Cover letter to Journal ‘Sustainability’

Special Issue: Environmental Policy and Governance: Evolutionary Perspectives

Subject: Point by point response to editor’s and reviewers’ comments

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Manuscript title: Transition policy after corona: The importance of a Natural Social Contract and co-evolutionary governance

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| ***No.*** | ***Comment*** | ***Response by authors*** |
| 1 | **Editor:** *We believe the proposed new perspective can be of great value, in post- corona times, but I would say it speaks more generally to the present conditions, where multiple transitions are required but where at the same time many transition approaches are contested because of their social-economic implications (and blind spots)* | Processes of transition are associated with anxiety, on top of increased anxieties in Covid times and anxieties about being self-responsible for your job and well-being. In section 3 we discuss the topic of anxiety which is underresearched in the literature on sustainability transitions and governance for sustainability. During the time of the yellow vest protests in France “La France en colère!!!” (France in anger) was a popular facebook site. We have included a reference to the anxiety and (absent) feelings of control and competence. in section 4. |
| 2 | **Editor:** *After receiving the three reviews, we would still recommend major revision. We would, however, like to frame this positively: we believe that if the nature of the paper and the chain of argumentation are further clarified, it can be a major contribution not just to several academic discussions (I would mention here the just transition discussions, resilience, innovation, co-evolution, governance, etc) but also to societal debates, to, hopefully, public discourse, leading into policy discourse.* | Many thanks for these constructive comments, and we agree with the suggestions for improvements made by the editor and reviewers. With our major revision we believe we have addressed these comments, which resulted in a substantially improved paper. |
| 3 | **Editor:** *First of all, we would like to underline that it is ok to be normative. In the given circumstances, and for the given topic, this seems very appropriate. One of the reviewers speaks of a manifesto, and I would agree, but see it as a positive. I would however try to be more clear and succinct: in this situation, marked by x and y in society, by a and b in science or academia, we believe something needs to be done, in practice, and we present, with aplomb, a theoretical perspective which makes the issues and possible solutions more visible; in this, our contract concept is central, and the key co-evolutions which cause damage and others which could help, are identified, as well as ways to manage them.* | We highly appreciate these constructive comments. Indeed, it is partly a manifesto, but it also offers an action perspective in addition to an analytical perspective. This paper is openly normative in the call for the creation of a Natural Social Contract and for transformation-oriented forms of governance, but the governance approaches advocated have been tried and tested, yielding insights for future use. Obviously, positive and normative approaches to support actionable agendas, like ours, do not escape the yardstick of scientific evidence. In our revised contribution we believe more attention is given to limits of steering and unanticipated results through references to the literature about this. |
| 4 | **Editor:** *In doing this, I would make the line of argumentation as clear as possible, weed out sidelines and corollary arguments, reduce examples to examples (this does not work very well as a piece based on case studies; there's not many manifestos in the form of case studies). This would take care of the remarks about case studies and examples, and avoid the impression that there's several manifestos, or a manifesto immediately derived from one empirical situation.* | Our line of argumentation has been revised, and examples have been reduced to examples. The line of argumentation has been greatly improved (something we are happy about ourselves). The previous version was written under great time pressure. |
| 5 | **Editor:** *So, no need to start from gaps, from one theory, from one question or a case; a manifesto is perfectly fine. What could be helpful is, in your argumentation, briefly incorporate the genealogy of your key concepts, while you work with them, thus showing more clearly how you combine and transform them. This also takes away the need for an overly elaborate introductory lit review.* | Section 2 on “Transformation pleas and approaches for achieving this” has been substantially revised and we discuss three models for working towards transitions: collaborative governance, evolutionary steering and adaptive governance. All three deal with complexity, normativity and uncertainty in an action-oriented way and have mechanisms of self-correction and adaptation which is necessary for transformations which cannot be planned and implemented from the top, but which must find solutions to demands for participation, fairness in outcomes, unintended effects in order to remain legitimate and secure continued support from societal stakeholders. For more information see section 2 on page 3-10. |
