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What transition to teach? Interview with Dominique Bourg.

Interviewers: Cécile Renouard¹, Rémi Beau

Interviewee: Dominique Bourg

Online interview realized on January 3, 2020

Dominique Bourg is a philosopher and honorary professor at the University of Lausanne (UNIL). He is the editor of the online journal *lapenséeécologique.com* and the author of several books about ecology, democracy and the impact of the market. In this interview he first talks about the initiatives, in teaching but also in university management, he is involved in, mainly in Lausanne. With regards to teaching, he shares his thoughts on how to introduce courses and he argues for a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach of teaching ecological issues, combining the perspective of social sciences with sound scientific knowledge and eco-psychological support. The interview then adopts a broader angle by mentioning obstacles to the « transition », the need to change institutions at different scales, with taking into account long term issues in public decision-making and defining a common baseline for democracy. Finally Dominique Bourg explains which levers he considers most important on the local, national and international scale.

Campus de la Transition: The Campus de la Transition presents itself as a place of experimentation, research and teaching to reflect on the transition processes to be put in place in order to put the economy back at the service of people and nature. The Ministry of Higher Education has entrusted us with the mission of conducting a project on "higher education at the time of ecological and social transition" to respond to the demands of students who are increasingly questioning the relevance of their teaching with regard to environmental issues. 70 motivated and convinced researchers and academics are working alongside us to try to decompartmentalize the curricula and revalue the transdisciplinary approach. In your university, such initiatives have been set up in particular thanks to your commitment. Can you tell us more about them?

Dominique Bourg: We have seen the emergence of a student movement that challenges the curriculum in general and the content of courses in particular. This is an important support for us who are trying to change the teaching. During my experiences at the University of Lausanne (UNIL), two things were created: a course and a master's degree. We wanted to provide scientific culture, in the sense of the natural sciences, to students in social sciences. It is somewhat the opposite of a humanities college that would exist within an engineering school. It is therefore within this framework that the course entitled "Scientific and Social Issues of Sustainability" was born. It is optional and is aimed at second or third year students. It has been very successful for the past ten years as it is one of the most popular courses at UNIL, with around 100 students attending. The first third of this course consists of a solid and precise assessment of the state of the planet with two main entries, an "Earth System" entry and a "Resources" entry. Our wish is that "no one should leave UNIL without knowing the state of the planet", to quote Plato, because it is essential that these elements be part of the common culture. Students

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must be able to have a global overview and all the keys in hand to understand these ecological and social issues. This works well, since a large proportion of the students who enroll in the Master's program have taken this course beforehand.

Campus de la Transition: You were also involved in a project concerning an engineering school, the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne. How was this one different from the previous ones?

Dominique Bourg: This one had the specificity of combining several subjects thanks to the mobilization of various teachers: a climate scientist, a conservation biologist and a social sciences teacher. We added our three disciplines, and it was a very good experience. However, the generalization of such projects is difficult because you need the resources to carry them out, which is not always possible in universities. It is easier to implement these programs in engineering schools where teaching is more cross-disciplinary. In a traditional humanities faculty, you have to be able to entrust this to a person who is willing to broaden his or her disciplinary field.

Campus de la Transition: You mentioned that the course was optional. In a logic of enlargement, would you advise making a course on climate and environmental issues compulsory?

Dominique Bourg: I would recommend that we start with the optional choice and wait three years before making it compulsory. We need to give people time to familiarize themselves with the idea, so that it is well framed without taking the risk of upsetting the most skeptical. That said, the idea of setting up a think tank at national level on these issues in order to identify the main contents and draw up a precise inventory based on solid references seems to me to be a good one. Secondly, psychological support is also very important. At the end of the course, it is necessary to show and give perspectives so as not to depress students. Furthermore, I strongly encourage students to do internships in eco-psychology. Of course, it won't suit everyone, but it's a memorable experience!

Campus de la Transition: In the common base that we have built, we have devoted a whole section called Dunamis to questions of eco-psychology and to a reflection on the links between relationships with oneself, with others and with nature. Did you feel alone or surrounded in the implementation of these initiatives? Have you seen a change in scientists' perception of the need to work with philosophers or other social scientists? Do you see the same changes in other universities?

Dominique Bourg: There has indeed been a remarkable revival of interest in these issues. We started with a sustainability commission, which became a sustainability center which now extends to the whole university with more and more people involved at each stage. A "Volteface" research program has also been set up to encourage researchers from different areas of the university to engage in environmental programs. We can also see this more concretely in the city of Lausanne itself, which was very lively during the climate strikes with more than 8,000 young demonstrators. This was unheard of, especially in Switzerland. So yes, we can say that there has been a significant change. I also felt it elsewhere, like at the University of Technology in Troyes where I taught and where a pole was organized to get things moving. The students are also very supportive of these issues as they are often more open than the professors...

Campus de la Transition: What are the main bottlenecks to remove in higher education?

Dominique Bourg: Certainly the ambivalence of the word "transition". Nobody puts exactly the same thing in it. For some, it refers to technological solutions; for others, it's a change in lifestyle. Depending on the case, it is a question of teaching very different things. Where there is now a consensus is on the scientific observation linked to the work of the IPCC and the IPBES. The problem is that from now on, all the scenarios presented in these reports predict an obligatory transition to violent energy decline, and this is why there is enormous political resistance, despite positive signals from the population.

