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## The Just Transition and its work of inequality

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### ABSTRACT

Changing our relation to the environment in a democratic way implies questioning models and methods of socioecological relations—including work relations. This article critically discusses the notion of a “just transition” toward democratic sustainability as developed at the intersection between climate justice and labor politics. We invite an expansion of ideas of socioenvironmental and labor justice based on Jacques Rancière’s “method of (in)equality,” which problematizes justice theories and the politics of identitarian-group recognition. Our argument is that since both ecological and social crises are produced via inequalities a just transition can be a transition out of the logic of unequal relations—rather than just out of fossil fuels. We posit that socioecological justice in political action can be based on the assumption of equality, the “scandalous” democratic principle according to which political agency belongs to subjects without them having to prove any particular subjectivity worthy of recognition. We thus invite connecting sustainability discourses with a critique of the processes through which subjects become subaltern in the first place, being ascribed unequal positions mostly via violent means such as dispossession and subordination.

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### Introduction

The discursive, policy-oriented framework known as Just Transition (JT) is probably one of the most innovative and promising proposals to address climate change, for it aims to overcome the historical opposition between environmental and labor politics, with a view to making the post-carbon transition a socially just process (Stavis and Felli 2015; Morena et al. 2020; Routledge et al. 2018; Felli 2014). This article critically discusses the notion of a “just transition” as developed at the intersection between climate and labor politics with the aim of expanding conventional understandings of socio-environmental justice. We start from the observation that labor and environmental justice organizations have different stakes in the definition of justice: while marching together and asking for carbon-dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emission reductions, still too often the two modes of advocacy find themselves on different sides of environmental conflicts (Barca 2019a; Barca and Leonardi 2018). The climate-justice movement has emphasized the values of self-determination through grassroots control over the use of resources, food sovereignty, energy democracy, reduction of overconsumption, recognition of climate debt, and respect for indigenous and peasant

rights (Bond 2012). Its demands are consistent with an eco-sufficiency (Salleh 2009) and degrowth perspective (Velicu 2019). Labor organizations, instead, have maintained a commitment to the green growth agenda as an unquestioned path toward a post-carbon society (Goodman and Salleh 2013). We posit that such logic of labor politics is rooted in the prevailing (Hegelian) vision of justice that fails to problematize pre-defined and oppressive identities within the institutional order.

With its roots going back to the 1980s as labor’s version of environmental justice in North America, in the past decade JT has gained momentum in climate conversations as an innovative labor-friendly plan for transforming the productive system (energy, manufacturing, transport, and related infrastructures) toward a zero-emissions target (Morena et al. 2020). As public awareness of the climate crisis has intensified, while climate-related catastrophes have also increased, civil society actors, and especially environmental and climate-justice organizations, have adopted and readapted the JT idea in their own terms. For instance, in North America, Black, Latina, and Indigenous communities have actively contributed to reshape the JT into a broader and more comprehensive frame that includes different understandings of its justice component.<sup>1</sup>

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In short, the concept of JT is emerging through an ongoing process of articulation between climate justice and labor politics. Climate-justice movements have been forming around the claim that working-class people (broadly defined as all low-income communities, with women, LGBTQIA+, and racialized people on the frontline) are among the most affected by, although the least responsible for, the ecological crisis (Bond 2012; Gaard 2015). Organized labor claims that the post-carbon transition is an epochal opportunity for making working-class lives better (Rosenberg 2017a; ITUC 2015). This convergence has been a very important achievement of the JT concept, which has allowed trade unions to take part in climate mobilizations marching alongside environmental organizations under slogans such as “there are no jobs on a dead planet” (Barca 2015). Moreover, the adoption of a JT framework on the part of climate-justice movements has opened important opportunities for labor environmentalism, allowing it to broaden its horizon from simply defending jobs in the green economy to demanding broader societal transformations, from the local to the global scale (Cock 2014; Stevis et al. 2018). This article aims to contribute toward radicalization of the “just transition” politics, expanding the conservatory visions of justice via a critical reading inspired by Jacques Rancière’s method of (in)equality. We challenge the reproduction of the logic of inequality in social justice politics, which has important implications for sustainability, for it contributes to maintain a post-political notion of sustainability as a consensual, techno-managerial type of politics. Broadening and deepening the meaning of justice in sustainability discourses seeks to “undo” notions of justice based on unquestioned social categories: here we focus on the category of “worker” as the one which is most relevant to the JT framework.