| The line-up of below figures in our manuscript (with two new figures compared to the original manuscript) has deliberately been chosen in response to a number of comments from reviewers. The line-up moves from high abstraction level (figure 2), towards a tool for identifying options for co-evolutionary steering (figure 3), to an example of leverage points for a specific transition path (figure 4).    ***Figure 2: Possible systemic leverage points for a societal transformation towards a Natural Social Contract, through transformative governance based on co-evolution across several interrelated dimensions (this figure is a synthesis of table 3.4 in Huntjens, 2021)***    ***Figure 3: The Intervention Flower as a tool for identifying options for co-evolutionary steering through connecting actor-coalitions and interdependent systemic leverage points. The transition path in question is always context-specific, path-dependent and goal-dependent.***    ***Figure 4 - Possible leverage points and key variables for a transition to nature-inclusive agriculture & agro-ecology in the Netherlands (at regional level) (Huntjens et al 2022)*** | | |
| 6 | **Reviewer 1:** *This paper seeks to develop the notion of a Natural Social Contract (NSC) to enable transformative governance based on co-evolution. In a nutshell, to quote, the NSC “involves the fine-tuning of top-down policy and visions with important bottom-up processes (…), and takes place in a hybrid sphere, in which there is room for collaboration between governments, businesses, knowledge institutions and civil society, among others, characterized by Penta-helix models and based on multiple value creation”. Because of this collaborative, polycentric approach, the papers draw on Evolutionary Governance Theory, and develops a perspective of “co-evolutionary steering of interrelated transitions”. The paper’s aspiration is clear and laudable; yet its elaboration is wanting. My recommendation therefore leans towards a strong ‘revise and resubmit’, based on these five points.* | Our paper has been substantially revised, and we have addressed the five suggested points for improvements by reviewer 1 (see below for more detail). |
| 7 | **Reviewer 1:** First, my main problem is that the paper reads as a compilation of manifestos, rather than one argumentative thread. From begin to end, the paper presents a mix of literature review and substantive argumentation, plus some examples. My recommendation is to set out a clearer agenda, in which the first part delves into the literature to explain the key issue, key concepts and key dilemmas, and a second part presents solutions and directions meeting the key questions and dilemmas. In brief, the paper warrants more focus, edge and structure. | Thanks to a substantial revision our paper now provides a clear argumentation and logical structure, with the first part delving into literature to explain the key issues and concepts, and then moving to solutions. |
| 8 | **Reviewer 1:** *A second point is the limited elaboration of the social contract, including the natural aspect. A social contract, as explained, consists of a consensual, value-based deal underpinning an institutional governance arrangement. Fig2. moreover, details many aspects. What remains unclear and implicit, however, is the form and operationalisation of such contract. How is the social contract articulated; how is consent manifested? How does one conceive and apply natural ‘design principles’ (669)? This also involves a question of scale: how do agreements at project level chime with societal notions of Social Contracts? How does a project mission contribute to a broader social contract? Much of the joining forces in the hybrid sphere between institutional domains may be primarily instrumental (pooling resources, aligning interests, preventing holdups), below the scope of an (aspired) social contract. What kind of hybrid practices gave shape to the latter? And how then is the aspect of nature taken on board?* | We have now provided a substantive elaboration on the Natural Social Contract (see section 3), and how contract formation takes place in polycentric ways at different levels (always context-specific and path-dependent). More specifically, we have provided more detail on transformative social-ecological innovation (see also the new figure 1 on TSEI), on the mutual gains approach and institutional design principles (see new table 1). |
| 9 | **Reviewer 1:** *A third point concerns the link between theory and practice. The paper’s general, theoretical story is very broad and ambitious, using an extensive, abstract and complex vocabulary. Much of this, moreover, is action-oriented, pointing out major carriers and direction of change. Two cases serve as quick illustrations, loosely underwriting some key statements. This presents, in my view, too much of a gap. The paper could do more to translate the general aspects of transformative governance into more specific project aspects, as an evaluative framework for debating the cases.* | The line-up of the figures (no. 2, 3 and 4 above) in our manuscript (with two new figures compared to the original manuscript) has deliberately been chosen in response to a number of comments from reviewers. The line-up moves from high abstraction level (figure 2), towards a tool for identifying options for co-evolutionary steering (figure 3), to an example of leverage points for a specific transition path (figure 4). |
