

Climate justice and the social-ecological transition

By [Éloi Laurent](#)

There is something deeply reassuring about seeing the growing scale of climate markets in numerous countries around the globe. A section of the youth are becoming aware of the injustice they will suffer as a result of choices over which they do not (yet) have a say. But the recognition of this *inter*-generational inequality is running up against the wall of *intra*-generational inequality: it will not be possible to implement a real ecological transition without dealing with the social question here and now, and in particular the imperative to reduce inequality. In other words, the ecological transition will be social-ecological – or it will not be. This is the case in France, where the national ecological strategy, currently 90% ineffective, needs to be thoroughly overhauled, as proposed in the new [OFCE Policy Brief \(no. 52, 21 February 2019\)](#).

This is also true in the United States, where a new generation of red-green politicians is taking part in one of the most decisive political struggles in the country's history against the ecological obscurantism of a President who is a natural disaster in his own right. In a [concise text](#), which is remarkable for its precision, analytical clarity and political lucidity, the Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has just proposed a “Green New Deal” to her fellow citizens.

The title may seem ill-chosen: the “New Deal” carried out by Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 1933 was aimed at reviving an economy devastated by the Great Depression. But isn't the American economy flourishing today? If we rely on the economic indicators of the twentieth century (growth rate, finance, profit), there's no doubt. But if we go beyond appearances, we

can discern the recession in well-being that has been undermining the country for thirty years and which will only get worse with the ecological crisis (life expectancy is now structurally declining in the United States). Hence the first lever of the ecological transition: to break with growth and count on what really matters to improve people's well-being today and tomorrow.

The second lever: coordinating the approach to social realities and ecological challenges. The New Green Deal identifies as the root cause of America's malaise "systemic inequalities", both social and ecological. Accordingly, it intends to implement a "fair and equitable transition" that will benefit in priority "frontline and vulnerable communities", which one could call "ecological sentinels" (children, elderly people, the energy insecure). These are people who prefigure our common future if we allow the ecological crisis for which we bear responsibility to deteriorate further. It is this coordination between the social and ecological that lies at the heart of the proposal by several thousand economists to introduce "[carbon dividends](#)" (an idea [originally proposed by James Boyce](#), one of the world's leading specialists in the political economy of the environment).

Which brings us to the third lever: to gain citizens' interest instead of terrorizing them. In this respect, the [detailed report](#) published by the Data for Progress think tank deploys an extremely effective argumentative sequence: the new ecological deal is necessary to preserve humanity's well-being; it will create jobs, it is desired by the community of citizens, and it will reduce social inequalities; and the country has the financial means to implement it. It's concrete, coherent, convincing.

In 1933, Europe and France were half a century ahead of the United States in terms of the "new deal". It was in Europe and France that the institutions of social justice were invented,

developed and defended. It is in the United States that the social-ecological transition is being invented today. We should not wait too long to get hold of it.

After the Paris Agreement – Putting an end to climate inconsistency

By [Eloi Laurent](#)

If the contents of the 32-page Paris Agreement (and the related decisions) adopted on 12 December 2015 by COP 21 had to be summarized in a single phrase, we could say that never have the ambitions been so high but the constraints so low. This is the basic trade-off in the text, and this was undoubtedly the condition for its adoption by all the world's countries. The expectation had been that the aim in Paris was to extend to the emerging markets, starting with China and India, the binding commitments agreed in Kyoto eighteen years ago by the developed countries. What took place was exactly the opposite: under the leadership of the US government, which dominated this round of negotiations from start to finish right to the last minute (and where the EU was sorely absent), every country is now effectively out of Annex 1 of the Kyoto Protocol. They are released from any legal constraints on the nature of their commitments in the fight against climate change, which now amount to voluntary contributions that countries determine on their own and without reference to a common goal.

In doing this, the Paris Agreement gives rise to a new global variable, which we can accurately track over the coming years:

the factor of inconsistency, which compares objectives and resources. At the end of COP 21, this ratio was in the range of 1.35 to 2 (the climate objective chosen, specified in Article 2, lies between 1.5 and 2 degrees, whereas the sum of national voluntary contributions declared to reach this would lead to warming of 2.7 to 3 degrees). The question facing us now is thus the following: how to deal with this climate inconsistency by bringing the resources deployed into line with the ambitions declared (bringing the climate inconsistency factor to 1)?

The answers to this question were actually set out during the two weeks of COP 21, but they did not survive the negotiations between states and therefore were not included in the final text in an operational form. They are three in number: climate justice, the carbon price and the mobilization of territories.

Climate justice, whose decisive importance was rightly highlighted in particular in the opening speech of the French President ("It is in the name of climate justice that I speak to you today") is actually contradicted in the text of the Agreement: while the text mentions the term "justice" only a single time, it provides that the parties recognize "the importance for some of the concept of 'climate justice'". The whole point of climate justice is precisely that its importance is not confined to only a few nations but concerns all the world's countries. So there is still a huge amount to be done in this field, particularly on the question of the distribution of efforts at mitigation and adaptation.