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we briefly review debates on the idea of justice in the environmental and climate-justice movements. While we maintain that demanding better distributional schemes of costs and benefits is a relevant component of “doing justice,” we follow critical debates in political ecology that have already pointed out the risks of this approach, which reiterates unequal relations of power and commodifies justice itself (Benford 2005; Velicu and Kaika 2017). In the third section, we focus on the notion of justice implicated in the JT discourse as developed by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). We argue that both organizations remain tributary to a vision of justice that boils down to compensation for the loss of (certain kinds of) jobs

resulting from the necessary post-carbon transition. We point to the fact that while ITUC and ILO recognize that workers around the world are actors with a crucial stake in the future of climate politics, they pay little attention to developing a reflective participatory approach to democratizing work, by allowing working-class people themselves to reimagine the future society they want and to design the transition (White 2020).

Subsequently, inspired by the recent political debate between contemporary prominent theoreticians (Axel Honneth and Jacques Rancière), in the last two sections we discuss in depth one of the basic principles of mainstream theories of justice, namely recognition, to support our argument that a Just Transition should facilitate the opening of spaces for events of subjectification, or the disidentification of working-class people with oppressive positions. In other words, we call for a JT framework that assumes the political equality of human beings in search for more just and sustainable relations with each other and with the nonhuman world. Overall, we point to the need for broadening visions of JT, problematizing both identitarian/group recognition and redistribution of (any)-system benefits (Honneth and Rancière 2016).

### Undoing socioenvironmental justice

In the last decade, the environmental justice framework has been adopted by a variety of movements, including indigenous, peasant, urban, and climate justice (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010; Anguelovski and Alier 2014; Agyeman et al. 2016). As highlighted by a now vast literature, the theories and visions of justice underlying these movements are often normative calls which bring together, often uncritically, distributive and procedural theories of social justice (Ambriz and Correia 2017). For instance, one of the main enduring concerns of environmental justice scholars and practitioners has been to evidence the harms of pollution in order to seek compensations plans (Mohai et al. 2009). As a result, environmental justice has been placed on the public agenda as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people—regardless of race, gender, nationality, or income—in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental policies (Bullard 2008; Agyeman et al. 2003). The theory of environmental justice has further been pluralized and reinforced by arguing for respect to the dignity of communities and their capabilities, recognition of the legitimacy of other (cultural) identities and values as well as the importance of participation and representation of all affected

parties in decision making regarding socioenvironmental policies (Schlosberg 2013).

However, critical scholarship pointed to the limits of this ethical and rights-based politics of justice in which vulnerable people seem to be invited to buy an equal share of whatever justice is distributed, usually as compensation (Harvey 1996; Heynen et al. 2006). The environmental justice principles of redistribution, recognition, or participation poorly address the already racialized, patriarchal and militarized political-economic patterns of controlled access to resources (Pichler et al. 2016; Pulido and De Lara 2018). Scholars have argued that distributive-affirmative justice policies are often ineffective in addressing long-term societal losses such as social disarticulation (Swainson and McGregor 2008). Legal-procedural environmental victories have often been diluted and even attacked by the exact official agencies created to protect them, making such conflicts an “unfinished” business of demanding reparations and illustrating the ailed promises of environmental justice (Pezzullo 2011). While the World Bank Operational Policies put an emphasis on the right to be informed and consulted on available options and guaranteed compensation at full replacement cost for losses (Eckersley 2004), scholars argue that such an approach “commodifies” justice in the language of cheap licenses for development projects to operate (Coni-Zimmer et al. 2016). Distributive policies that recognize the harm and offer compensations are generally adding to a growing global class of “3-nothings: no land, no job, no social security” (Li 2010).

