

## There will be no ecological transition without a social and labour transition

*The energy model must be changed. But even more urgent is a transformation that addresses the limitation of wealth, consumption and the necessary sharing of labour.*

Vicente López

At present, practically no one doubts the need for an ecological transition. For example, the April 2022 CIS survey showed that 81,1% of the Spanish population was very concerned about climate change. Environmental denialism, although it exists, seems to retreat in the face of the overwhelming evidence of the negative effects of our way of life on nature. Significance, as for the first time in history, humankind would have a tool that makes it possible to interfere with the evolutionary process of living organisms fundamentally and to permanently eliminate species.

There are, however, political disagreements about how and with what intensity environmental measures should be tackled, especially in the field of energy.

The reason is quite simple: people are well aware of the consequences of these measures on economic growth and, therefore, on the level of employment and income distribution. The escalating prices that we are experiencing, whose origin is determined, among others, by the prices of energy, raw materials and the problems in the supply chains, are leading to a process of impoverishment of the majority of the population, especially of working men and women, while corporate margins are increasing



Pintada callejera a favor de un cambio de sistema para evitar el cambio climático.

— Street Lab



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unchecked. On the other hand, the monetary authorities' response has been an increase in interest rates that will generate more unemployment and greater social inequality. This may be a good example of what can happen in these

processes of ecological transition if the recipes of economic orthodoxy continue.

In broad terms, for political options on the more or less extreme right, the transition must be tempered to the pace set by the market. Everything would suggest that there is a shift from inconsistent "negationism" to a certain prospective "hold-up". From this ideological perspective, the objective of its policies remains the same: to create the macroeconomic bases established by neoclassical economic thinking to maintain GDP growth and capital accumulation. It is left to the "free" market to temper both the possible pace of ecological transition (sustainability cannot jeopardise efficiency) and the redistributive task (equity cannot jeopardise efficiency); more market and less public regulation and intervention, except to secure, at whatever price, private property, the dynamics set by markets and thus the existing distributive status quo.

This means policies of rising interest rates to curb inflation, control of public spending in a tax-cutting framework and deregulation of the labour market: worse working conditions, more inequality and poverty and, of course, boosting the concentration of wealth. A path that some have warned could be the prelude to so-called "eco-fascism". And all this, of course, seasoned with blind faith in the accumulation of scientific-technical knowledge, "science will provide", which becomes the guarantor that whatever happens, we will invent something.

For those options that are in the social-liberalist camp (which would include today's social democracy, Christian democracy, and even other more progressive options), the transition towards a sustainable economy needs to be encouraged and pushed by the public authorities. It is an urgent task, and the market, although essential, is not sufficient for such an undertaking. The more than foreseeable negative effects of the ecological transition in the socio-occupational sphere are confined to policies that fall within the framework of the so-called "just transition": no one should be left behind. However, there is no concrete definition in terms of political action of what is meant by the term "just" and what is involved in being left behind. On the contrary, this lack of definition gives way in practice to the assumption by the public authorities of some acceptable increase in unemployment, social inequality and poverty. Unlike the previous one, this option does not see insurmountable contradictions between sustainability, efficiency and equity. And if it does, it relativises them.

Let us recall that this perspective not only does not see inconsistencies in the classic efficiency-equity binomial but even considers that equity is the basis for inclusive economic growth. This has only been the case at the level of nation-states at precise historical moments. The general global data, however, speak of increasing relative poverty, social inequalities and the spread of the so-called "working poor" or "modern slavery". As Amartya Sen points out, the national perspective is not a good indicator of social justice in a globalised world. However, just like the conservative options, this option also has full confidence that the science-technology binomial will energise this change and the dreamed-of balance between efficiency-equity-sustainability. The sentence: "science will provide" is therefore maintained.

But if one thing seems evident, it is that the socio-political success or failure of this transition, more or less intense, liberal or planned, towards the oxymoron "fair and sustainable growth" will depend on maintaining GDP growth



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and with it, the dynamic "trickle down" that socially legitimises the market economy. This means that the pie will continue to grow and then be shared out without anticipating how it will be shared out.