Campus de la Transition: In our reflection on training for the ecological and social transition, we reflected on how to teach the basic knowledge that would enable students to become aware of the extent and seriousness of the change underway, while at the same time forming critical minds capable of making judgements on scientific statements. How do you combine and balance the two objectives? Have you encountered any difficulties in combining the two?

Dominique Bourg: To begin with, when we teach about environmental issues, we must always give a historical perspective. The relationship between the perception of our problems and knowledge is quite curious. In the 1970s, we could already explain the major mechanisms in terms of climate change. So you could say that what we know today, we have known since yesterday, and the way we relate to it is the same. However, from the second half of the 2010 decade, everything started to accelerate. It is gradually becoming clear that disruptions to the carbon cycle are not limited to the residence time of a CO₂ molecule in the atmosphere, that they will extend over much larger time scales, while the windows of opportunity are gradually closing. Despite this, there is enormous resistance; just look at the counter-papers being written. Then there are more philosophical and epistemological questions. A model is a model, and it's important to have epistemology in education to tell us where we are. Still, you have to combine a historical perspective, to show the dynamics of appreciation and the evolution of perception, with sound scientific knowledge.

Campus de la Transition: In terms of teaching, what innovative forms of teaching would enable the acquisition of this basic knowledge and the development of this critical mind?

Dominique Bourg: In the *Foundations and Practices of Sustainability* master's program, we have opted for a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach. For the acquisition of a scientific culture, we teach them for example to read papers from the scientific literature, combining historical, ethical and practical aspects.

Campus de la Transition: Among the obstacles to such a transformation of higher education, some as you said are political. This is a delicate area when it comes to education. For many, teachers and trainers are required to respect a form of political neutrality in their courses. So how do we deal with these powerful obstacles to transition? Should this position of neutrality be broken?

Dominique Bourg: On the political question, we can see that first of all there is a need to change the institutions at the national level, because we are in the midst of a crisis of representative democracy and the rift between the elites and the people is growing. We are clearly in a time of change and turmoil with a reaffirmation of the relevance of the state and the need for its regulatory function. At the same time, democracy is developing at different scales and is alive and well, especially at the local level. The major challenge is to take into account the question of the long term in public decision-making. This integration of the long term must lead us to redefine the common horizon of our democratic life. Previously, the left and the right agreed on the principle of creating more material wealth and debated above all on the different ways of creating and redistributing it. Today, the consensus should be to reduce this material wealth through degrowth. However, for the moment there is no unanimity on the general direction to take. Let's imagine that we have to go through a period of energy diet (climate and depletion of hydrocarbon resources). If this phenomenon were to become a reality, it is estimated that 15 to 30% of the population would have to be assigned to agricultural work in order to feed the entire French population. Different schemes are then presented to us depending on the political forces in power; on the one hand, we can imagine that everyone would have to devote a quota of work to agriculture in their lifetime to meet seasonal demands in a world with scarcer transport, a measure that is more likely to be supported by the left. On the right, there is a tendency to promote specialization and to assert that only one category of people, the poorest, should be involved. To achieve resilience in relation to the resources the planet generates in a year, some want to divide the cake equally so that they can give it to everyone, others are prepared to give more to some and less to others so that the average balances the equation.

Campus de la Transition: To sum up, as today we have not defined a common objective, we think that the left-right divide is being erased, which is not necessarily the case, because if we re-establish the conditions that allow a debate around a precise objective there will be a debate on the means. We must therefore make this common objective a reality.

Dominique Bourg: Absolutely, the left-right divide is consubstantial with a democracy that represents a pluralism of values. We can express ourselves as long as we have a minimal consensual basis. Education does not have to be left or right, but should bring out these systemic aspects in a degrowth framework. The political obstacle to be removed is therefore the one that continues to make growth and the production of material wealth the common horizon of democracy.

Campus de la Transition: To conclude this interview, we would like to ask you to describe three types of action that you consider to be crucial at the local, national and international levels.

Dominique Bourg: As far as the local approach is concerned, we have to prepare for a different civilization and I think it is important to teach people to reappropriate a certain number of fundamentals. Relocating food production is essential to rebuild a strong form of local resilience. On a national scale, the answer is more difficult. The legitimacy of a state today depends on its ability to organize resilience and solidarity in the face of ongoing changes. This resilience and solidarity may be easier to achieve at the regional

level. At the supra-national level, Europe must once again become a power capable of developing an internal policy that is equal to the challenges. But to do this, it must first of all get rid of neoliberalism and of course stand up to external powers. At the international level, we must maintain efforts to build international regulation because the changes we are experiencing are global. Withdrawal within our borders and a policy of every man for himself would be a disaster. We must therefore ensure that we combine a logic of state power with a process of multilateral construction that enables us to maintain dialogue between the powers. The issues that determine the planet's habitability are global issues. Allowing Jair Bolsonaro to "savannahise" the Amazon forest would be catastrophic for the planet and this is one of the reasons why dialogue must be established now.