More analysis is needed to examine every day social relations of injustices as they indicate preliminary problems: environmental injustice is not just the unfair distribution of toxins or benefits but the perpetual production of people who “can” stomach trash (Harvey 1996, Velicu 2020). While most environmental justice movements have engaged with multiple dimensions of injustice, they conceive justice mostly in procedural terms, assuming parties are “recognized” as humans entitled to rights. But officials often treat opponents as “mere animals” screaming about “private” suffering. People often feel pinned down to fixed identities by development policies having to make a (non)choice between being a miner or an economic migrant (Velicu and Kaika 2017). In this respect, justice principles may actually reinforce rather than disrupt consensual thinking about trickle-down economics. This is a dilemma that goes beyond the “recognition vs. redistribution” dichotomy most commonly discussed, as illustrated also in the limits of participatory mechanisms: once at the table of negotiation (often celebrated as an environmental justice

victory), people are further exposed to violence, patronized, intimidated, manipulated, coopted, or simply disregarded as uninformed and unreasonable (Velicu 2020). The sense of injury called upon by justice scholarship is a usually moral rather than political one, lamenting the exclusion (of the “poor”) from the benefits of a liberal community which is supposedly benign if only more inclusive.

In what follows, we want to extend this argument from the environmental justice arena to that of the JT. We problematize the idea that the main work of subjects is simply to affirm their own self-identity and demand benefits for it. We want to call attention to a prior problem, namely that the position of being a waged worker, no matter how valuable and entitled to benefits, serves to reproduce the same alienation and reification of workers as proletarians, depending on a wage relation (the job) to survive. Such naturalized hierarchies end up embracing an exclusively redistributive vision of justice intended as benefits—recognition and compensations for harms upon “minority groups” from a system that in fact thrives on producing such groups themselves, and not just the harms they suffer. What we intend to do is *not* to focus on the recognition dimension of justice to the detriment of the distribution dimension. In fact, we see both as part of the main procedural vision of justice which does not address its own preliminary deeper issue, that of the production of inequality, which in turn reproduces and gets reinforced by subaltern political subjectivities. Undoing a notion of JT presupposed on the reproduction of workers themselves as subordinate subjects would require asking the question: Is a post-carbon economy just if it simply redistributes the costs of its transition so that the burden is not placed upon the already vulnerable? Answering this question demands some background analysis of the JT concept in labor politics.

### Labor politics and the Just Transition

Over a decade ago, at its second congress in 2009, ITUC adopted JT as a comprehensive strategy “to protect those whose jobs, incomes, and livelihoods are at risk because of climate policies” (Rosenberg 2017a). Since then, the basic features of ITUC’s vision of JT have been defined as those of a broad social dialogue “between governments, employers, workers and their unions” to ensure that trade unions “have a seat at the table” (of climate negotiations and related governmental policies). This dialogue, it is added, can include “other partners and stakeholders, such as communities and regions, in order to have support from all sections of society” (ITUC 2015). Though the creation of “green” and

decent jobs (or climate jobs) is the single most important issue in the mainstream labor unions' JT discourse, we can begin to understand it as part of a broader struggle for climate justice. Introducing a JT pamphlet for COP24, ITUC Secretary General Sharan Burrows writes:

COP24 has to deliver now with a Paris Rulebook. These negotiations are critical to ensure that the promises made in the Paris Agreement will be met. These rules must frame ambition and solidarity including ecosystem integrity along with the commitment of governments to respect, protect, and take into consideration existing human rights obligations, including the rights of indigenous peoples, public participation, gender equality, food security and Just Transition... Unions are committed to build jobs and decent work on a living planet (ITUC 2018a).

The bottom line of this coalition strategy is that labor relations play an important role in the future of global climate politics. According to labor's JT discourse, this is so for at least two reasons. First, as the environmental justice scholarship and movement have demonstrated, working-class people (generally all low-income communities) are among the most affected by climate change, from toxicity to precariousness and poor living conditions. Second, because the post-carbon transition is an opportunity to make working-class lives better, mostly by creating new and better jobs, but also by improving adaptation capacities and stopping environmental damage that affects workers in dirty jobs as well as frontline communities (Rosenberg 2017a). Implied in the celebration of this coalition between labor and climate movements is the idea that workers and poorer communities "have the potential to become climate allies, so long as investments are made in their future livelihoods and well-being" (Rosenberg 2017a). Overall, the trade unions' vision of JT appears to be a discursive strategy aimed at, first and foremost, "winning the hearts and minds" of workers through a massive program for public investments in new, green employment and leading the way toward economic restructuring. Such strategy—similar to that of the Green New Deal proposal in the United States (Aronoff et al. 2019)—is being presented as a path-breaking historical change capable of finally overcoming the jobs vs. environment dilemma. Such circumstances would provide the material basis for labor organizations to join the climate movement. Commenting on the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris agreement in 2017, ITUC leading officer for environmental matters Anabella Rosenberg declared, "Bush and Trump used risks for jobs to justify leaving climate deals. But something changed. Unions. We're on the right side of history" (Rosenberg 2017b).

