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The road to the European Social Green Deal: class struggle or counter-hegemony

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Abstract: Addressing the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, Albena Azmanova proceeds from the fact that any alternative – any positive utopia or alternative models of social existence – to this dominant socioeconomic model today seems to be fundamentally lacking. Within this condition of “anxious disorientation”, Azmanova seeks the enabling conditions for progressive radicalism, in particular in relation to social and ecological justice in Europe. She contends that the model of “class struggle” centred on the industrial proletariat has become counter-productive for social transformation, and suggests that multifaceted discontent with the new social conditions of an intensely competitive capitalism could better enable its overcoming, in forms that remain largely open to this day.

Keywords: Green Deal · Class struggle · Capitalism · Working class · Europe · Ecology · Justice

“Truth will sooner come out from error than from confusion.”¹ Francis Bacon’s famous pronouncement was meant to inform the progress of science. Whatever the merits of this wisdom for its intended field, its validity is now being tested for progressive social transformation. The puzzling difficulties the affluent and scientifically proficient European societies experienced in containing the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020-2021 have been a potent catalyst for radical social transformation. They have deepened the crisis of the dominant socio-economic model – that of neoliberal capitalism. This model, with its excessive stress on profit, depletion of essential public services such as healthcare, production networks spanning the globe, and commercial logic of ‘just on time delivery’ proved to have made these societies extremely fragile and their governing mechanisms inept for coping with the challenge. The acute crisis of the neoliberal

¹ Francis Bacon, 1620. *Novum Organum*, book ii, aph. 20.

hegemony, however, has not engendered an alternative. In the interlude between crisis and the conspicuously absent transformation, the sense of confusion is palpable. Corroborating Bacon's dictum, no distinct 'truths' seem to be emerging for the needed overhaul of our governance know-how and models of political economy.

European societies first entered this state of anxious disorientation at the close of the 20th century when, despite the stable economic growth and low unemployment in most countries, 'fringe' parties and movements began to mobilize, triggering the anti-establishment upheaval that pundits have named 'populism'. These movements signaled a spreading distress by voicing concerns with physical insecurity, cultural estrangement, political disorder and economic instability – the four elements of a new 'order and security' agenda of public demands (Azmanova 2004). The anxiety was further inflamed by the 2008 financial collapse and the decade-long recession that ensued, followed by the economic and medical crisis that beset the world in early 2020.

This state of exasperation has been aggravated by the lack of positive utopias offering plausible alternative models of social existence. In late capitalism, Jürgen Habermas observed, one particular utopia has come to an end, namely, the socialist utopia centered on the emancipation of labor from alien control.² The collapse, in 1989-1990, of the Soviet-style dictatorships in East and Central Europe – regimes that had claimed to have implemented the socialist ideal -- deprived the Socialist and Communist creeds of their capacity to steer discontent into a constructive pursuit of a better future. With very few exceptions, the social imaginary driving most of the anti-establishment insurrections is marked not by the solidaristic spirit that typically animates utopias (this has been true even when these utopias directed their longings to an idealized past) but rather by resentment without direction, targeted at designated enemies of

² J. Habermas, 'The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies', in S. W. Nicholson (ed), *The New Conservatism. Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991[1984]; pp.48–70, at 50, 52-53). Jacques Derrida, has used the term 'crisis of crisis' to describe as a situation when, even as the word "crisis" has deserted our vocabulary, the idea that the present world is in crisis persists (in J. Derrida, "Economies of the Crisis", in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, 69–73. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002; p. 71.

the moment – ruling elites, immigrants, cultural minorities. This ‘exhaustion of utopian energies’ (Habermas) has helped transform the crisis of neoliberal capitalism into what I have described as a meta-crisis (or ‘crisis of the crisis’): society experiences itself in perpetual crisis -- a state of anxiety and animosity. The low inflammation of civil strife consumes its creative energies, leaving it unable to end the crisis or exit the rejected societal model.³

