



BLOG POST December 9th 2020

Ecological transition and inequality, a democratic challenge. Part two: Conducting the transition in a society of distrust

Ecological transition and inequality, a democratic challenge: Part two

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 Reading time: 6 min



While reducing economic inequalities is an important component in the transition to a sustainable society, this plan must go hand-in-hand with a transformation in our individual and collective aspirations for more moderate lifestyles. However, leading this transition requires us to take into account the specific forces impinging on liberal democracies today.

‘Moderation’ seems to be necessary, but is it desirable?

In 1972, the [Meadows report](#) put forward the idea that our model of development and the ways of life associated with it are incompatible with the biophysical conditions for sustaining human life on Earth. Almost fifty years later, scientific knowledge about this issue has expanded considerably, revealing the extent to which the preservation of a climate and ecosystems necessary for life does indeed depend on a radical transformation in our energy use and our consumption patterns; in a word, the propagation of more ‘moderate’ lifestyles ([IPCC, 2018](#); [The Lancet, 2019](#); [IPBES, 2019](#)). Technological progress has not been rapid enough to limit the impact of our lifestyles on our environment, and the technologies that are seen as providing answers to environmental challenges, such as carbon capture and storage, are not yet fully fledged ([Rankovic et al., 2018](#)).

In the face of this imperative need to build a more moderate society, today numerous researchers are asking how we can maintain a high level of well-being during the transition ([Lamb & Steinberger, 2017](#); [O'Neill et al., 2018](#)), and are seeking to demonstrate that it is possible to reconcile more moderate lifestyles with a sense of prosperity ([Jackson, 2010](#)) and a high level of satisfaction (Vita et al., 2020). On another register, a significant literature has built up over several decades on defining alternative wealth indicators to GDP, which is today the flagship indicator of wealth (for an overview of this literature and some experiments, see [Chancel et al., 2014](#)). The research explores and seeks to explain the motivations underlying the existing phenomena of self-limitation and voluntary simplicity ([Ademe, 2019](#)).

However, this theoretical research encounters limited echoes in the social and political sphere, where moderation-based approaches are generally perceived as a retreat from modernity, and often judged as anti-liberty in character, or even totalitarian ([Saujot et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, this research does not tend to explore the question of implementation in a real political context, with all its divisiveness. A number of papers on social psychology have attempted to identify narratives that help to engage people in discussion of the transition on the basis of the differing political values that coexist in society ([Whitmarsh et Corner, 2017](#)). But it is also important to work on the conditions of their implementation, particularly in a context of increasing mistrust.

Trust, a key ingredient in the transition?

The level of trust in a society determines in part the acceptability of public policies. Thus, [Algan et al. \(2019\)](#) show that citizens with a low level of trust (both interpersonal and in institutions) are generally more hostile to social redistribution mechanisms, even if they are part of the beneficiary population. The authors explain this phenomenon by the fact that these population groups do not trust in the power of the government to ensure this redistribution takes place in a fair manner, nor in the integrity of their fellow citizens who are recipients of these benefits.¹ As a result, calls to adopt a more moderate lifestyle (fly less, eat less meat, live in smaller houses, etc.), in the context of the present society of consumption, and to limit oneself in the name of a collective good, seem vain in a context where interpersonal trust is lacking: why should I make these efforts, when I cannot trust others to do the same?

Invoking these frames of reference should help us to think more clearly about how to promote adherence to plans for the green transition, which is essential to bring about societal change.¹² Democratic societies are defined by growing social polarization, where trust plays a major role. This observation has also been made in the mapping of French society undertaken by Destin Commun³ (2020). One of the groups identified in their study, named the Laissés pour compte (‘left-behind’), who would account for almost one-quarter of French society, is characterised⁴ precisely by a very high level of mistrust, both towards political institutions and towards their fellow citizens. These observations are important as even if they only relate to a minority group, this entails a structural impact on the political context and the terms of debate, via the dynamics of polarisation of political discourse or movements such as the Yellow Vests.

There are many reasons to explain the rise of this mistrust in contemporary society: technological and scientific complexity are growing, making the world harder to decipher for ordinary citizens (Rosenvallon, 2006); individualism has come to the fore as a new social norm, to the detriment of the idea of a collective destiny (Cheurfa and Chanvrl, 2019); many areas, especially in rural and suburban zones, have lost sites of social interaction, such as local public services (post offices, schools), stores, and places of education and culture (bookshops, cinemas) ([Algan et al., 2020](#)); political leaders are seen as remote and failing to represent a significant part of the population (Rouban, 2019); finally, the economic downgrading of certain population groups over recent decades⁵ together with a sense of threat from the impact of technological innovation are other factors explaining this growing mistrust (Fleurbay, 2019, pp. 81-83). As a result, if growing inequality is one of the factors contributing to social fragmentation, it must be understood in a broader sense: as social loneliness coupled with economic insecurity.

Given that the green transition obliges us to rethink our model of development, as we showed in [the first part of this series of blog posts](#), it therefore seems essential to take greater cognizance of the specific political context in which we operate: how can we rebuild the elements of trust that allow us to project ourselves collectively towards a new model of society? How can the green transition serve as a support for this democratic renewal? The last post in the series will be devoted to these questions.

¹ The accusations of “taking advantage of the system” and “social handouts” can be read in this light.

¹² This link between the transformation project represented by the green transition and social and political cohesion has been analyzed by other authors, such as Smith and Mayer (2018) in relation to climate policies.

³ Destin Commun is an association which aims to build a more united society. Their research, inspired by social psychology, is based on a division of French society into six groups, established from questions relating to beliefs and the degree of social and civic engagement.

⁴ This group overwhelmingly thinks that their children will have a worse life than them, avoid debating and sharing their opinions, and do not feel properly respected in society. In France, between 1983 and 2014, 10 % of the wealthiest groups absorbed 42 % of the accumulated growth, compared to just 21 % for the poorest 50 % (<https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf> (p. 98). This pattern is repeated worldwide.

⁵ In France, between 1983 and 2014, 10 % of the wealthiest groups absorbed 42 % of the accumulated growth, compared to just 21 % for the poorest 50 % (<https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf> (p. 98). This pattern is repeated worldwide. <https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-summary-french.pdf> (p. 9)