As already mentioned, however, this discursive mechanism of convergence between labor and climate justice politics hides internal tensions and conflicts that threaten to hinder its potentialities. A reading of the ITUC (2015) official document on JT focused on its "justice" dimension shows how this is strongly limited by unquestioned assumptions regarding the true interests and political subjectivity of waged workers. Despite various mentions to social and climate justice, the document does not offer a clear definition of justice itself. The latter is assumed as self-evident and consensual rather than the core contested concept, and mostly exemplified by the plan's insistence on public investments in retraining and new employment opportunities. What is more unsettling, however, is that references to justice disappear altogether in collateral documents, specifically those containing policy guidelines, addressed at governments and the private sector. This reflects a more general tendency—that of shifting the terms of the JT discourse toward a business-friendly language when aiming at implementing it in policy terms.

In the Silesia Declaration put forward by the ITUC in Katowice, for example, to be undersigned by governments as a way of manifesting their position on climate change, the word justice is not mentioned once (ITUC 2018b). ITUC's position as a negotiator of labor policies, together with business and public sectors within the tripartite ILO must be considered as an important constraint here. In fact, the ILO (2015) guidelines for JT are not oriented toward climate justice at all, but toward a much more restricted version of the sustainable development discourse, in which the need for change is only recognized in the rights of future generations, without any mention to the environmental inequalities currently implicated in climate-change responsibilities and impacts. From this framework, JT can only be formulated as a concern for securing jobs in a post-carbon transition which is being forced upon labor by the biophysical limits of Planet Earth. The Just of JT manifests as a demand for inclusion at the negotiating table. In the words of Sharan Burrow, "[I]f you are not at the table then it means you are on the menu."

Clearly enough, the elephant in the JT room—the never-mentioned presence that determines everything about it—is the capitalist system, which is implicitly accepted as the most advanced, or else the only possible form of social organization. In this perspective, ITUC's (and ILO's) JT strategy can be summarized as a claim for labor's right to be sitting at the table of a capitalist post-carbon transition. This approach reflects a limited understanding of what kind of justice concerns workers, one that

boils down to decent green jobs and not being “left behind” in the war against climate change and transition toward green capitalism. Two questions arise though: first, *who* will be left behind by this idea of justice? (e.g., frontline communities which will be negatively affected by clean-energy infrastructures, indigenous peoples, women, and LGBTQIA+ persons, and all others who will not get the decent green jobs foreseen by the JT plan); and second, *what* does this idea of justice mean for working-class communities themselves, those who are supposed to benefit from it?

These are the eminently political questions that the mainstream labor union’s JT vision avoids asking. This void is partly due to structural constraints stemming from ITUC’s limited negotiating power within ILO. However, we also need to take into account how, over the last four decades, labor environmentalism—at least in western Europe—has subscribed to the hegemony of a post-political ecomodernist horizon that assumes the current western lifestyle as the only possible definition of well-being, one to be extended into the future via a green growth agenda (Barca 2019a). The problems with this vision are multiple. On one hand, green growth is based on an assumption that ecological economists have now disproven (Hickel and Kallis 2020), and also a vision of the future that the climate-justice movement has already rejected, because it will subject even more people to exploitative wage relations and more land to socioecological stress (Brand and Wissen 2013; Goodman and Salleh 2013). At the same time, however, we want to point to an inherent problem of the post-political, eco-modernist vision of JT: the fact that it inevitably reproduces workers as subjects of inequality.

In the next section, we develop the hypothesis that at the heart of ITUC’s and ILO’s JT discourse there is a notion of the subject (worker) with a strong consistency as a self-related identity (the proletarian whose survival and well-being depends on a wage relation) that the subject will inevitably carry with it in the new and supposedly more just green future. Justice here simply means the right of the worker to carry on along this same path. As we will discuss below, this reproduction of power inequality not only traps workers within a reduced, domesticated version of justice, but also locks sustainability in a consensual techno-managerial type of politics, limiting the possibilities for democratizing it via new political egalitarian relations.

