

Hamza Hamouchene and Katie Sandwell (eds), *Dismantling Green Colonialism: Energy and Climate Justice in the Arab Region*, London: Pluto Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780745349213 (paper); ISBN: 9780745349190 (ebook)

Climate justice can ultimately be understood as an agenda for exposing and seeking to remedy how climate change impacts different people differently across the world (Sultana 2021). Along the same lines, it has been suggested that substantial and transformative just transitions to low-carbon economies must tackle injustices that may—as transitions unfold—befall the people of the global South, since “market-based efforts to tackle climate change” are bound to appropriate resources and harm livelihoods of people of the periphery (Newell and Mulvaney 2013: 137). The unsurprising extension of capitalist rationale to transitioning out of fossil-fuelled economies inspired a critical political ecological agenda that focuses on two tasks: “both a careful interrogation of the political economies of capitalism and a confrontation with the conceptualisations of justice itself” (Bouzarovski 2022: 1014). *Dismantling Green Colonialism: Energy and Climate Justice in the Arab Region* seeks to do just that, while offering a pioneering intervention laying groundwork for starting the conversation on energy justice in the Arab region.¹ However, while it does a great job interrogating and exposing the political economy of green transitions in the region, there remains work to be done in confronting the conceptual baggage of “just transitions”.

The volume’s introduction sets the tone, starting with the current and projected impacts of global warming on the Arab region, where climate science predicts that large parts of it will eventually become uninhabitable, and where most of the region’s countries will be under the absolute water-poverty level by 2050. Meanwhile, the editors explain, COPs are used as opportunities for Arab regimes for green washing and attracting funds and foreign investments for energy projects claimed to be green, including projects destined to deplete already scarce water resources and to displace indigenous groups. With a political economic stance, the editors name international financial institutions (IFIs), multinational corporations, and local Arab elites as actors perpetuating and deepening the climate crisis, even through processes and projects framed as transitions for humanity’s survival.

¹ For a rare—and partial—exception, see Müller et al. (2022). Non-political ecological/economic literature on the Arab region is on the rise (see e.g. Hossin et al. 2023; Mills and Sim 2021).

A central question asked here is who are the groups that will bear the costs of the climate crisis and the massive changes—as they take off—to face it (i.e. energy, technology, and infrastructural work to transition away from burning fossil fuels)? A short answer from the Arab region, the introduction suggests, is that a green transition of sorts is in the making, through capitalist corporate-led projects, that reproduce patterns of dispossession and resource plunder that were and are the hallmarks of the fossil fuel regime. This regime from the viewpoint of the Arab region is obviously being reproduced into the transition with the support of authoritarian power structures. Renewable energy projects across the region are conducted through further enclosing and privatisation of water, land, and power, by means of sophisticated neoliberal tools where public–private partnerships (PPPs) feature prominently (p.5).

Dismantling Green Colonialism adopts an eclectic and rich toolkit of conceptual framings. They are used across the book’s three parts to guide the analysis. Different chapters rely in different proportions on certain framings. They are multi-layered and bring together different concepts, actors, and processes, which allows for critically approaching recent developments in the region’s energy sectors, from several entry points. The volume assimilates a broad and deep survey on energy and climate justice questions in the Arab region, even if several countries were not included (notably Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen).

The main conceptual lenses deployed are three. There is, first, a historical–environmental view on Orientalism (Davis 2011; Laroui 1977), which extends here to the present, mainly in North Africa. Diana K. Davis’ work on Algeria under a French occupation which constructed a narrative of environmental degradation in North Africa over the 19th century to justify expanded colonial institutions, is brought to bear here on contemporary representations of North Africa. The extensive Saharan biome is often represented as an empty, dead land waiting for European renewable energy investments, including for green energy exports to the EU, rendering invisible, in the process, countless communities and livelihoods such projects are destroying (p.10). Summoning a historical perspective that seeks to highlight how enclosures of the commons are justified by following colonial logics is not unprecedented, nor does it stop at the Arab region (e.g. Carver 2023), but it takes off here from critical environmental historical scholarly work on the Arab region, and builds on it with empirical rigour throughout many of the chapters, especially in the book’s first section.

A second conceptual lens invoked is “fossil capitalism”. The concept goes beyond Andreas Malm’s (2016) “fossil capital”—originally coined to factor in the role of fossil fuels in the expanded reproduction of capital—to describe global capitalism in connection to the region’s hydrocarbons producers on global, inter- and intra-regional scales. “Fossil capitalism” here delineates the oil- and gas-rich Gulf states’, and, by extension, “Gulf capitalists”’, role “as a semi-periphery—or even as a sub-imperialist—force” that dominates several economic sectors in other countries across the region (p.7). We are invited then to see this particular intra-regional dynamic of global capitalist expansion through an analytical lens that stresses the role of the sub-regional hydrocarbons producers. The concept is, however, not utilised substantially (except in Chapter 11, by Adam Hanieh) to showcase and deliver this analytical promise.