Yet the great exigencies of our time – from the deepened impoverishment of the poor to the impending climate catastrophe, have spawned a novel policy commitment to two familiar goals – social equity and ecological sustainability. The twin goals of social and environmental justice seem to be delineating an emancipatory trajectory amidst the metacrisis of neoliberalism. The political leadership of the European Union proclaimed a commitment to Social Europe which led to the inauguration of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2016. A drive for a Green transition (the European Green Deal) became the flagship policy of the new European Commission in 2019.⁴ This indicates the emergence of a broad societal consensus for an epochal paradigm shift, akin to the shifts that enabled the post-WWII welfare state and that of neoliberal capitalism in the late 20th century. The double commitment to social and green Europe is, indeed, a challenge to the stress on competitiveness that is *raison d'être* of neoliberal capitalism. The strong commitment to these goals, both by political elites and broader publics, is far from sufficient for the paradigm shift to become reality. This is the case because even though the two elements of this policy shift enjoy a broad public support, they are nevertheless in tension. Thus, a Eurobarometer survey conducted in late 2020 established that environmental responsibility and climate action are seen as a top priority by 27% of EU citizens,

³ A. Azmanova, ‘Anti-Capital for the XXIst Century: on the metacrisis of capitalism and the prospects for radical politics’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46/5(2020): 601-612. See also A. Azmanova, *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

⁴ The European Green Deal is a policy roadmap aiming at the elimination of emissions of greenhouse gasses in the EU by 2050; it sets out guidelines for EU member-states for comprehensive reforms to their economies, ranging from investment in non-carbon fuels, to farming and transport, together with a pledge to make the transition socially equitable. See “The European Green Deal”, Communication from the Commission, Brussels, 11.12.2019: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1576150542719&uri=COM%3A2019%3A640%3AFIN>

yet jobs are the overwhelming priority for most (at 46%).⁵ This means that climate action would face an opposition if it is perceived to threaten employment. Moreover, businesses are increasingly vocal in their concerns that higher environmental and social standards would hurt their bottom-line and impair their competitiveness, and are actively claiming to have input in EU policy-making in order to block policy that harms their interests.⁶

Acting simultaneously and promptly on both goals—healing society and healing the environment—is not a matter of somehow balancing, or reconciling these goals, that is, of diminishing pollution and improving social rights. This is the case because in the current socio-economic model, with the shrinking of the welfare state, personal wellbeing has become deeply dependent on holding a job, and job-creation is, in turn, implicated in polluting practices. Thus, a transition to a social and ‘green’ Europe would necessitate a profound alteration of the way European societies manage their economies and polities. What would it take for the proclaimed commitment to a greener and more social Europe to actuate a genuine societal transformation? In other words, what are the enabling conditions for progressive radicalism in our era? Can such a radical policy shift be undertaken without the energies of an empowering Utopia?

The European Left’s positioning within this emerging paradigm shift, I will argue in what follows, is preventing it from assuming a leadership role. Animated by concerns with rising inequality and the widening rift between the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of neoliberal globalisation, progressive politics on the Left is taking the familiar ‘class struggle’ formula of left mobilisation. I will review this diagnosis of our predicament and the solutions it issues in order to expose its poor fit to the present historical juncture. I will then chart an alternative recasting of both the analysis of the social question and the prognosis for emancipation within a formula of a broad anti-capitalist mobilisation which negates the ‘class struggle’ pattern of conflict. Both my critique of

⁵ Special Eurobarometer 509, “Social Issues”, Kantar Belgium and DG COMM; Brussels, March 2021. <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Special-Eurobarometer-509-Social-Issues.pdf>

⁶ For instance, Germany’s industry association BDI called on the EU to “focus all policy areas on competitiveness” and introduce customary “industrial mainstreaming” to “environmental, climate and consumer policy discussions at an early stage” (reported in POLITICO Brussels Playbook 1 March 2021).

the ‘class struggle’ modality of intellectual and political militancy and the articulation of an alternative will deploy Marxian conceptual schemata, which I adumbrate in the next section.