### Theories of social (in)justice, methods of (in)equality

As shown in the first section, most theorists of justice argue that at the core of injustice in capitalist

societies lies an overwhelming reification of our social relations, mostly visible in the “creeping commercialization of our everyday life” (Honneth, 2008, 18) which instrumentalizes others in predominantly exchange-based relations (Nussbaum 2001). In capitalist contexts, political subjects are no longer in an empathetic relation with each other or their socioecological environments but rather detached, contemplative, and isolated in an alien system. An economistic form of consciousness, based on fighting for economic benefits, seems inevitable in order to reach more decent, humane, and just working conditions. Against these background conditions, reclaiming more decent and green jobs could be seen as a necessary condition to improve the lives of millions, and a first step toward capturing more political power and eventually suppressing wage relations through, for example, revolutionary reform in the sense described by Rosa Luxemburg (Rätzl and Uzzell 2012). However, such kinds of improvements and sharing in the benefits of a benevolent system have tended to lock the working class within a political horizon limited to maintaining the same system, accepting its exploitation and structural inequalities.

Following Honneth—a mainstream figure of justice theories—greater justice requires a moral attitude of care and (positive) emphatic relations, based on mutual recognition. In other words, his vision of socioecological justice is based on ethically reforming the system toward more “humane” and respectful relations. Because the structural reproduction of the system is based on a reification of socioecological relations, “proletariat”/subalterns are co-opted into consumerist culture and thus “forget” their own oppression as well as their role in changing the world in which they live. In other words, reification is the crucial relational problem that should be changed in order to reach a more just society. Therefore, as mentioned previously, most theories of justice (see also Schlosberg 2013) share his liberal optimism, which assumes that irrespective of how prevalent reification-alienation has been, it only shows the opposite: people’s primary relation, even before cognition, is the need for recognition (Honneth 2008). Honneth develops his influential theory of recognition as central for justice in contrast to the Marxist-inspired ideas of Lukacs who argued that reification happens because of a core praxis which is structurally false: relations among people have “taken on the character of a thing” (1923, 83), which eliminates any possibility of engaged praxis. Honneth wants to show that, in fact, Lukacs also has a normative turn. If the veil could be removed and workers would realize that they operate within a false framework, they could reach the more genuine empathetic engagement

with the world that is somehow inherent to humans but has been forgotten in the habits of disengagement and alienation.

However, for Lukacs (as well as for post-Marxist scholars), this attitude is not simply some moral mistake to be addressed with more ethical virtuous conduct by more people. In the ideal ethical world in which Honneth places his theory of justice, where human rights and more empathetic recognition of each other would actually make sense, the masses of people should not be continuously struggling to be heard. In other words, as Jacques Rancière asserts in his debate with Honneth, recognition as one main focus of justice theories reproduces a paternalistic and unequalitarian logic of emancipation — verifying, confirming, and thus, reifying inequalities while setting the ideal of equality in a future that never seems to arrive (see Honneth and Rancière 2016).

Rancière describes this approach as a method of inequality, which can be observed not only in the instruments of state and other institutions or policy proposals but also in most social science approaches: a means to verify and confirm the existing inequalities and marginalization of groups (the poor, the workers, the women, the indigenous). Rancière does not look at these inequalities through the mainstream Marxist idea of “class” or identity and prefers to refer to class as the dissolution of all classes or predefined identity groups. To him, the generic word “proletariat” signifies a symbolic process of declassification (Hasan et al. 2005). Hence, the question of the proletarian dignity does not revolve solely around demanding better wages and labor conditions—their recognition as worthy of recognition as workers—but also about their capacity to stage themselves as something else than wage-workers (for instance), to speak for themselves, and to give themselves another name.

In other words, this is not a form of struggle for the recognition of a specific identity that is socio-logically or culturally defined—usually associated with apolitical positions — “workers” supposedly not having the time and the energy for public affairs (Rancière 2012). Therefore, Rancière emphasizes that if we are to still use the term “recognition” for our ideal of justice, we should instead couple it with an equalitarian staging of the freedom to be recognized for something else (other than the wage-worker for instance). He writes,

the struggle is not for recognition but for another form of recognition: a redistribution of the places, the identities, and the parts. Even the slaves were recognized a competence, but it was of course the other side of an incompetence (Rancière in Honneth and Rancière, 2016).