The increase in the production of goods and services, tempered by the evolution of productivity, continues to be the priority, and the volume of employment and the (re) income distribution a secondary objective—the end of the pipeline. The share of wage income in income distribution will continue to depend on (p)redistributive issues: the greater or lesser bargaining power of workers (direct wage) and the development or otherwise of the role of the state in the economy, both in terms of public revenue and expenditure (indirect and deferred wage).

But the evolution of the variables that make visible the state of equity at a global level do not, as we have pointed out, show signs of good health: trade unions are losing bargaining power – the high level of unemployment, the increase in job insecurity, the processes of subcontracting, the commodification and individualisation of work... are the main weapons used by economic power to weaken the trade union movement, which leads to an increase in the capacity of employers to extract surplus value – the loss of the share of wage income in national income over the last half century in Western countries bears witness to this. The reduction of taxes on the highest incomes continues – less tax equity both in vertical terms (progressivism) and horizontal terms (sources of income), and social spending is deteriorating in various ways (privatisation, limitation). In those countries where it existed, the welfare state is becoming a state of charity for the poor, a poor welfare state. Warren Buffett seems not far wrong when he points out that his social class is winning the class war.

We can always find some exception that confirms the rule, especially in political pragmatism. But this is always accidental and fragile. Or at least it gives that feeling. I think it would not be foolish to point out, with the data we know, that equity loses by a landslide to efficiency. In recent decades the "trickle down" has not only been interrupted by the repeated crises of capital accumulation (where the political objective is to recover the rate of profit in exchange for greater labour exploitation), but it is also doing so and increasingly intensively, in the stages of expansion. We are experiencing, with increasing clarity, a permanent "trickle up" both in national terms and, above all, on a global scale.

Similarly, the data on the state of the environment's health are, if anything, less encouraging. The emission of greenhouse gases (climate change), the extinction of species (sixth extinction), the deterioration of fertile soils or

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the oceans and seas, the pollution of aquifers, the growing deforestation on a planetary level, or the "scarcity" of raw materials (both energy and mineral), not only shows us the resounding failure of the Climate Summits or of the "sustainable development" policies that most Western

countries have implemented in recent decades, but, above all, the evident physical, biological and energy limits to economic growth. The relationship between sustainability and efficiency does not work; it has never worked.

The main problem is, therefore, that the increase in economic efficiency (greater volume of products and services in relation to the consumption of resources) that the capitalist system needs to survive entails a continuous environmental deterioration (nature as a source of resources and a sink for waste) and an increase in precarious employment, vulnerability and job insecurity in which the working class lives and which is a source of inequalities and poverty. Unsustainability and inequality seem to be intimately linked.

The labour force needed by the socio-economic system (visible, productive, and invisible reproductive labour) is just another energy source, along with other energy and materials sources. Its demand, like that of other resources, is a derived demand that depends, therefore, on the volume of production of goods and services. So far, there is not much difference between extracting a barrel of Brent or the actual labour of one person. However, unlike other productive resources, extracting actual labour is peculiar: the workers have a will. Its extraction, therefore, involves conflict and social tension. Hence, one of the basic objectives of the socio-economic system has been, and is, to train healthy bodies and, above all, to discipline the human mind for the highest possible output. Today, as Byung-Chul Han points out, a not inconsiderable proportion of workers no longer need external disciplinary measures: they "happily" exploit themselves in an environment of a false belief in freedom and authenticity. But this successful domestication involves people not only as labour, as labour cattle, but also as consumer cattle: people who, as Bauman pointed out, are eager to consume. And this is the U.S. way of life that has been imposed as a way of life on the planet: to work to earn enough income to consume goods and services, energy, matter and labour power. To consume, discard and consume again.

