The ideal model for inhabiting the territory would be the one that Galicia still largely preserves, and which coincides with what science says on the subject: a rhizomatic organisation, by hierarchical levels in a network, which in Galicia would be the village, the civil parish, the region and the city (or metropolitan areas). We need to move towards models where 90% of your life is lived without the need for transport —your village and parish, 9% in the main town of your region, and 1% in the nearest city, roughly speaking. In cities, something similar could be applied (only to a certain extent) in a structure of highly autonomous neighbourhoods, which was the normal organisation historically but has been destroyed in recent decades [in Europe] and which in other countries has never existed, because urbanisation was based on the premise of infinite and perpetually cheap oil (as in the case of the US).

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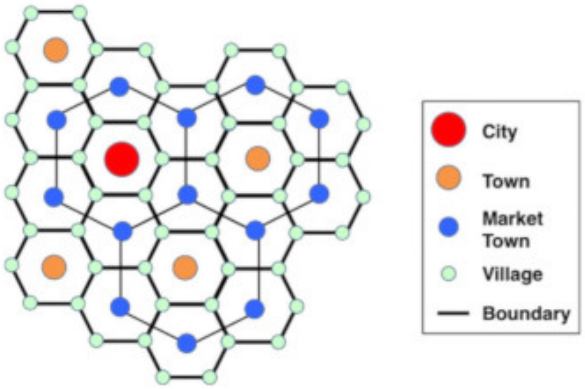

DRK: In a world geared towards resilience/post-oil, will it be possible to have access to the Internet, albeit to a lesser extent or in certain places designed for that sole purpose?

I am confident that it will. Although reversing the trend towards complexity is very difficult, it is not only a question of energy or resources, but also of the system's hysteresis (to put it graphically, going up is not the same as going down).

[1] https://www.politico.eu/article/josep-borrell-faux-pas-latest-in-long-line-of-ill-judged-comments/

But I do not think it is impossible, thanks above all to the fact that the ARPANET project, from which the Internet was born, provided it with an architecture and basic protocols (TCP/IP) designed to withstand the destruction of multiple nodes in the event of a nuclear attack. So now we would have to *destroy* part of its infrastructure in a controlled manner and ration its use, establishing priorities and eliminating the flow of superfluous data, which is now increasing even more due to the activity of bots used to feed so-called artificial intelligence. This would be a sine qua non condition, together with a drastic policy against the programmed obsolescence of electronic devices and an engineering redesign to facilitate the recycling of their components to the greatest extent possible. And if not, as long as there are computers, electricity and telephones, we could return to the Internet model of the early 1990s, that of BBS (Bulletin Board System). But in any case, what is technically feasible is impossible without a courageous, internationally coordinated political decision.

DRK: And how will all this affect food services in the leisure sector? Will we still be able to go to a nice restaurant from time to time?

Well, I'm sorry to say that I really doubt it. What is clear is that eating out or ordering so much food delivery, or going to cafés every day (going for a beer, as a left-wing politician said the other day, is a basic right of the working class!), is a bourgeois lifestyle when viewed from a historical perspective. This was never affordable for the working class or subsistence farmers until the enormous (gross and net) energy of oil made it possible after the Second World War (and only in industrialised countries, of course: in many others, people still die of hunger today, it should be remembered, while precarious Spanish workers choose between 50 types of pizza on their mobile phones). In any case, we can aspire to go for a glass of wine at the village tavern once a week. Here, too, we need to downsize and become more self-sufficient: to rebuild ties with the community through celebrations and communal meals. And so, the only good food and drink that we will be able to enjoy will be the ones that we can produce ourselves, using sustainable (organic and local) means, in our neighbourhood or village. This seems to me to be humanly preferable to trying in vain to maintain the current number of restaurants and diners which, like so many things in this society, is unsustainable and requires energy surpluses for discretionary expenditure that we will no longer have, even less so if we accelerate the cuts in order to devote our last energy resources to preparing for war against who knows whom. Civilisational triage will also have to go through this, and the cultural shift towards more self-managed, more local leisure activities with a smaller ecological footprint: either daily beers with tapas, or not plundering other peoples, but I think it will be impossible to do both at the same time. However, before we reach the point of cutting back on drinks, there is a lot of unnecessary spending that can be cut back on, mind you! But let no one be fooled, when the primary sector suffers and the secondary sector collapses, who is going to sustain the tertiary sector? When we are risking the extinction of the species and even of all life on the planet, I would not worry too much about the extinction of restaurants, to be honest. It is hard to say this to those who work in the sector, but we cannot hide the harsh reality and treat people like small children incapable of facing reality. We must talk to people as adults and tell them that our material standard of living has its days numbered. And as for employment, at the end of the day there are many other sectors where there will be work in a context of decline and where we should already be starting to relocate a lot of labour. The energy transition will also involve an unprecedented labour restructuring, which few dare to talk about.

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Miguel Ángel Villar: What political method would achieve the energy reduction and social reconstruction you propose in the book? It is possible that this cannot be achieved through democracy. Do you propose more extreme visions such as eco-dictatorships (at least until the energy transition is achieved)?