The third conceptual lens is “just transitions”. The editors review its history, and present a unique contribution, which is a set of parameters for a definition from a scholar-activist meeting in 2019 that hosted environmental justice and labour movements from three continents, and came up with key normative characteristics for a sought-after just transition: it looks different across different spaces; it is a class and gender issue; an anti-racist framework; just transition involves more than climate justice; and it is about democracy. With these parameters, the book project also was first conceived (p.12). Just transition is central to most of the chapters and gives different shades of meaning and focus across the cases, since it inherently *looks different across different spaces*.

One major theoretical success across the chapters is the different and analytically useful overlaps they conjure between these stated broad conceptual tools and various political economic vehicles of analysis. This is about situating neoliberal practices and processes of the green transition in the Arab region within entrenched colonialism, extractivism, and uneven development, being mechanisms—presented with their long historical trajectories—that ultimately sustain the persistent and expanding driver of the Anthropocene: global capitalism. Concrete institutions pointed out include IFIs, global corporates, and authoritarian power structures, and how these actors reproduce Orientalist colonial narratives of the empty desert waiting for smart and green economic development. These multiple framings offer an open-ended basis for rethinking climate change, green washing, and green energy projects along political economic lines of analysis that are

sensitive to the region's peculiarities and its colonial historical trajectory. The result is nuanced accounts that showcase how *unjust* transitions unfold.

Below I selectively review some of the chapters that span the book's three parts, to tease out the ways in which the book presents overlapping and innovative analytical entry points to just transitions in the region. In Chapter 1, Hamza Hamouchene offers a panoramic view of North African renewable energy projects (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Western Sahara) within the framing of green colonialism, or green grabbing. He shows from a macro perspective how these projects perpetuate and nourish the European appetite for green energy consumption (including green hydrogen), while wreaking havoc on local communities elsewhere, like pastoralists and peasants in semi-arid and arid zones.

In Chapter 2, on the Western Sahara, Joanna Allan, Hamza Lakhal and Mahmoud Lemaadel contrast green energy plans in the Sahara, to the grievances of the local indigenous population. Such a state of affairs, carried out through authoritarianism in combination with neocolonial and neoliberal extractivist policies, ultimately undermines real just transition prospects for the local communities. For activists on the ground, renewable energy projects are seen as simply the next wave of extractivism impoverishing local populations and plundering their livelihoods. Wind farms power corporate industrial projects, including a cement factory and phosphate mine, that in turn deplete scarce groundwater reserves essential for local livelihoods. It is "business as usual" latched to green energy, where the latter perpetuates and extends the former.

Chapter 3, by Manal Shqair, offers a concentrated intervention on Israel's greenwashing of its settler-colonial project in Palestine, and its history of plundering the water resources of Jordan, as the background on which recent green energy normalisation plans with Jordan rests. "Eco-normalisation", a term suggested by Shqair, is closely linked to the kind of historical environmental narratives Davis (2011) offers. Concretely, eco-normalisation that rests on energy colonialism, is resourced by the violent colonial aggression against the Palestinian right of self-determination. Shqair presents *eco-sumud* (eco-steadfastness) as a term covering environmentally friendly everyday practices of Palestinians to challenge daily disruptions of their lives and lands by illegal settlements. As such, *eco-sumud* is posed as a roadmap for a just transition for the Palestinians. Here a just transition is proposed precisely as an act of resisting colonialism.

Chapter 6 offers a long historical view on the energy sector in Sudan, from the colonial past (early 20th century) to the most recent neoliberal developments under the IFIs after the revolution of 2018, with a focus on energy policies that are enmeshed in postcolonial development rhetoric and practices. Razaz H. Bashier and Mohamed Salah Abdelrahman chart a “just transition” in the Sudanese energy sector as one that should leave behind the long colonial and postcolonial legacy of megaprojects which served the purpose of legitimating authoritarian power, and that challenges neocolonial imperatives which serve only global corporates. With this ends Part 1 of the book, which focuses on the colonial legacy and continuities between fossil fuels and renewable energies (Chapter 4, however, presents the North African agrarian sector, offering a recipe for a just agrarian transition), with such a simple and straightforward *vision* that seems applicable across struggles for just transitions across many countries of the global South.

