

A vision for just and fair transitions toward a carbon-free world

Review of *A just transition for all: Workers and communities for a carbon-free future* by J. Mijin Cha (2024) MIT Press

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As time passes, news about the now hotter Earth buzzes through the bird village. Those kingfishers residing along the banks of the Red River often report drying riverbeds and skinny fish. As Kingfisher casts his gaze upon the events that have unfolded, he can't help but feel a sense of unease creeping up within him. He decides to collect all the scientific information concerning climate change and greenhouse gas emissions. An elite squad with a unique talent for gathering vital information is formed for emergency information collection.

In GHG emissions, *Wild Wise Weird: The Kingfisher Story Collection*, Vuong (2025)

In the latest turn of even, the Trump 2.0 administration had decided to prevent the US delegation to attend the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in Hangzhou, China on the first week of March 2025. This move follows the complete and immediate withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change in early 2025 (Schonhardt et al., 2025). The fight against climate change demands a global effort to move away from traditional fuel sources while meeting rising energy needs. But can we innovate and implement new technologies fast enough? Can we balance decarbonization with economic growth? And can we truly imagine a radically different future? Can we even begin to create a shared vision for a future without carbon-emitting sources? How would the classical thinkers and philosophers view our situation?

Technological visionaries often paint a future powered by clean energy, yet these optimistic visions tend to overlook the messy socio-political realities of such transitions. As *A just transition for all: Workers and communities for a carbon-free future* (MIT Press) powerfully illustrates, there is a vast difference between a so-called ‘just’ transition and one that is genuinely just. This book offers a much-needed, thought-provoking, and meticulously documented exploration of how political and business leaders can ensure fairness for all stakeholders - especially vulnerable workers and their communities - as the world shifts toward a carbon-free future.

Climate justice: ending fossil fuels equitably

J. Mijin Cha, a faculty member of the Department of Environmental Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz and a fellow of Cornell University’s Worker Institute and the Labor Network for Sustainability, specializes in research on climate and environmental justice, just transition, and labor/climate coalitions (Cha & Grubert, 2025; Pastor et al., 2024; Price et al., 2024). In her latest book, *A just transition for all*, she offers a fresh perspective on ‘effective climate advocacy’ - how to transition toward a decarbonized economy in a way that protects workers and communities, labor/climate alliances, and the relationship between inequality and the climate crisis. J. Mijin Cha has explored the social causes of climate problems and presents a deep understanding of human environmental rights. Drawing from decades of field research and advocating experiences (Cha & Pastor, 2022), Cha examines the economic and social impacts of transitioning away from fossil fuels on workers and communities. She argues forcefully for justice in this transition, ensuring that all affected stakeholders are protected.

Central to her thesis in the book is the idea that a just transition requires not only *the near-total elimination of fossil fuel use* but also fairness and equity in the process. While this concept is not new, Cha emphasizes the complexity of decarbonizing the economy, particularly in communities across the U.S. and Germany’s Ruhr region. The transition, she asserts, is a radical and transformative process that extends beyond reducing greenhouse gas emissions - it necessitates the restructuring of socio-economic and governance systems that have long depended on extractive practices. It must include two principles:

“(1) there must be an actual transition away from fossil fuels, which requires a decline in fossil fuel use, and (2) it must be just - that is, even if the meaning may not be uniform or consistent, justice requires a shift from extractive economies to regenerative ones” (Cha, 2024, p.27).

Here, Mijin Cha critically examines the long-standing “jobs vs. environment” debate, highlighting its toxic legacy as this argument had been often deployed to delay the process of decarbonization. She documents Tony Mazzocchi’s fights since 1993 to secure a “Superfund for Workers,” which later evolved into the Just Transition Alliance’s six principles: *worker and community leadership; no worker or community left behind, a healthy and sustainable environment, equitable burden and benefits, sustainable economic models, and accountability and transparency*. Cha stresses the importance of empowering marginalized communities and workers with the right to challenge any entities (governments, corporations, the military, etc.) that commit economic and/or environmental injustice. And the sixth principle of accountability has percolated into the continued labor-climate alliance, marked by the 2018 People’s Climate Movement’s main demand being ‘climate, jobs, and justice’ (p.32).

Here, citing the seminal conceptual review of just transition by Wang and Lo (2021), Cha shows the growing alliance between labor and climate movements makes perfect sense when we recognize science, technology, and society as an interconnected *technosocial system*, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of justice. The book then introduces with justice concepts, outlining procedural justice (fair participation in decision-making), recognition justice (acknowledging marginalized groups), restorative justice (repairing harm), and distributive justice (fair allocation of benefits and burdens) (Chapter 2, p.34-35). All these types of justice should be in the front of the mind of those fighting for justice in decarbonizing our economy. A key strength of the book is its ability to blend historical and contemporary examples, reinforcing the argument that fossil fuels’ deep entrenchment in the socio-political economy has obscured discussions on achieving net-zero emissions .