If we are to use “recognition” of outside its conservative meaning, it should imply first recognizing

ourselves as something else other than our oppressive selves, through events or acts of dis-identification that subvert the normative basis of society which we reproduce, an “undoing” of subject positions and a “queering” of politics (Chambers 2009). Contrary to Honneth, for whom recognition is already assimilated to an institutional order that is morally expected to keep its “promises” and distribute social freedom (as in the ITUC/ILO JT model), “recognition” for Rancière has crucial dissensual or antagonistic implications that emphasize an ongoing disruption of this institutional “recognition order.” The identity to be “recognized” is not the identity already prescribed within a problematic institutional order (or “police” as Rancière calls it)—or, in our case, the identity of a wage-worker. It is instead a becoming of another identity, or an enriching/enlargement of identities as new capabilities and competences that may actually not be easily legible or recognized within the institutional or policy logic.

Therefore, it becomes important to emphasize that political agency belongs to subjects without them having to have any particular subjectivity or identity which, in addition, has to be proved worthy of recognition. This is what the democratic “scandal” should imply: there is no special characteristic or value that makes one person a political agent, that the anonymous themselves could stage themselves as political. Moreover, the concerns of sustainability strategists should be with a type of democratic politics that does not presuppose a reified/predefined group such as the workers or the minorities because these generic names of the “demos” reify the fact that the demos will always remain that supplementary part of any account of the population. The act of supposedly voluntary disempowerment exercised by workers upon themselves has been a history of political (not just ethical) decisions of dispossession, destitution, and marginalization. As Rancière argues,

The war between the rich and the poor is at the centre of politics. But these names did not refer to economic classes. The poor were those who were “nothing”, who were not entitled to govern. Democracy was the power of those who were “nothing” (see Hasan et al., 2005, 288).

By adopting Rancière’s view on proletarian subjectification, we invite more reflection on the possibilities to resist the tendency to predefine the (political) subject and the roles of any new order (policy). Democratic sustainability and justice—as any model of politics—does not need to be based on a specific theory of the (good) worthy subject, which inevitably excludes others. Distributional reforms, like those implied in compensating certain

workers for the loss of their jobs, or retraining them so they can obtain new jobs, appear as one means to change among others, but certainly not the end of the radical transformation required by the scale of systemic challenges implied in the ecological crisis.

Based on the above, we could start thinking of workers as the precarious majority or proletariat staging their equality rather than as an identity group to be acknowledged political agency (as a counter-reification method). Such a vision of workers implies that they are already agents of democratic sustainability, not by virtue of their given collective identity, but by virtue of the exact “lack of virtue” that the democratic “scandal” should imply. In fact, there is no special characteristic that makes one person a political agent. For Rancière, the political is based on the scandalous intervention of “the no-name/the invisible equal” in the “police” order of any governmental regime. That is why any model of politics, according to him, does not need to be based on construction of a general theory of the subject—be it the worker or the revolutionary. He explains,

[W]orkers do not designate an already existing collective identity. It is an operator performing an opening. The real workers who construct this subject do it by breaking away from their given identity in the existing system of positions ... First, it is a matter of affirming an equal capacity to discuss common affairs. It's a matter not only of claiming this capacity but of asserting it by enacting it ... they affirm the common capacity, the universal capacity as the capacity of those to whom it is denied in general or the capacity of anybody (Rancière in Honneth, and Rancière, 2016, 93).

In other words, radicalizing our political vision of justice requires not just a non-teleological vision of future democracy—but also basing political action on the presumption of equality as the *sine qua non* of current power struggles. Such a vision is in contrast with mainstream approaches to justice based on the Hegelian tradition of critical theory as assumed by Honneth, and for which, society needs a sociological account of its own state of consciousness and of its desires for emancipation. As Rancière argues, emancipation should be less about a future of more inclusive just society and more about inscribing equality as a set of practices of the present, which already assumes the equality of each and every one and the will to verify it. He finds the meaning of “politics” in a process of rupture and reconfiguration of consensual politics, because it rests upon the method of equality: the verification and enactment of the universal presupposition of equality. Such vision has to admit the fact that any hierarchical principle or order is fundamentally

contingent, without any other authority but its own performed power. Therefore, inequality exists only because of equality:

There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you (Rancière, 1999, 16).