Marx and the Social Critique of Domination

Sidestepping the copious debate on the interpretation and intellectual heritage of Karl Marx’ work, I have proposed to recast his critique of capitalism as an institutionalised social order (or system of social relations) into an account of domination along three trajectories (Azmanova 2018, 2020a, 2020b).

The first trajectory is that of *systemic domination* – that is, the subjugation of all members of society to the system-constitutive dynamic of commodity-production and capital accumulation. I refer to this core dynamic of capitalism as ‘the competitive production of profit’. Although Marx offers no systematic analysis of competition, in his treatment of capital accumulation competition is “the inner nature of capital, its essential character” (Marx 1857, Notebook 4). Being the general form of economic interaction among actors, competition is thus capitalism’s coordinating mechanism and acts as a “coercive law” through which the logic of capital accumulation is imposed on individuals and the whole society (Ibid.; 1867, ch10 and 12; 1885; 1894, ch. 10 and 50).

Within the realm of systemic domination, social injustice occurs in the form of harm beyond the unequal distribution of social advantage and disadvantage. The object of critique in analyses of systemic forms of injustice is therefore not the way power resources (wealth, political office, respect) are distributed, but what counts as a resource and how this resource is valued as a desired good. Within a capitalist society, this valorisation of practices is sourced from the *profit motive* – not so much the realization of profit through market exchange, but the motivation of human activities and interactions on the basis of their likelihood to generate profit.

Marx introduced this trajectory of domination in his analyses of alienation (the multifaceted estrangement of people from their humanity, their “species-essence”). Although he focused predominantly on the effect of alienation on wage labor, there is no reason to claim that

the impact of the competitive production of profit is not suffered by all members of a society of commodity producers, irrespectively of their class status. The alienation thesis therefore can be taken to apply to all participants in this process: the profit motive permeates all spheres of human existence, resulting in a broad spectrum of suffered injustice. Thus, labor commodification (treating a person's capacity to work as a good produced for market exchange) and alienation afflict all who are engaged in the process of competitive profit production, while the destruction of the environment is a harm suffered by the whole of humanity, be it in different degrees.

Policies of *equality* (such as rising wages) and *inclusion* (worker involvement in the management of companies) would not suffice to counter the harms of systemic domination. Emancipation from systemic domination would necessitate not redistribution, but the eradication of the operative logic of the system—in the case of capitalism, the competitive production of profit. In the current historical junction, the inventory of socially induced suffering that is incurred by the competitive production of profit spans the intensified productivist pressures that prevent a fulfilling or even healthy work-life balance, the increased health hazards as companies prioritize profit over safety, and the destruction of our natural environment.

The second trajectory of critique of domination we find in Marx's analysis of capitalism (what I have named *structural domination*) concerns the effect of the main structuring institutions through which the operative logic of the system is enacted. These are the institutions of the private property and management of the means of production, as well as the market as a mechanism of economic governance (i.e., a mechanism for the allocation of productive inputs and social surplus and not as a price mechanism via meeting supply and demand, which is not peculiar to capitalism).⁷ Within the original Marxian analysis of capitalism, exploitation is the key

⁷ Nancy Fraser has offered a useful articulation (drawing on Marx) of the “distributive” and “allocative” functions of markets. Under many social formations, markets are a basic tool for distribution of goods for personal consumption. The *differentia specifica* of capitalist markets is that they are also used for the allocation of societal resources (inputs into production) as well as for the allocation of society's surplus (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018, 24–28). In this sense, I speak of markets as a primary mechanism of economic governance under capitalism.

structural injustice in this social system. The structure of the private property of the means of production, together with the nominally free labor contract, is what allows the exploitation of labor: it gives the owners the power to extract surplus value from their workers. The particular social harm incurred by the market as a structure of commodity exchange is the commodification of labor and nature, i.e., treating human beings' creative capacities as well as our natural environment as goods "produced" exclusively for market exchange. Raising the living standards of the working class (returning to workers, in the form of higher wages or other benefits, a bigger share of the value they produce) would not terminate exploitation. Only eliminating class differentiation by way of abolishing the private property of the means of production would do so.