A vision for regenerative economy: Abandoning extractive and exploitative practices

The key issue, according to Cha, is the exploitative nature of these extractive practices. A truly just world must eliminate the need for unsustainable resource extraction, ensuring that communities do not suffer the same neglect they faced after deindustrialization. Here she introduces the vision of *a regenerative economy*: An economy where resources are regenerated, governance is based on deep democracy, purpose is formed around ecological and social well-being, world view is driven by attitude of care and sacredness, and work is characterized by cooperation. Here, Cha’s vision is even more positive and ambitious than most proponents of the green growth approach or green machines approach, which is often criticized for blind faith in how “green” technologies are neutral politically, presumed to be solutions for all problems (Roos & Hornborg, 2024).

Contrary to this dreamlike vision of a new economy, the first chapter shows Cha's realistic understanding of how fossil fuels have shaped a vast *networked* world, where any transition away from traditional energy sources will have widespread, *non-linear effects*. Workers and local communities are particularly vulnerable to these changes, making it clear that moving away from fossil fuels is not just an economic shift but a deeply socio-political and cultural one. The authors show political interventions have facilitated the dominance of fossil fuels, which in turn serve as geopolitical tools for nations to assert power and influence. The continued weaponization of climate change agendas into political tools, driven by ambitions unrelated to environmental concerns has led to antagonism, disputes, and prolonged confrontations among political actors, hindering global efforts to address climate change (Vuong et al., 2024), even at the level of creating a shared vision.

As documented by Cha (2024), fossil fuels have thus expanded their roles beyond energy production to encompass economic, social, and political functions. How do we even begin to embrace a coordinated, science-based approach to build a culture valuing eco-surplus (Ho & Nguyen, 2023; Vuong, 2021; Vuong & Ho, 2024), ensuring effective climate mitigation and adaptation remains a tough question. As such, Cha stresses that a just transition requires active government intervention, including financial support and policies that protect those most affected by the shift, and other critical facilitating conditions as detailed in the four pillars.

The four pillars of a just transition

Cha identifies four essential pillars for a just transition, based on her data and analysis: (1) strong governmental support, (2) dedicated funding streams, (3) economic diversification, and (4) strong and diverse coalitions (Figure 1). Without these foundational elements, any transition risks perpetuating existing inequalities rather than addressing them. She argues that while the challenge of decarbonization is immense, it is also an opportunity to build a more just and sustainable future - one where the benefits of a green economy are shared equitably among all.

The role of the first pillar - the public sector - is to provide policies and legal guidelines. The second pillar ensures strong financial resources to implement a just transition. The third pillar creates job opportunities for workers in industries undergoing transition or decline. The fourth pillar functions as a form of political alliance among individuals and community organizations, enabling proactive action and timely protection of workers' rights. These alliances are crucial in shaping transition policies that accurately reflect the needs of workers and communities while building the necessary political strength to drive policy adoption.

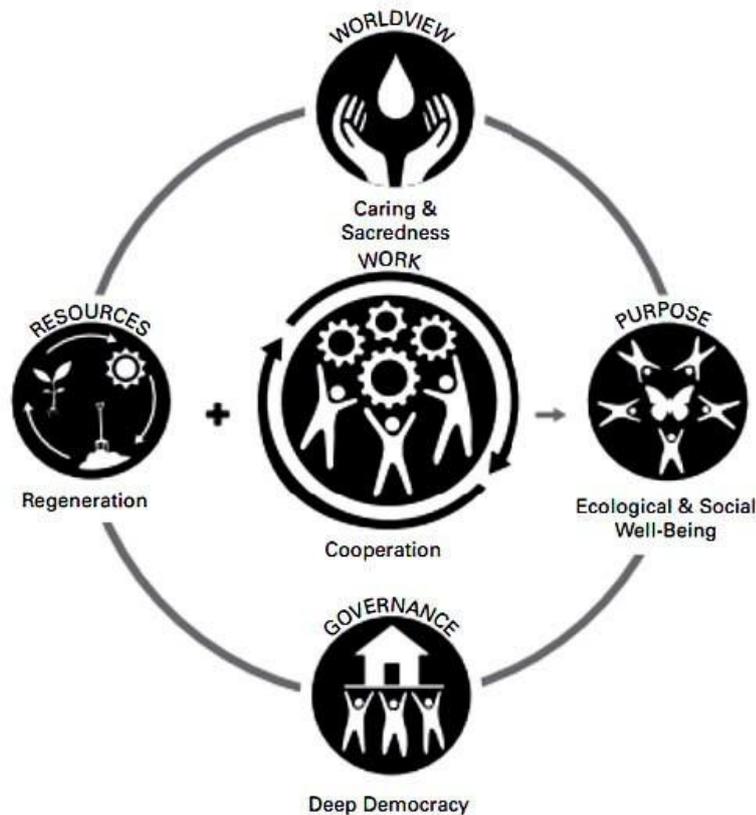


Figure 1. Cha (2024)'s model of regenerative economy (Redistributed under the license Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0).

However, the author emphasizes that these four pillars are theoretical guidelines. To effectively implement a just transition, social objectives must be strongly integrated into climate policies.