A new systemic configuration for Rancière could mean various forms of anonymous staging of equality (or subjectivization), which implies performative power whereby the political subject is born out of the exact process of reconfiguring the existing order and implies—rather than mere new policies or institutions—new bodies, voices, objects, and subjects or the so-called “new distribution of the sensible” world. For this reason, we do not wish here to argue for or against reformist or revolutionary change, as if we could possibly know the parameters and implications of such change. We could see, however, that a reformist approach could require institutions themselves to change as not only to include in their order (and recognize) predefined waged workers but also to represent the majority of precarious masses of people who find themselves destitute and marginalized by the market. This majority is invisible also because it is not some social category or class to operate with when reforms are designed by elites. Rather, it is an invisible declassified force, united solely by invisibility in decision making related to resources and exclusion from capital. For instance, trade unions—as part of the democracy “deal”—cannot be designed only for “professions” but exactly, as Rancière would say, for those who are “nothing” (either waged or non-waged, those who do not own the means of their own reproduction).

### Rethinking Just Transition through a method of equality

The debate between Honneth and Rancière allows us to see the ITUC/ILO JT discourse as resting on a model of political subjectivity that fixes humans (just as natures) in predetermined positions. The implication is that such a vision of sustainability reproduces the system as it is, reforming it according to the same unequal power relations. Monopolized by technocratic experts, decisions related to sustainability politics are mostly impacting the everyday reality of people who seem to have a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo. This post-political consensus implies a specific idea of democracy in which the political subjects and objects—such as nature vs. culture, men vs.



women—are already produced and fixed into predefined relations.

Despite its welcoming attempts to support workers in gaining more rights within future green politics, this reduced version of JT neglects its own contribution to the reproduction of the system's privileges and inequalities by not engaging the possibilities of change implied in the idea (and practice) of transforming labor relations and social metabolism away from capitalism (Barca 2019b). Our main point here is that such policies are based on a method of thinking that centers around confirming and reifying fixed unequal positions, and not just inequalities in terms of opportunities. Positing equality as the initial axiom of a JT would provide a focus on the processes through which subjects become political: first, by denying identities which have been ascribed to them (often) violently—such as that of alienated wage-dependent workers—and, second, by disidentifying themselves with that which pinned them down to a subaltern unequal position. The claims of some minority groups to respect their identity may also mean the claim to *not* be assigned a specific identity because respect for a certain identity may actually mean a statement about their commonly perceived and reproduced “incapacity.”

Historically, the labor movement has played a fundamental role in pushing for radical reforms that have allowed broad social change, taking responsibility for a systemic agency in which the masses have found representation as proletarians, and not simply employees. We are now at a historical juncture in which labor could again have such epoch-changing agency, provided it sees itself as something broader than the sum of its parts. Reformist politics, such as the Green New Deal for Europe,<sup>2</sup> can be very ambitious, pushing for radical change at the scale of supranational (European Union) and national economic policies, thus setting the conditions that would allow invisible subjects (the unwaged, peasants, or unpaid caregivers) to emerge as active subjects of a JT. However, like any institutional and policy change, it will not suffice to “bring” democratic sustainable change. Our concern is not the future of a new order of positions and roles, but the politically dangerous moment when something (or someone) is already left out of a new order. The process of disidentification or declassification we refer to here could also mean that we call “worker” a member of a worker community which abolishes the worker community as it is now and resets the terms of the debate around labor and working class.

Changing our relation to natures in a democratic way implies questioning models and methods of socioecological relations, including the wage and other extractive exploitative relations. For instance, the JT may be rethought of as an opportunity to witness and

support those anonymous “workers” that enact their power as autonomous collectives of wealth creators in a variety of invisible, insurgent, or unrecognized ways, for instance in worker-recuperated factories (Barca 2019b), or in demanding for a “care income.”<sup>3</sup> An alternative, equality-based theory of JT could be an opportunity for workers to redesign the productive system on equal terms with capital, or even away from it, according to their autonomous needs, creativity, abilities, and so forth—as in self-management or the commons. As Damian White (2020) has noted, a broadly understood JT is not only about jobs, but about more general choices. For example, it is not simply a matter of producing clean energy but also how much energy to produce, for whom, and to sustain what kind of life. He writes,

Decarbonizing, decolonizing, democratizing and de-commodifying our carbon-intensive material world is going to require ... the unleashing of enormous amounts of creative labor and inventive praxis to build public institutions, a public ecology and a public culture to allow us to survive and flourish on a warming planet. This will require spaces where very different kinds of technical, cultural, political and economic knowledge, labor and practice can meet and develop new modes of collaboration (White 2020, 37).