Finally, the third form of domination – what I label *relational domination* concerns forms of suffering whose source is the unequal distribution of power, that is, the power actors have in relation to (or relative) to others. The unequal distribution of material or ideational resources

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(e.g., wealth, knowledge, recognition) might produce power asymmetries.⁸ Typical forms of injustice on the plane of relational domination are inequalities and exclusion. To remedy them, it suffices to equalize the distribution of power by, say, policies of wealth redistribution and political and cultural inclusion and recognition.

Marx has been adamant about the futility of what he dismissed as a bourgeois obsession with equality:

“An enforced *increase of wages* (disregarding all other difficulties, including the fact that it would only be by force, too, that such an increase, being an anomaly, could be maintained) would therefore be nothing but better *payment for the slave*, and would not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity. Indeed, even the equality of wages, as demanded by Proudhon, only transforms the relationship of the present-day worker to his labor into the relationship of all men to labor. Society would then be conceived as an abstract capitalist. (Marx, 1844)

Radical social transformation, therefore, should be thought not in distributive terms (as a matter of fighting what I called here relational domination), but in terms of countering and eradicating the constitutive dynamic of capitalism (the competitive production of profit) and the supporting institutions through which this dynamic is enacted. Transformative radicalism acts on the planes of systemic and structural domination.

In further elaborating a device for conceptualizing a path for progressive social change in contemporary European societies, I adopt and adapt three additional distinctive features of Marxian social analysis.

First, Marx saw his intellectual endeavor as being strongly *historicist* in nature. He famously refused to identify himself as a Marxist, that is, a thinker subscribing to a method of socioeconomic analysis based on abstract laws derived from his historical account of nineteenth-century European capitalism (Engels, “Letter to Bernstein,” 1882; Engels, “Letter to Schmidt,” 1890.) In the spirit of this aversion to formulistic accounts, the critique I will offer of

⁸ I do not claim that every inequality of resources generates domination; I am suggesting that there are forms of domination that can be traced back to power asymmetries resulting from unequal distribution of resources: the rich may not dominate and the dominators may not be rich.

contemporary democratic capitalism is meant to take into account the peculiarities of our current historical juncture.

The second feature of Marxian analysis I take up is the preference for critique of domination over the design of utopian blueprints for an emancipated society. Indeed, Marx has offered no detailed account of a postcapitalist society. In his writing, far from being an elaborate social model, communism is the realization of democracy as spontaneous self-organization of the people. (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875; *German Ideology*, 1845). For Marx, “communism is not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.” (Marx, *German Ideology*, 1845). Thus, the emancipatory interest driving critique is sourced not from an ideal of a just society (a utopian telos) but from the ambition of reducing domination by eliminating its sources. Thus, for Marx, eliminating the private property of the means of production is not a programmatic element in the blueprint of communism as the singularly just society. It is, rather, a way of removing one of the main sources of injustice that industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century systematically engendered—worker exploitation. Putting an end to the private property of the means of production (but not of private/personal property altogether) is a way of achieving emancipation from specific sources of domination, not securing absolute freedom. Such a negativistic conception of emancipation from oppression, one aspiring to diminish suffering rather than to obtain the just society—what Amy Allen (2015) has aptly named “emancipation without utopia” – is particularly appropriate for our contemporary context marked, as it is, by the exhaustion of utopian energies.