Part 2 offers through four chapters concentrated case studies of state energy policies from the region that answer different questions on neoliberal energy policies, the privatisation of energy, and the role of IFIs. The following are not necessarily the central questions each chapter asks, but ones I find particularly stimulating: how does the privatisation of electric power in Egypt impoverish the very social groups that IFIs claim are benefiting from the neoliberal turn? (Chapter 7) How is the impressive transition to renewables in Jordan being challenged by fossil fuel regional interests, and what does it mean for state energy policy that rich households and big businesses turned to autonomous renewable energy systems instead of the less privileged households? (Chapter 8) By subtly tracing the contours of grievances that started the Arab Spring, how could a just transition to renewable energies in Tunisia support tackling inequalities between the provinces and boost local industries and job creation? (Chapter 9) And why would “energy sovereignty” for the people of Morocco be the way for achieving a just transition away from the amalgam of money lenders to the Moroccan market-based renewable energy sector (including from France, Germany, and Japan) *and* autocratic Moroccan energy governance? (Chapter 10)

Part 3 takes on the majority of the hydrocarbons producers in the region (GCC states and Algeria). For example, Adam Hanieh (Chapter 11) traces the rise of the Gulf hydrocarbons producers over the last two decades to recent structural changes in global capitalism, notably the rise of China and other Asian economies—an “East-East” hydrocarbon

axis between the Gulf and East Asian economies. One important implication of this view is that it shows a glaring blind spot for the global climate movement that focuses almost exclusively on Western governments and hydrocarbon industries.

Overall, this volume comes with an empirical richness that offers plenty of space for comparative analysis. We have chapters for countries and others for the sub-region (North Africa and the Arab Gulf), with a focus on political economic questions. The diversity in approaching “just transitions” across different locales and temporal ranges gives potential for comparing how mechanisms of appropriation and extractivism work differently—or similarly—in different cases. A point of strength here is the clear lines of argument across the chapters, and crisp analyses, which managed to lay groundwork for further research.

However, a major weakness is that this laudable work does not land on a conclusion or an epilogue that synthesises and fleshes out analytically how we should rethink the questions of “transition” after the empirically rich chapters. The complexity of such questions becomes clearer as one progresses across the book, and the chapters problematise the different cases as essentially complex ones: transitions of neoliberalism, privatisation and PPPs; continuities from colonial projects to neoliberal projects; transitions to renewables *without* transitioning out of capitalist extractivism. It shows this complexity by thinking across scales: local, national, regional, and global (particularly North Africa vis-à-vis Europe in the energy sector, and the Gulf states’ roles in leading market-based renewables transitions across other countries in the region). A synthesis on “just transitions” in the conclusion is also called for since the introduction presents a “justice lens”.

By way of conclusion, and taking inspiration from the chapters, I offer here three remarks on what the justice lens seems to bring through this volume in relation to renewable transitions. First, it shows from several chapters that teased out colonial legacies across specific countries how historicising energy questions can be useful for investigating transitions. As Karen Rignall puts it in her essay (Chapter 4), “[d]iagnosing what we need to *transition from* is essential to identifying what we need to *transition to*” (p.89). This is one way to transcend what Stefan Bouzarovski (2022) described as “bounded approaches”, where purportedly “inclusive approaches” to transition tend to leave out broader socio-technical, socio-political, and environmental questions and problems. The justice lens deployed here, as it takes history seriously, shows the narrow path renewable transitions are walking, with

continuities from the structural injustices of the past, and as such shows clearly rich potential outside the path: energy sovereignty, democratic processes, autonomous and small-scale renewables infrastructures, to name a few openings for transformative change.

Second, thinking of justice is to think of inequalities. This volume—in its structure and curation mainly—presents them as fractal, a view that I think is important to understand unevenness, being inherently endemic across social groups, scales, and geographies. Inequalities are shown being deepened by: renewable energy projects in North Africa, which continue to plunder the precious water resources of arid and semi-arid zones, impacting marginalised social groups and deepening their dispossession; privatisation of national power grids, a trend the region shares with other regions of the world, including Western Europe, where the analysis may tend to focus on class lines; inequalities on the regional level where hydrocarbons producers of the Gulf deepen impoverishment and sustain the neoliberal order in other countries of the region. *Seeing* fractal unevenness and inequalities is to remain attentive to multi-scalar analyses and aligned with feminist and anticolonial scholarship.

Third, and drawing on the remarks above, a justice lens seems to be more useful the more it moves towards higher sensitivity to the broader aspects in which energy questions are deeply embedded. These include, from the Arab region, questions of inter- and intra-regional economic “development” and business dynamics, autocracy and representation, logics of perpetual growth which are the flesh and blood of a relentless global capitalism, continuities of colonialism and extractivism, and how loans/debts are playing out as an extremely powerful obstacle to just transitions for the people in the global South, at least since the age of High Imperialism (1860s–1940s) to the present. This is perhaps an evident perspective for scholars exploring social scientific aspects of energy in critical ways, but it is a welcome and long anticipated contribution from the Arab region, coming precisely at the moment when renewable energy transitions in the region are starting to take form.

As such, the book represents an important pioneering toolkit for activists and critical scholars engaging with causes and questions of energy, transitions, capitalist exploitation across different milieus, and global warming, even if it did not go as far in conceptualising just transitions as it did in terms of investigating the political economy of renewables in the region.

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