The need to put a price on carbon (and thus give it social value), which has been gaining in support, as was highlighted from the opening of COP 21 under the aegis of Angela Merkel and the new Canadian government, still appeared in the penultimate version of the text. It disappeared from the final version (under the combined pressure of Saudi Arabia and Venezuela). Yet there is no doubt that it is by internalizing the price of carbon that we will put the economy at the

service of the climate transition. But it seems at this point that the world's governments have decided to outsource this internalization function to the private sector. It is necessary to quickly take this in hand, both internally and globally.

Finally, the way the Agreement deals with the crucial role of decentralized territories, both to compensate for the shortcomings of the nation states and to be laboratories for a low-carbon economy, is too brief and too vague. The summit organized by the Mayor of Paris on December 4 nevertheless showed clearly that towns, cities and regions have become full participants in the fight against climate change, reviving the spirit of the 1992 Rio Summit. It is essential to set up as quickly as possible an organization for genuine cooperation between the territories and the nation states, in France and elsewhere, to breathe life into the Paris Agreement.

It can be seen clearly in the light of these three decisive issues, that the most severe criticism that can be levelled at an architectural agreement, which is a programme of intentions rather than an actual plan for action, is not to be progressive and dynamic enough and not to anticipate sufficiently its own shortcomings and its coming outdatedness by opening the way for new principles, new instruments and new players. Moreover, what are we to make of the fact that we have to wait until 2020 for its implementation, while the signs of climate change are visible all around us?

The easing of this time constraint may well come from the big country that proved to be the most constructive before and during COP 21: China. It was China that, five days before the conclusion of the Agreement, was the source of the best climate news since the announcement of the slowing of Amazon deforestation in the 2000s: global CO₂ emissions, after almost stabilizing in 2014, should decrease slightly in 2015. This decrease is due to their reduction in China under the combined impact of the economic slowdown (the decision to end hyper-

growth) and the de-carbonization of growth (related to lower consumption of coal). This is in turn due to the increasingly strong pressure being placed by the Chinese people on their government, because they have understood that the economic development of their country is destroying the human development of their children. It can thus be hoped that China will contain global emissions over the five years between now and 2020 and thereby make the Paris Agreement more acceptable... on the condition of using this to put an end to climate inconsistency.

Climate justice – the “Open Sesame” of the COP 21 climate conference

By [Eloi Laurent](#)

Climate negotiations cannot be limited to technical discussions between experts about the reliability of scientific data: they need to take the form of an open political dialogue that is nourished by ethical reflection involving the citizens. What should be the focus of this dialogue? With COP 21 opening in two months in Paris, it is becoming increasingly clear that the key to a possible agreement is not economic efficiency, but social justice. The “green growth” that was a goal in the past century has little mobilizing power in a world plagued by injustice. It is much more important to highlight the potential that resolute action against climate change holds for equality at the national and global level.

Three issues indicate how social justice is at the heart of the climate negotiations. The first concerns the choice of the criteria for allocating the carbon budget between countries in order to mitigate climate change (the approximately 1200 billion tons of carbon that remains to be emitted over the next three to four decades so as to limit the rise of ground temperatures to around 2 degrees by the end of the 21st century). Various indicators can be used both to estimate the carbon budget and to distribute it equitably among countries; while these indicators need to be discussed, we cannot under any circumstances ignore this issue in Paris. It is demonstrable that [the application of hybrid but relatively simple criteria on climate justice](#) would lead to cutting global emissions almost in half over the next three decades, which would ensure meeting the goal of 2 degrees, and even targeting the increased rise in temperatures to 1.5 degrees, thereby enhancing the fairness of this common rule with respect to the most vulnerable countries and social groups.

The second issue concerns adaptation to climate change, that is to say, the exposure and sensitivity to extreme weather events and rising global temperatures that is differentiated between countries and social groups. Here too it is important to select relevant indicators of climate vulnerability to fairly allocate the available funding (which should increase to \$100 billion per year by 2020). But it will be very difficult to mobilize the necessary sums without [shifting the climate negotiations from the current quantitative logic to a price logic](#).

Finally, combatting inequality seems to be the most effective way to involve citizens in the climate dialogue. The fight against climate change must be understood not as a social threat or an opportunity for profit-making but as a lever for achieving equality: a chance to reduce disparities in human development between countries and within countries.

The case of China shows how constraints on cutting CO2

emissions can turn into a tool for reducing inequality: the limitation on coal consumption simultaneously reduces the country's greenhouse gas emissions and the damage caused to the Chinese population's health by fine particles, which are distributed very unevenly around the territory and therefore within the population. The same applies to the much desired regulation of automobile traffic in France's urban areas, which represents both a gain for health and a reduction in emissions related to mobility. This dual climate-health dividend (reducing emissions to contain global warming has an indirect effect, i.e. improving health) must therefore be at the heart of the Paris negotiations. The fight against climate change offers a chance to reduce the inequalities that will be so devastating: by cross-checking the "social" map and the "climate" map, we can anticipate that the impact of heat waves will be felt strongest in regions where both climatic exposure and the share of elderly people living alone are at high levels. The climate risk is a [socio-ecological risk](#). Inequality associated with this risk is [environmental inequality](#) [article in French]. The goal of COP 21 should not be to "save the planet" or even less to "save growth" but rather to "save our health" by protecting the most vulnerable from the worst of the climate crisis.