

Green Transformations?

By Alexander Dunlap, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Ian Scoones, Melissa Leach and Peter Newell (eds.). *The Politics of Green Transformations*. Oxford: Routledge, 2015 Paperback: ISBN 978-1-138-79290-6, £25.49 GBP. 220 pages + Bibliography and Index

Emerging from the Pathways to Sustainability book series, *The Politics of Green Transformations* brings together the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability (STEPS) and Science and Technology Policy Research (SPRU) at the University of Sussex. Its first named editor, Ian Scoones, a research fellow at IDS and director of the STEPS Center, is renowned for his work on science and policy issues around land and agricultural arrangements in Africa. Melissa Leach, the director of IDS, founder of the STEP Center and co-chair of the Science Committee of Future Earth, examines science, health and sociotechnical systems as they relate to agriculture and sustainability around the world. Peter Newell, director of the Centre for Global Political Economy, also at Sussex, has been a key researcher in the political economy of biotechnology, carbon credits and climate change mitigation schemes. Each of the editors has an extensive body of published work, now coming together with an edited book to unite research on sustainable development with the aim to creating an ecologically sustainable future. The eight book contributors, and the reputation of the University of Sussex, represent a segment of what could be called the “critical mainstream” in environmental debates and politics. The introduction begins with an overview of advocates of environmental transformation, analytically breaking these actors into four positions: technocentric, marketized, state-led and citizen-led, which is followed by a discussion of the challenges to reconcile each of these approaches to reach ecological sustainability. Chapter 2, by Leach, discusses in depth the meanings and implications of the different ways ‘green’ is used by these various actors. After this chapter, Erik Millstone examines some strategies and tactics in science and policy debates around environmental policy, using biotechnology as the principle example. This is followed by Andy Stirling in Chapter 4, who looks at social movements, environmental authoritarianism and the “fallacies of control” as exemplified by concepts like the Anthropocene. Highlighting the problem of eco-authoritarian policy with notions of “Earth system governance” and the importance of “unruly democratic struggles” (58, 54), Stirling stresses how public concern and green movements are responsible for the (humble) progress in green transformations condemning environmental authoritarianism emerging from these debates. Newell joins in with a brief historical examination of the industrial revolution, Fordism, globalization and later the role of finance to derive lessons for green transformation of the present. Then lessons are considered and analyzed to avoid pitfalls with the rising green economy. In Chapter 6, Mathew Lockwood examines the intricacies of energy politics and policy-making, comparing UK, Germany, India and China. Here lessons are learned to advance industrial policy that nurtures country-wide green transitions. Adrian Smith and Adrian Ely, in Chapter 7, engage both grassroots and institutional innovation to find ways to encourage sustainable development and advance ecological changes both in the global south and north. Afterward, Leach and Scoones examine the food sovereignty movement, resistance to genetically modified crops, and transition towns, to extract lessons for creating green transformations. This leads into a discussion about the dynamic relationship between the private and public sectors with Mariana Mazzucato who discusses ways to support renewable energy with state subsidies to mitigate investment risks for a green transition. Finance is again revisited by Stephen Spratt in chapter 10, who develops a typology of finance, how it can support environmental change, and finds that finance is likely to support “light green” transitions as opposed to “dark green” transformations. Finally, Hubert Schmitz considers

urgency in green transformations, political framings and summarizes some key lessons from previous chapters about how to approach environmental crisis.

The Politics of Green Transformations is engaging, useful and a formidable resource, discussing the fault lines in environmental debates, policy, social movements, innovation and financial systems. While tensions exist between these authors, two main tropes resonate through almost every chapter. First, there is no one-way towards green transformations and, second, change requires (different levels of) engagement with state and economic institutions. Additionally, democracy throughout the book receives a heightened status yet receives little critical reflection, which correspondingly neglects other (unsavory) radical actors. With the four factions mentioned above, citizen-led was noted to “take as their point of departure that neither state nor market can deliver” a green transformation (19). In all of its democratic plurality, the book neglects what could be called an ‘insurrectionary faction,’ actors who do not negotiate, but directly and violently attack the current system of subjugation and environmental degradation. While mentioning sabotage of genetically modified crops only once (126) or clumping illegal direct action into “unruly democratic struggle”, there is no other reference to direct sabotage from eco-anarchist action groups, among them the Earth Liberation Front, or intense concerted attacks from Individuals Tending towards the Wild, who have been bombing institutions and gunning down nano- and bio-technology professors in Mexico because of their role to attack and dominate wild life. Such phenomena is also an important and integral part of the politics of green transformations.

Similarly, while state and capital recuperation/flexibility/co-optation was mentioned (78-81, 106-7), the issue of co-optation is not discussed at length, which might require extra attention considering the limited green transformations of the last thirty years. Notably, with the exception of the editors’ contribution, one lesson stated clearly by Newell was relatively poorly reflected in the rest of the book: “...the uncritical pursuit of the ‘green economy’ also runs the risk of reproducing injustice of the fossil fuel economy unless attention is paid to inequities and injustices in the production or the supply of energy technologies” (77). In regions such as Mexico the recent wave of neoliberal restructuring supported by climate change legislation has created new opportunities for investment in wind park development and renewable energy for Wal-Mart and other transnational corporations, which has created social conflict and increased inequality/poverty with ethnocidal implications for indigenous groups—‘green grabbing’. Some chapters in the book neglect this important insight, parading renewable energy and its grassroots innovation as inherently ‘good,’ on the path towards green transitions. Nonetheless, in several cases, this green development seeks to continue consumption, production and industrialization as we know it. Mazzucato’s concern with private and public institutions cooperation so policy makers can “use efficiently the tools and means to shape and create [green] markets” (152), may be operating on a green premise that will no doubt, as they stand, reproduce old inequalities at greater frequency with a less environmentally damaging technologies. This point raises the overarching concern around the green economy, green transformations and what is really being created by the use of Gramsci’s interregnum—“a period between the decline of one order and the rise of another” (80) —discussed by Newell. Is this new green order with “just,” “equitable”, “inclusive” and “democratic” (24) intentions really paving the way for new and more intricate inequalities, strengthening economic systems of social control and engineering/transformations? Put differently, are good intentions and desires for ecological harmony being reconfigured to integrate cybernetics and toxic waste further into people and the earth? Such questions deserve special consideration when discussing green transformations. Regardless of the common blind spots in academic literature, this book is an excellent introductory text on urgent debates on the environment with a variety of critical mainstream perspectives. I recommend this book, especially the introduction, to anyone who is studying the politics of the environment, development and debates around green transformations