Well, dictatorship is already there in one form or another —a soft dictatorship, if you will. And it is the system's default path; no one can doubt that at this point. But before saying that democracy is not fit for purpose in terms of the civilisational change we need, as some notable scientists and thinkers on these issues, such as Jørgen Randers for example, have done, we would first have to really try a democratic system, because what are often pompously and misleadingly called democracies are nothing more than elective particracies, with parties that are mostly heavily influenced by extra-political powers, usually of an economic nature. The people are far from being in charge here. We only choose, from a minimal number of options, those who will rule us for four years, with a blank cheque to laugh at us and ignore what we really want. I actually believe that achieving true democracy (which, for me, can only be the type of direct democracy historically practised by anarcho-syndicalism) is the best way to achieve the necessary ecosocial transition, or almost the only way, I would say.

Of course, a planetary eco-dictatorship could, in theory, save the species and even halt the destruction of the Biosphere. However, ethically, I cannot defend it when we have the ethical and political alternative of direct eco-democracy, which would preserve human rights and *Equaliberty* (Balibar, Castoriadis, Riechmann). Therefore, for me, fighting to create a genuine democracy —to restore power to the people —is indistinguishable from the fight for Life, to curb climate chaos and gaiacide (the death of the Biosphere) as much as possible. As Riechmann also often says, we need movements of 'emancipation and survival'. And there, tragically, I do not see the major left-wing parties: neither in terms of returning decision-making power to the people, nor in terms of putting the media in their hands (something essential for true democracy, but which we tend to forget), nor do I see them fighting for survival, as the majority continue to bet everything on industrialism, technology and growth, that is, they continue to push in the direction of collective suicide, with a few wars and genocides guaranteed along the way. We are probably heading for a global civil war between these two visions, which will be a war of religion, between believers in the exclusive religion of Progress and believers in the inclusive sacredness of Life.

Alejandra Santos: I understand that the degrowth necessary to transform our societies and adapt them to available resources is incompatible with the capitalist economic system. But would it be compatible with the organisation of countries according to the nation-state model?

I believe so. Although, it brings me back to the classic dilemma posed by Trotsky: is revolution (degrowth, in this case) possible in a single country? I see it as an inevitable path, because states either degrow or become imperialist to seize the resources necessary to continue growing from others: 'Si vis pacem, para descensum', as I titled an article published in *Papeles de Relaciones Ecosociales y Cambio Global*. Because neocolonial imperialism can only end in mutual destruction, and in self-destruction and civil class wars when even external plundering is no longer enough. So I see it as a path that different countries must gradually follow, and that at first those who try it will be called crazy, but in the end, the last one will be the fool! In other words, either degrowth or imperialist barbarism. How this difficult first step could be promoted in a country, whether any country, such as Bhutan, is already moving in that direction, or whether the EU wants to prepare us for post-growth to test the waters for the demolition of the totemic GDP, is difficult to address in a few lines. But I think the question is more about anarchist

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Banknote issued by the anarcho-syndicalist communities of Aragon during the Spanish Revolution of 1936.

degrowth vs. statist degrowth. There I believe that both paths can and should be reconciled, with supporters of the former recognising that states still have tremendously useful and necessary resources that we cannot afford to waste, and supporters of the latter recognising that, in the end, the state itself will have to degrow in an orderly manner and, to do so, will need to return power to self-managed and confederated local communities, perhaps in the style of Kurdish Democratic Confederalism, indirectly inspired by the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37. To my comrades in the anarchist movement, I would say that today Federica Montseny would accept the position of Minister of Ecosocial Transition, and to my comrades with a penchant for state socialism, I would say that the state is a huge devourer of energy and resources that should be progressively dismantled, but not in favour of private companies, as Trumpists and anarcho-capitalists dream, but in favour of local democratic communities.

AS: Is it compatible with the current border system and state organisation? Compared to what a new model of smaller communes and communist or anarchist organisation would be like, for example...

I have my doubts about borders. It would probably be more appropriate to replace them with much more permeable borders organised around natural bioregions, although how climate chaos will affect bioregional boundaries is somewhat problematic. Regarding the communal vs. state model, it should be compatible, at least until the state is simplified to its minimum expression, as I explained earlier.

Aida Quiralte: Your book points to the need for a huge cultural change. Could that cultural change only come about through fear of the end of human life and the urgent need for change?

It is possible. The usefulness of fear (when well managed) is undeniable. And if there was ever a time when our species as a whole needed to fear something, it is now. But in order for it not to paralyse us, we need to know where to run, where the little 'Exit' light is. That is now the vital mission of scientists, universities and other centres of knowledge and research, the mass media, or anyone who is simply aware of what is at stake. I believe in a somewhat Kantian view of duty, embodied in the responsibility that, when you know something so momentous for the future of all people, you must tell them and mobilise as many of them as possible to build lifeboats and abandon the Titanic before it sinks and drags us to the bottom, as Carlos de Castro always insists. Then, together, we will seek other lands where we can rebuild communities and other types of civilisations, more local, humble and harmoniously integrated into the biosphere.

