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Transitions in Tension

Controversies and Tensions Around Ecological Transitions

Edited by

Andrea Catellani and Grégoire Lits

ISTE

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coordinated by
Andrea Catellani and Céline Pascual Espuny

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Introduction

Controversies and Tensions Around Ecological Transitions: For an Infocommunicational Approach

In recent years, the metaphor of the "transition", which suggests a movement, a priori soft and smooth, from one state to another, has taken a growing place in both media and scientific discourses on the evolution of human societies. Beyond the apparent peacefulness associated with it, this term often appears in connection with issues associated with quite lively tensions and controversies, whether related to the ecology and habitability of the planet, energy policy, even the evolution of our social protection models or the evolution of our communication tools (when we talk about a society's digital transition). It is this apparent contradiction between an imaginary of gentle evolution, of a natural change of state and the strong tensions that these changes arouse in the social body that this book attempts to elucidate by presenting different works of research from the information and communication fields, and more broadly the humanities and social sciences, focusing on the environmental and energy sphere.

The *Dictionnaire critique de l'anthropocène* (2020, p. 780) takes from Chabot (2015) the idea that we have entered the "age of transitions", defined as a "fundamental reconfiguration of the functioning and organization of the system, faced with a tipping point". But the notion of an ecological transition, unlike others such as "demographic transition", indicates not so much a phenomenon as an "intention", a "watchword prescribing practices" (ibid.), used by a wide range of actors (activists, institutional, professional, technical, political, scientific), just as for the "digital transition".

Introduction written by Andrea CATELLANI and Grégoire LITS.

Like the latter, the ecological transition describes a process of "transformation during which a system passes from one regime of equilibrium to another" (Bourg and Papaux 2015, p. 780, cited by Monnoyer-Smith (2017)). The term is particularly linked to the "transition towns" movement and the transition network, a movement initiated by Rob Hopkins in England in 2005. More broadly, the notion of transition has become one of these "formulas" (Planque 2010) used today in discourse dealing with the ecological situation, its consequences and perspectives for action in the political, media, economic, social, spiritual and cultural spheres (as well as the scientific, with recent research on sustainability transitions). This formula indicates a complex set of values, scientific notions, projects, projections, actions and practices involved with the transition from the current state towards a more "sustainable", lasting and desirable condition for humans and living beings, thus partly replacing the semantics of sustainable development (Theys 2020), and also implying "the resorption of social inequalities or environmental injustices" (*Dictionnaire critique de l'anthropocène*, 2020, p. 780), as recalled by the notion of "just transition" also present in the text of the Paris climate agreement. In France and Spain, for example, there exist Ministries of Ecological Transition, even if the names quickly change.

The positive, dynamic and promising connotations of this type of expression (different from those of other expressions such as collapse, therefore with potential for euphemization) certainly help the dissemination and use of these formulas. Different actors therefore appropriate this expression within different logics and perspectives, such as those of long-term public policies, that of associations and movements oriented towards the commons and the local, or even that of large companies (and more particularly in the energy sector). Transition makes it possible to build a positive framework, linked to the discourse of innovation, of design thinking, of participation, etc. This diversity and heterogeneity – which does not deny the existence of a "family resemblance" between the different uses – is interrogated by research in information and communication or even discourse analysis.

For its part, the expression "energy transition" is defined by the World Energy Council (2014) as "a significant structural change in an energy system". The current transition to renewable energy is the latest energy transition, and it is driven directly by the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in this era of ongoing global climate and environmental crisis. However, as the *Dictionnaire critique de l'anthropocène* reminds us, "the energy transition is not determined in its solutions, nor in the modalities of its implementation" (2020, p. 783). Different, more or less radical models and perspectives intersect, integrating ecological issues to a greater or lesser extent. From this point of view, the energy transition and its challenges "question our relationship to the Earth" (*Dictionnaire critique de l'anthropocène* 2020, p. 784) and therefore the self-definition of societies. Here too, there is material for work in