Past, present, and future of just transition

To provide a clearer picture of how these four pillars operate, Chapter 4 uses the lense afforded by the Four Pillars and analyzes two major transitions in U.S. history: the transformation of the tobacco industry and the Trade Adjustment

Act. The four-pillar framework offers valuable insights, particularly emphasizing the crucial role of the public sector as the ultimate employer in maintaining equity.



Figure 2. Illustration of four pillars of just transition postulated by J. Minji Cha (2024) by the authors

For instance, through key legislative measures, a stable market was secured for farmers amid the contraction and increased competition in the tobacco industry. Similarly, the Trade Adjustment Act was enacted to balance free trade policies by providing compensation for workers who lost their jobs and for communities indirectly affected by the shrinking labor market. These cases demonstrate that government support significantly impacts the well-being of workers receiving assistance during a transition.

Through the analysis of these two historical transitions, the author concludes that the extent to which the four-pillar framework is implemented directly determines the effectiveness of labor support and just transition outcomes. Therefore, applying these four pillars rigorously is an essential tool for ensuring a just transition away from fossil fuels for workers and communities.

Chapter 5 focuses on analyzing and comparing two key legislative measures: the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Build Public Renewables Act (BPRA) of New York using the four-pillar framework to assess their ability to promote a just transition. The chapter highlights philosophical differences in transition

approaches between the two laws and how these differences may impact the fairness and effectiveness of the energy transition.

The IRA follows a market-regulated approach, emphasizing financial incentives for renewable energy production and consumption. It provides tax benefits for corporations to reduce fossil fuel usage. The BPRA, on the other hand, prioritizes the public sector's role in building and managing renewable energy infrastructure, placing a stronger focus on workers' rights.

The author's stance is in favor of the BPRA, arguing that: "The BPRA, in contrast, is building toward a different model for renewable energy development and more aggressively accelerates a transition away from fossil fuels, which, in turn, can more successfully advance a just transition." (p.116). Thus, the BPRA is seen as a more effective framework for a just transition compared to the IRA.

The conclusion of Chapter 5 raises the issue of the necessity for substantial political power to drive climate policies, with the solution found in Chapter 6—promoting alliances and building power from the grassroots as the foundation for a just transition. Focusing on four U.S. states—California, Kentucky, Louisiana, and New York—the chapter analyzes the similarities and differences in their climate struggles, examines their dependence on fossil fuels, and assesses their efforts toward a just transition. For example, the Public Power New York (PPNY) coalition, made up of environmental justice groups and eco-socialists, advocates for shifting control from private utilities to publicly owned renewable energy. They support legislation like the BPRA to expand clean energy and create unionized green jobs (Chapter 5, p.112).

From this, the author highlights the importance of organizing and forming alliances, building power to drive change at local, state, and federal levels, and the political and policy aspects of the just transition process.

Continuing the fight

The book drives home the point that what matters most is the *community-based, community-led organizing* and the *creation of strong, diverse alliances* to fight for just transition. This view underlines the cooperation character of the vision of a regenerative economy. Hence, the alliances can then unify around a common vision for a just transition, build power, and deploy it through various strategies to advance the transition process. A just transition requires a comprehensive transformation - not just of energy sources but also of institutions, political and social structures.

The vision for just transition in Cha's work is among many visions for sustainability that have been proposed and continued to garnered attention and supports and evaluations in the world where human-machines interaction are

increasingly changing human-nature interactions (Ho & Vuong, 2024). For example, the eco-socialists proposed a transformative political philosophy that integrates ecological principles with socialist economics, asserting that capitalism's profit-driven nature is fundamentally incompatible with environmental sustainability and social justice, instead advocating for democratic ecological planning, collective ownership of productive resources, and prioritization of use-value over exchange-value in a society where ecological limits are respected and human development flourishes beyond material accumulation (Albert, 2023). Or Quan-Hoang Vuong's semiconducting principle of monetary and environmental values offers another alternative to standard economics, but with notable differences from Cha's approach. The key feature of Vuong's principle is its unidirectional conversion property: "the environmental value can be accounted for as a monetary one, but NOT vice versa" (Vuong, 2021). This asymmetric relationship creates a one-way valve that prevents the substitution of environmental value with mere monetary compensation. Vuong's principle focuses more explicitly on reforming business culture and profit calculations. These visions provide policymakers, workers, businesses, and other stakeholders with rich foods for thoughts, thus, potentially lead to further productive adaptation of strategies for better climate advocacy.

In summary, *A Just Transition for All: Workers and Communities for a Carbon-Free Future* focuses on the concept of 'Just Transition' within the context of energy transformation. Through the Four+ Pillars framework and grounded, empirical research, Cha provides a roadmap for actualizing just transition in the U.S. context. It explores the gap between theory and practice through interviews with policymakers and affected communities facing the decline of the fossil fuel industry. The book underscores the importance of building strong and diverse alliances and the role of politics in achieving fairer policies. Additionally, it examines the multidimensional nature of the transition, where extractive industries extend beyond economic factors to cultural and social dimensions. Ultimately, the book argues that a just transition must address people's material needs, redistribute resources, and create a more just future for all. The vision presented in the book is one of humanity's future development—perhaps it is time to acknowledge and embark on a new revolutionary, humane transition that ensures social justice and ecological balance.

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