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Henry Shue

# HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE NEXT GREAT ENERGY TRANSITION

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*Summary*

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## About the author

**Prof. Henry Shue** is a Senior Research Fellow and a Professor of Politics and International Relations at Oxford University. He is best-known for his book on international distributive justice, *Basic Rights*, and for pioneering the sub-field of International Normative Theory. He was a co-founder, in 1976, of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, a founding member of the Executive Committee of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (U.S.), and the inaugural Wyn and William Y. Hutchinson Professor of Ethics & Public Life at Cornell University. His research has focused on the role of human rights, especially economic rights, in international affairs and, more generally, on institutions to protect the vulnerable.

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## Abstract

### HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE NEXT GREAT ENERGY TRANSITION

When the atmospheric physicists first understood that a full-scale exchange of nuclear weapons between the United States and the Soviet Union would affect our planet's atmosphere like the simultaneous eruptions of hundreds of volcanoes by injecting into the atmosphere a thick layer of black soot and other debris from the simultaneously burning cities across the Northern Hemisphere, debris that would linger long enough to prevent the conduct of agriculture for at least an entire year, leading to mass starvation in many countries untouched by the initial explosions - a phenomenon of climate change that was named 'nuclear winter' - Jonathan Schell perceptively wrote, in *The Fate of the Earth*: "Formerly, the future was simply given to us; now it must be achieved. We must become the agriculturalists of time." We must plant, nurture, and grow the future of humanity.

Exactly the same insight applies to the climate change that we are producing now, not with nuclear explosions, but with the explosion of consumption following on the Industrial Revolution and resting on the burning of fossil fuels. We have been distorting the dynamics of our atmosphere more gradually - indeed almost imperceptibly, for many decades - but just as surely as if we were torching each other's metropolises. We need to change the way we live and to become 'agriculturalists of time' - faithful trustees of the future.

For, the humans who will live in the future are at our mercy - they are vulnerable to us because they will have to live at least at the start in the kind of society that they inherit from us, including crucially the energy regime we bequeath to them. Because we control their initial starting places, if not their complete fates, they need the protection that can come from our acknowledging that when they are born they will be endowed with certain rights, human rights. The importance of our acknowledging now that when future generations come into being, they will be entitled to human rights is the result of a powerful combination of the nature of the central problem and the nature of the best solution to it.

The central problem is becoming better understood. Climate change can be limited only by exiting from the fossil fuel regime, and Germany, to its eternal glory, has been a vigorous leader in acting on this realization. We know, for example, that the single most crucial factor in climate change is the cumulative total of carbon emissions since the Industrial Revolution began to change the composition of the atmosphere. The carbon dioxide that we have already emitted will produce, for example, rising sea-levels well into the next millenium, and the date on which we cease to inject carbon into the atmosphere - I like to call this the "date of technological transition" - will determine the number of additional centuries, and perhaps millenia, over which the seas will inexorably continue to rise. If we are to become 'agriculturalists of time' and help to grow a healthy future, we must first realize the extreme degree to which we control the fate of future humans and other living things now that we have, in effect, seized control of the climate - now that we have transported the world into the 'Anthropocene', the era in which the most powerful force on the planet is the collective impact of human lives.

What may be less clear is why an acknowledgement of the rights of future humans may be at least part of the best solution. The idea of human rights was a response to the realization that it is perfectly normal for human beings to encounter threats that it is impossible for even the strongest individuals to defend themselves against. Most obviously, when we are very young, and when we are very old, when we are injured or ill, we are simply incapable of fending on our own. Young girls cannot fight off rapists by themselves, old men cannot fight off muggers on their own. So we have developed social institutions to provide protection against these vulnerabilities. This is what human rights do: protect against vulnerability. The institution of the family has evolved to provide some protections; others are provided by rescue services, police, and welfare agencies. Different societies at different times have dif-

ferent institutional arrangements to protect against vulnerability. Gradually, as modern mass societies and globalization have occurred, we have realized that the most dangerous threats include not only individual rapists and muggers, but impersonal social forces powerful enough to overwhelm individuals. Governments decide, rightly or wrongly, to slash work forces, and neither being physically strong nor intellectually trained and talented guarantees an individual a job and an income. When macro-economic policies eliminate jobs, many individuals are made helpless to provide for themselves and their families by those policies. So we have come to realize that if people are not to be vulnerable to forces they cannot resist, we must provide institutional protections not only for physical security against rapists and muggers but for economic security against lack of food, lack of shelter, and lack of basic medicines. And we create institutions that embody social guarantees of these necessities for those who have no way to acquire them for themselves - again, the institutions vary over place and time, taking culturally diverse forms.

No one is any more vulnerable to others - not infants, not the aged - than the people of the future are to us for the fundamental institutions that they will inherit and that will structure their lives. And the research on climate change has shown us that no institution is more central and powerful than the dominant energy regime that structures the world economy and determines which sources of energy are accessible and affordable to which people. The not entirely completed transition from wood to coal, which we think of as part of the Industrial Revolution, and the even less fully completed transition from coal to oil and gas, have each taken on the order of a century to occur. Even the most powerful government cannot simply say: stop burning wood and start burning coal, or stop burning coal and start burning gas. How does it get to you? Who creates the infrastructure? Who builds the facilities that efficiently burn one fuel rather than another? Previous changes in energy regime have each been monumental and slow. But the climate science now tells us that

there is a cumulative carbon budget for any given rise in global temperature and that if we do not stay within the carbon budget, the temperature rise will not stay below the corresponding level of rise. This time we must move between energy regimes more deliberately and quickly. Approximately 80% of the proven reserves of coal, oil, and gas must stay in the ground - if we burn them and move the carbon from the ground to the atmosphere, the temperatures, sea-levels, weather volatility, and other related phenomena will soar. But this means that we must begin a rapid exit from the current fossil fuel regime now.

If we do not, the people of the future will inherit rapidly advancing climate change and an energy regime that allows them only the impossible choice between reducing their economic activity in order to reduce their carbon emissions or making their own climate progressively worse. It is our choice whether that is their only choice. And we can protect them against facing such an impossible choice by beginning now to build the new global energy regime that leaves behind the primitive energy regime that burns fossil fuel and dangerously pollutes the atmosphere - precisely as Germany is already committed to doing, in spite of great obstacles.

One can construct many rationales in favour of escaping carbon-based energy and advancing beyond it into non-carbon energy, but one of the clearest and most compelling is the human rights rationale. Humans of the future are at our mercy with regard to whether we leave them trapped inside a fossil-fuel regime that provides them electricity and transportation only at the price of undermining the climate, or we leave a more advanced energy regime that will drive the economy without undermining its environmental pre-conditions. We need not leave them threatened - we can leave them protected, with their basic welfare secure. We can plant and nurture a safer energy regime. We can achieve a future fit to live in.