The system and this is its great success, produces an army of homo oeconomicus that oozes individualism, selfishness and an idea of progress and happiness intimately linked to consumerism and the unlimited accumulation of material wealth. This army of minds and bodies tamed by schools, the mass media and the entertainment industry keep the production-consumption binomial in good health. An army of producers-consumers that give life, through the vote in societies with liberal democracies, to those political options that ensure economic growth, environmental deterioration and a distribution of wealth that ensures economic and social inequality based on the fallacy of equal opportunities and the meritocratic mechanism. For those who see a contradiction between what working people need and what they vote for, let us not forget that productive employment suffers without ensuring sufficient extraction of raw materials and energy and greater facilities for the appropriation of surplus value. And with lower levels of employment and access to the trickle-down to the venerable global consumer market, the source of "freedom and happiness" in this socio-economic system becomes more challenging. The capitalist system collapses without these labour and consumer cattle and the possibility of natural resource extraction.

The ecological transition, a serious flaw in some people's approach, is presented solely from the perspective of maintaining the supply of materials and energy to continue the process of capital accumulation. If we get renewable energy and the circularity of the economic process, the problem is over. The ultimate goal remains unchanged: growth of production and consumption, and with it, the level of employment (the quality of employment is less talked about). But renewable energies do not ensure the necessary energy levels to satisfy current and future production and consumption needs. Among other reasons, this is due to the deficit of materials and the need for fossil fuels for their development. And unfortunately, production processes cannot be completely shut down because of the damned laws of thermodynamics. It is impossible.

And all this leads to the more than foreseeable failure of these more or less prospective policies. They have failed in the past and will fail in the future despite their "good will". Capitalism will never be a guarantor of greater levels of social equity and sustainability. It goes against its extractivist essence. Capitalism cannot live without exploiting people (extraction of surplus value) and Nature. And this obviousness is hidden behind impossible political possibilities and unrealistic techno-optimism. In short, when economic efficiency enters through the door in the globalised market economy, equity and sustainability go out the window. You have to choose what to take politically. There is no other choice.



In my view, the only viable political option in progressive terms is the one that puts the binomial "equity" and "sustainability" as a priority political objective and rejects economic growth as an end in itself. In any case, this would be possible and desirable for some vital consumption to ensure certain living standards for the world's

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population. It is evident that an expansion of a universal health system or access to clean water on a global scale is needed, for example. But it must be recognised as an unavoidable starting axiom that there are physical, energetic and biological limits to economic growth and, despite the massive epidemic of "self-exploitation", there are also

urgent limits to the exploitation of people. Because, in addition, if we limit this extraction of surplus value, we are putting a limit on unsustainability itself. They go hand in hand.

From here, the possibilities for political action are less "sexy" for pragmatism and political perspectives (in lower case) but much more straightforward, more restricted and effective if we want to make POLITICS (in upper case).

By way of example, we highlight some points that should be included in a programme focused on equity and sustainability: firstly, the redistribution of existing consumption capacity under criteria of needs (capacities) and sustainability. No one can consume more than Nature can bear, and "no one can pollute even if they pay"; secondly, the implementation of radical policies for the distribution of work (and not only employment). In this respect, it is essential to reduce working hours and, in parallel, the individual or collective provision of essential goods by a reinforced public sector, in particular: food, housing, health, energy, communication and education, always under the umbrella of sustainability. This reduction in working hours should be carried out from a redistributive perspective: cutting the wage gap (including that of managers, of course). Thirdly, and following this distributive idea, it is necessary to start talking about establishing limits to wealth. This means, for example, recovering tax progressiveness and equity and moving towards confiscatory tax rates above a certain level of income and wealth. And fourthly, limits on the mobility of capital, goods and people. The global casino must be broken up, the banks must be overturned, and the economic power of the transnationals must be curbed. This means recovering the state's role in the economy as a guarantor of equity and sustainability.

These measures would most likely affect economic growth negatively, thus the extraction of effective labour, energy and materials. There would be less material wealth, but it would be better distributed and more sustainable.

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Would it be politically impossible?*

Would it be politically impossible? What is really impossible, populist and extremist, is to continue on this path of dependency that leads to further environmental and socio-labour deterioration. As Foucault pointed out, it is time for *parresia*, for a commitment

to the truth, even if it has a high political cost in the short term. It is time to have a "courageous discourse" that places us in line with those necessary reforms that, as André Gorz pointed out, are not only "reformist" but, above all, revolutionary.



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❖ **About the author: Vicente López** is director of [Fundación 1º de Mayo](#).



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