Nicholas Low. 2024. *Social transformation for climate change: A new framework for democracy*. **Routledge. ISBN 9781032465319. $49.99.**

Reviewed by Astrid Edwards. Email: edwardsa "at" student.unimelb.edu.au

In *Social Transformation for Climate Change*, Nicholas Low argues that we need to understand how social transformations occur to make the transformations necessary in this age of multiple crises. Low focuses on three specific crises in this book: climate change, threats to democracy, and rising inequality and poverty.

The book is structured in two approximately equal parts—"transformations" and "the climate transformation." The first part takes a historical look at three European societal transformations that occurred in the twentieth century: the rise of social democracy in the UK and across Europe, the shift from social democracy to neoliberalism in the 1980s, and the shift from communism to capitalism in Russia and its periphery. The second part explores how the climate crisis is affecting several key areas in the contemporary moment: democracy, inequality and poverty, and social movements (including the actors within them).

Low's contention is that "the Climate Movement must include societal change, and that requires not just change within democracies but change of democracy" (p. 92). His argument is threefold. Social transformations occur because of crises with society. Transformations require a change in ideology as well as political movements and champions. Therefore, to avoid the failure of any individual democracy or the broader idea of democracy itself, we need to understand previous transformations to guide the ones necessary today.

In Chapter 1, Low outlines his argument that we require "the emergence of new philosophies" to achieve "the social transformation necessary for nations to adapt to climate change" (p. 6). By transformation, Low means "economic and social change in which ideological settings are changed… fundamental social change without violence" (p. 7). Chapter 2 is devoted to Hungarian economic sociologist Karl Polanyi's (1886-1964) work *The Great Transformation*. Low argues that Polyani's theory, with a few minor critiques, more successfully explains mechanisms of social transformation than the work of Marx or Engels. Chapter 3 considers the arrival of social democracy in Britain, exploring the period between the two World Wars, culminating with the election of the Labour Party in 1945. Chapter 4 jumps to the "neoliberal regression" (p. 48) of the 1980s and beyond, with its focus on property rights, individualism, and free markets. Up to this point, most of the work has centered on Polyani's interpretations. It is in this chapter that Low's reliance on Polyani shifts to French economist Thomas Piketty (1971-present), specifically his ongoing work at the World Inequality Lab.[1] Chapter 5 discusses the social change(s) that accompanied the fall of communism and an attempted transition to capitalism in Russia. Chapter 6 concludes the first half of the book and focuses on movements in civil societies during transformations such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and the School Strike for Climate.

The second half of the book, "The Climate Transformation," begins with Chapter 7. Here Low considers the climate crisis itself and identifies the core problem of the neoliberal regression—the idea that markets are able to provide answers to crises, when in fact 'we' (this we is not defined by Low) "turn to governments to solve the problems created by market relations: in times of economic depression, pandemic, and in times of climate crisis" (p. 109). Chapter 8 explores the links between democracy and the international order. Chapter 9 draws heavily on work by Piketty and others at the World Inequality Lab, specifically the *World Inequality Report 2022* and *Climate Inequality Report 2023* (Chancel *et al.*, 2022, 2023). There is a brief analysis of carbon inequality among socio-economic groups, between regions, and among nations—which is clearly integral to any understanding of social transformation during the climate crisis. This is followed by an unexpected detour into the Australian political ethos, possibly because Low is a Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne in Australia.

The theoretical foundation outlined in the first half of the work is European, despite addressing what are fundamentally global crises. While Low does offer basic critiques of Polyani (notably that he failed to address the Women's Rights movement of the twentieth century), he does not draw substantially from other frames of reference. And while Low's Australian perspective does enter the text occasionally including a brief acknowledgement of First Nations thinking in the chapter analyzing Polyani, the work remains predominantly focused on Europe.

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[1] https://inequalitylab.world/en/

The second half of the book deals with recent events and takes a slightly broader view than the Eurocentrism of the first half, with case studies from the United States, India, and Australia. The work also briefly mentions Ukraine and notes that the climate crisis puts a different kind of security at stake: "environmental security… the basic need for global climate security is not being met by existing institutions of international governance" (pp. 129-130). Low himself argues that we need to move towards an 'ecological welfare state' (p. 178).

While Low has a background in environmental planning, *Social Transformation for Climate Change* also exhibits a surprising reverence for thinking from the humanities. The book is partially influenced by the work of British historian Tony Judt (1948-2010). There is also a notable mention of Margaret Atwood's contribution to articulating the value of 'utopia' on the page.

The extent to which the conclusions in this work can be applied to the Global South is not addressed aside from the case study of democracy in India. The text lacks a consideration of localized and geographic responses, including communities who will experience the inequalities of climate change in different ways. Consideration of the urban rural divide, the First Nations perspective, and women (including research by women) is also missing.

Social Transformation for Climate Change will be of use to researchers interested in the social dimensions of climate change and our near future, including policymakers. For example, the importance of rethinking social protection to meet the consequences of the unfolding climate challenge is specifically explored in the November 2023 report from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade entitled *Rethinking Social Protection and Climate Change* (Costella & McCord, 2023). The work is also of specific relevance to those working within environmental politics and political ecology; still, Low himself notes that when "intellectuals [talk] mostly to other intellectuals rather than the population at large" (p. 87), nothing changes.

References

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Astrid Edwards is a co-disciplinary PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, and the Melbourne Climate Futures Academy. https://astridedwards.com