AQ: Will humanity be able to respond decisively solely because of these incentives, or will something else be needed to appeal to them, which, if not brought to their attention, would be an impediment to achieving a true energy transition? If this is the case, what could be that other reason to appeal to humanity to make such a transition?

Well, there is no more powerful reason than survival. If that alone is not enough to convince someone, then we might as well give up. Our survival and that of our descendants, of course. That is, the survival of the species, because none of us will survive individually indefinitely, even though this culture tends to forget that. Avoiding more suffering than necessary in the process of survival is also a huge motivation. It has been proven that human beings can endure pain much better when we know it is necessary, that we have to go through it to heal from an illness or injury, for example. And we can also endure becoming poorer if we see that it is done fairly and justly and that no one around us is thriving while we are declining. And, of course, having emotional and even spiritual support for all this is important. It could even be the key to mobilising people quickly and effectively: combining powerful and inspiring myths, such as that of Gaia or returning home, and creating others in an unprecedented exercise of collective mythopoesis because we are undoubtedly moved

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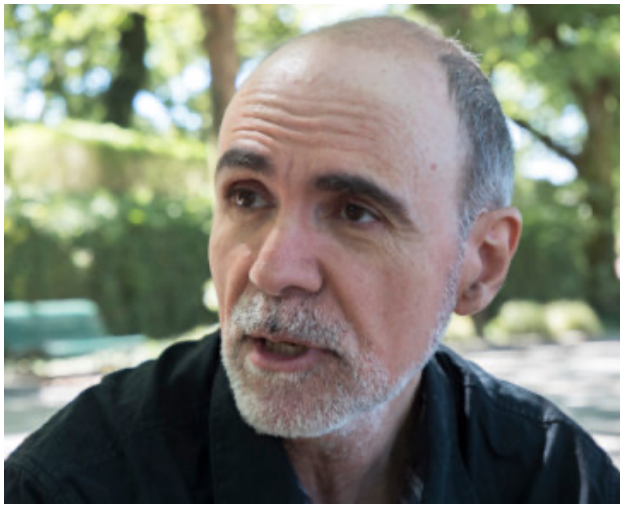
more by myths, by emotions, by narratives, than by rationality. Neurologists and experts in the collective mind and social psychology know this all too well. This is where art can play a transcendental role: from poetry to cinema, music, theatre, comics, or, why not? video games... we need to use them to imagine horizons of emancipation and survival. So, more than other motives, what we need are many more and more powerful vehicles to convert these fundamental motives into action on a revolutionary scale.

The most interesting approach, and the one I see as having the most potential, is not only based on your own survival, that of your family and your in-group, but one that extends the sense of belonging (and ethics) far beyond, to all of Gaia, and to all lives in the future. It is essential to take advantage of the cultural and spiritual wound we have suffered for at least a century from a lack of meaning, from finding ourselves orphaned from God. The void can be filled by a return to the ancestral, indigenous senti-thoughts of Mother Earth, which we can now call Gaia again, and do so with two crucial nuances: one would be that, unlike a foreign god, we are part of this new being that gives meaning, of this new myth (actually very old, but now supported by science); and another is that Gaia is a mortal goddess who needs us humans to survive (we have to stop killing her, first of all), and she needs us now. We can see ourselves as defenders of the future, defenders of Life... we can see it from multiple perspectives, but always understanding it as a way to satisfy that need for meaning and belonging, for identity understood as being-with-others, something that nationalist or religious extremists have understood very well for a long time and have used for their own ends. That same need can be our lever for action, that is not against others but against what destroys Life, what robs us of our future, which is nothing more than a dark part of ourselves, a monster we have created and which has run wild.



Manuel Casal Lodeiro. Photo: Xarda.

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❖ **About the authors:** ❖ **Manuel Casal Lodeiro** is co-founder of the association Véspera de nada por unha Galiza sen petróleo (Eve of nothing for a Galicia without oil) and the Touda Association; coordinator of Petrocenitales; author of Nosotros, los detritívoros (We, the Detritivores) and La izquierda ante el colapso de la civilización industrial (The Left Facing the Collapse of Industrial Civilisation) and coordinator of the Guía para el descenso energético (Guide to Energy Descent). **Francisco Alejandro Carrasco** is a third-year philosophy student at the Autonomous University of Madrid, with an interest in metaphysics and the philosophy of science. He has studied tests for consciousness in Artificial Intelligence and developed an outline of his own ontological system. **Miguel Ángel Villar** is a third-year student of Philosophy at the Autonomous University of Madrid. **Alejandra Santos** is a third-year student of Philosophy at the Autonomous University of Madrid, with a broad view of philosophy that extends to literature. She has participated in anthologies such as Las cerezas también sangran (Cherries Also Bleed). **Aida Quirarte** is a third-year student of Philosophy at the Autonomous University of Madrid.

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❖ **Tags:** capitalism, democracy, ecology, degrowth, planetary crisis.