| 10 | **Reviewer 1:** *Fourth, the section on co-evolution warrants serious re-thinking. Rather than elaborating the notion and development of NSC, this section largely discusses co-evolutionary approaches, with emphasis on discursive aspects (e.g., metaphors, open concepts and master signifiers). While the section aims to uncover the generative mechanisms behind a ‘transition to a Natural Social Contract’, it lacks focus and thread. In the section, NSC is presented as a ‘master signifier’ (345) and the orientation of governance actors (536) towards the ‘well-being economy’ (Table 1); NSC is also associated with alternative business models (443) and integral and robust forms of transition (554-581); NSC is said to need horizonal governance as well as Transformative Social-Ecological Innovation (TSEI). This raises two basic problems. One, the definition and position of NSC in this conceptual medley remains vague. Two, the nature and form of evolutionary variation, selection and dynamics remain unclear. Co-evolution is now associated with all kinds of change-in-tandem, social-sustainable, different institutional actors, discursive items, etc. One wonders whether the notion of transformative change really warrant this evolutionary perspective.* | We moved up the discussion on governance and steering and elaborated on the generative mechanisms behind a transition to a Natural Social Contract, e.g. visualized by the TSEI framework below, with more attention on three different models for working towards transitions: collaborative governance, evolutionary steering and adaptive governance. All three deal with complexity, normativity and uncertainty in an action-oriented way and have mechanisms of self-correction and adaptation which is necessary for transformations which cannot be planned and implemented from the top, but which must find solutions to demands for participation, fairness in outcomes, unintended effects in order to remain legitimate and secure continued support from societal stakeholders. For details see section 2 on page 3-10. |
| 11 | **Reviewer 1:** Following on the latter, my final point concerns the relation between transformative change and NSC. One the one hand, the paper trumpets collaboration, joint principles and responsibilities, mutual trust, etc. On the other, the paper also refers to vested (eg ‘carbon’) interests (38, 619), strong voters’ resistance (574), policy holdups (507) and opposition from disadvantaged groups (118). I would suggest the paper can delve deeper into the question of how the NSC can help to meet and overcome such resistances, and to bring forces of change and resistance more in line in the story. | The question of how the NSC can help to meet and overcome such resistances has been addressed by diving into governance approaches that are capable of dealing with complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, and with particular attention for multiple value creation and the mutual gains approach (e.g. in section 2). At the same time, we are careful not to present those approaches as simple solutions to those problems. |
| 12 | **Reviewer 1:** *Source citations are sometimes unclear, as they refer to “cf.” items and lack page numbers* | Has been revised |
| 13 | **Reviewer 2:** *I thank the opportunity to evaluate this article, which I really enjoyed reading. The article brings a current theoretical discussion, putting into dialogue the debates of sustainability and public governance, defending the idea of a co-evolutionary governance that can put into practice a "Natural Contract", as proposed by the authors. However, the paper in many parts takes an extreme normative tone that weakens its scientific contribution. It is important that the authors give more emphasis on the scientific evidences of what they defend and anchor their argumentation in such evidences, whether theoretical or empirical. In particular it is recommended:* | Below we will respond to the suggestions by reviewer 2 |
| 14 | **Reviewer 2:** *1) Make the problematization clearer, exploring what motivates the proposed theoretical study and in which previous studies it is anchored. In particular, it is suggested to start from a systematic review on the studies that bring together co-evolutionary governance and the issue of sustainability, discussing what is the scientific advance of the proposition put forward here and how it enriches the current debate on these issues.* | Section 2 on “Transformation pleas and approaches for achieving this” has been substantially revised and we discuss three models for working towards transitions: collaborative governance, evolutionary steering and adaptive governance. All three deal with complexity, normativity and uncertainty in an action-oriented way and have mechanisms of self-correction and adaptation which is necessary for transformations which cannot be planned and implemented from the top, but which must find solutions to demands for participation, fairness in outcomes, unintended effects in order to remain legitimate and secure continued support from societal stakeholders. For details see section 2 on page 3-10. |
| 15 | **Reviewer 2:** *2) Remove from the problematization the "normative-prescriptive" tone starting from questions and nuisances that justify the study and from gaps in the literature. I am referring to universal and generalist statements with a "should be" tone that do not fit well with a scientific article, like the one in lines 51 to 54, among many others in the article.* | We agree that the "normative-prescriptive" tone and use of "should be" was excessive. This has been changed where appropriate. At the same time, it is unavoidable in a paper which is partly a manifesto., in the form of a call for the creation of a Natural Social Contract and for transformation-oriented forms of governance. We want to note that the governance approaches advocated have been tried and tested, yielding insights for future use. Obviously, positive and normative approaches to support actionable agendas, like ours, do not escape the yardstick of scientific evidence. The need for critical analysis and the presence of limitations to steering are acknowledged.  Cf. editor’s comment 3 about being normative: *First of all, we would like to underline that it is ok to be normative. In the given circumstances, and for the given topic, this seems very appropriate. One of the reviewers speaks of a manifesto, and I would agree, but see it as a positive.* |