Seen from this standpoint, JT could be an unprecedented historical opportunity to reclaim for workers a choice to opt out of wage dependency (being forced to sell their physical and mental capacities to capital). JT politics could aim to enhance their potential to not be waged workers but empowered and autonomous re/producers who care for community, environmental, international, and intergenerational others and are engaged in not only redressing current injustice but also in preventing “prospective” environmental injustice and dispossession (Velicu 2020). In the mid-1980s, these ideas were advocated by non-orthodox Marxist intellectuals such as André Gorz, Raymond Williams, and Maria Mies—only to remain in the European context (Barca 2019a). Anti-capitalist environmental movements such as socialist ecofeminist, peasant, and indigenous organizations have been advocating counter-hegemonic visions of labor which found expression in the 2012 document *Another Future is Possible*—the alternative Rio + 20 declaration. Echoes of such visions can be found in the Climate Justice Alliance, Just Transition Alliance, *La Via Campesina* and many other grassroots organizations around the world (Morena and Krause 2018).

## Conclusion

At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, climate-justice movements and official trade

unions found themselves on opposite sides of climate politics (Barca 2019a). This situation, we have suggested, can be explained by the fact that in ITUC's version of the JT workers are seen as a social category whose identity is entirely defined by the wage relation—the job. Workers' political subjectivity is delimited by the necessity of preserving, even expanding, the wage relation, on one hand, and the opportunity for improving it, by demanding decent green jobs, on the other. In short, workers are univocally understood as those who have the right and privilege of access to a wage relation. Following this line of reasoning, everyone else becomes either a want-to-be worker, or a member of marginal unproductive social categories, which ultimately depend on the wealth produced by waged work. The problem with this vision, as we have argued, is that it leaves no alternative to workers themselves than to reproduce this situation, as predefined political subjectivity and identity.

Our intention here has not been to provide an overview of unions' concern for JT (see for instance Stevis and Felli 2015). The practical difficulties of such a transition on a day-to-day basis has prompted some authors to advocate for reformist rather than transformational changes, giving unions themselves a new sense of purpose (Snell and Fairbrother 2013). All that workers seem to need in this respect is to wait and be reorganized and reeducated by other elites, and eventually accept that the transition to green jobs is more just and less risky than maintaining the same economy and dirty jobs.

More generally, our concern here was not just talking about socioenvironmental and labor justice as affirmative or even transformative. Rather, we have sought to push the limits of these visions of justice themselves, to *undo* them, by asking “how, in the absence of alternative imaginaries, could the miners desire something other than mining?” (Velicu and Kaika 2017, 310). In other words, we wanted to call attention to a foundational problem of labor's JT: that the terms of the debate are already established—be they about coal mining or clean jobs—while the process of justice remains a teleological one guided by the unquestioned principles of growth and capitalism. Change and transformation are often unexpected and hard to describe or to consensually define. We have not been interested in defending or defining a certain form of change—rather we wish to emphasize that the point of democratic thinking is always to look at what is left out of any new deals or, in other words, to avoid the foundational mistake of design(at)ing the supposedly best social order, and its worthy subjects.’

## Notes

1. See, for example, the Just Transition Alliance at <http://jttalliance.org>.

2. A campaign promoted by Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DIEM25) and a coalition of European think tanks based on a detailed policy document co-authored by a number of scholars and activists. One of the authors of the current article has actively contributed to this project. See <https://www.gndforeurope.com/>.
3. A demand which is part of the GNDE, but also standing as an autonomous global campaign emerged in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020). See [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfjS\\_qM-zyku4ig2YajtyO1BLOSTu4da0u7\\_\\_BlQup-7fGIhw/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfjS_qM-zyku4ig2YajtyO1BLOSTu4da0u7__BlQup-7fGIhw/viewform) (Access 09 August 2020).

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