| 16 | **Reviewer 2:** *3) Make clearer and more explicit how the article meets the proposed problematic and responds to the gaps found in the debate, including raising the limits of such proposition.* | The systemic leverage points for transformation offered can be used for achieving change through questions about interdependencies which can be utilised by actor coalitions interested in transformative change through sustainability transitions which are not unduly sectoral but also pay attention to issues of just transition, resilience and the overarching goal of instituting a Natural Social Contract. Achieving this requires and involves a rebalancing of society and new imaginaries (as master signifiers), such as the well-being economy and a Natural Social Contract, as important new orientations. |
| 17 | **Reviewer 2:** *4) Further problematize the discussions/debates that are being mobilized in the article. The theoretical debates and the literature on "social contract", "public governance" and "sustainability" are vast and controversial. It is important that the authors also go into the challenges, the difficulties, the dilemmas in these debates. To mention just one aspect, the text makes little or no reference to the differences and nuances between the realities and contexts of the countries of the North and the South, nor to the relationship between sustainability and social inequalities or between sustainability and democracy. Only in these aspects it is possible to bring several elements that problematize the discussion and show that there is not a single path or model for building public governance that favors sustainability.* | We fully agree that there is not a single path or model for building public governance that favors sustainability. In this regard, we have stressed, on several occasions, that social contract formation takes place in polycentric ways at different levels (always context-specific and path-dependent). Challenges related to sustainability, social inequalities, or public governance, regardless of whether it takes place in the North or South, call for transformation-oriented forms of governance which are capable of dealing with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. |
| 18 | **Reviewer 2:** *5) In terms of the debate on public governance it would be important to insert the discussion of co-evolutionary governance not only ideally, but also exploring the differences between this theoretical proposition and other forms of governance already discussed in the literature as collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2015), for example. Such an approach could help to better see the authors' contributions and the difference of this contribution to what has already been discussed about public governance, a debate that is nowadays quite robust.* | Section 2 on “Transformation pleas and approaches for achieving this” has been substantially revised and we discuss three models for working towards transitions: collaborative governance (including Ansell and Gash, 2015), evolutionary steering and adaptive governance. All three deal with complexity, normativity and uncertainty in an action-oriented way and have mechanisms of self-correction and adaptation which is necessary for transformations which cannot be planned and implemented from the top, but which must find solutions to demands for participation, fairness in outcomes, unintended effects in order to remain legitimate and secure continued support from societal stakeholders. For more information see section 2 on page 3-10. |
| 19 | **Reviewer 2:** *6) Empirical cases are very relevant, but are placed as "mere examples" without delving into the challenges and difficulties lived in practice. In this sense, it is not clear the relationship between the propositions presented by the authors in section 4 and the empirical or even theoretical evidences presented in the article. I suggest to improve the interface between the propositions presented and what comes before in the text.* | Our line of argumentation has been revised, and examples have been reduced to examples. Thanks to many changes our paper now provides a clear argumentation and logical structure, with the first part delving into literature to explain the key issues and concepts, and then moving to solutions. In addition, the line-up of the figures (no. 2, 3 and 4 above) in our manuscript (with two new figures compared to the original manuscript) has deliberately been chosen in response to a number of comments from reviewers. The line-up moves from high abstraction level (figure 2), towards a tool for identifying options for co-evolutionary steering (figure 3), to an example of leverage points for a specific transition path (figure 4). |
| 20 | **Reviewer 3:** *The paper presents quite an interesting discussion.*  *The case at local and regional levels are well developed, but the discussion at international level seems poor, maybe the authors could exclude this mentioned focus o the Introduction*  *I'll suggest a format review in the figures and their quotations, as well as the box and the table.* | Format of figures and tables has been improved where appropriate. |