Third, in the absence of guiding utopias, the critical enterprise does not aspire to spell out the *features* of a just social order, but instead the *conditions* enabling such an order and the *processes* for attaining it. It seeks to discern what Horkheimer discussed as “the enabling conditions for successful realization” (*Gelingen von Vollzügen*) of a valued form of life. This is the role that the collectivization of the means of production plays in Marx: socialization of labor,

thus achieved, would in turn enable the transformation of specialized and alienated labor into creative and individuated practice. Once the productivist pressures of the profit motive are eliminated, the space opens for creative, fulfilling work that also satisfies needs.

I next turn to the resurgence of radical critique of capitalism in the course of the recent crisis of neoliberal capitalism and attempts to merge Environmental and social justice into a novel formula of progressive politics.

Green-and-Participatory Socialism as a Neoliberal Ruse

Bridging environmental and social justice is a promising avenue for the emergence of a radical alternative to neoliberal capitalism. Such efforts, however, encounter a triple difficulty.

First, social and environmental justice cannot be easily reconciled by pledging allegiance to both. The struggles for ecological and social justice have not only taken place on separate battlefields, they have been in permanent conflict with each other. Advocates for a grand Green transition have always had a little 'red' problem. In the famous words of one Yellow Vest protester: "The elites talk about the end of the world; we talk about the end of the month" (Rérolle 2018). There are solid reasons for the advocates of social and ecological justice to be political 'frenemies'. The political economy of capitalism has made livelihoods strongly dependent on employment in polluting industries, and consumers' purchasing power in the context of neoliberal globalisation has become dependent on cheap imports whose competitive prices are achieved through polluting practices. This has engendered a powerful capital-labour alliance that has been opposing environmental policy ever since ecological concerns gained public attention in the 1970s. Reassurances that the Green transition would create *in the future* more jobs than it will eliminate are not compelling when livelihoods are at stake *now*. We cannot expect working people to be impassioned about a Green transition when their economic survival – here and now – is threatened by such a transition.

The second weakness of the Green democratic transformation platform is its narrow understanding of social justice in terms of fighting inequalities. Since pundits and academics

drew public attention to the spectacular growth of inequalities in the West, social justice has been approached as a matter of fighting inequality via wealth redistribution. Thus, in a formula of ‘participatory socialism’ that is gaining popularity, the eminent French economist Thomas Piketty has articulated two pillars of progressive social reform towards a post-capitalist future. The first pillar is a dramatic redistribution from rich to poor, sourced from income and wealth taxation. A wealth tax is to provide the funds for a capital endowment inheritance for all – 120.000 euro each is to receive at age 25. The second pillar is increased worker involvement in the management of companies, for instance, by giving employees half of the seats on the board of large companies (Piketty 2019).⁹

Although proposals for a dramatic redistribution of wealth and power from rich to poor, from capital to labor, are now being advocated as a form of radical opposition to neoliberal capitalism, the departure from neoliberal convention is only apparent. Thinking in terms of inequality engages a logic of comparison between individuals and presents the idea of social justice in individualistic terms – as a matter of personal circumstances, of private wealth. Such a focus on individual circumstances is a trademark of the neoliberal mentality. Thus, even as we engage in the worthy struggle against inequality and exclusion, we in fact remain captive of the neoliberal imaginary, which views society as composed of individuals solely responsible of their lives. This eliminates the notion of collective wellbeing that has always been fundamental for Socialism as it espoused a *solidaristic* economy without emphasizing neither equality nor prosperity. Equality-within-prosperity is not a socialist idea; solidarity in wellbeing is. It might be worth remembering that Marx did not advocate economic equality in his vision of a just social order. Marx’s formula of distributive justice under communism mandates not equal distribution of existing resources but rather allocating them according to the dictum ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs’ (Marx, 1875:27). A privately-wealthy society, even if not too unequal, can still be publicly poor as long as essential public services are missing or deficient of funds. In his critique of the celebrated egalitarian affluence achieved under the post-war Welfare state in western democracies, John Galbraith (1958) observed that these

⁹ For Tomas Piketty’s discussion of this project in the context of Europe, see his interview for *Social Europe* (podcast 16 Dec. 2020): <https://www.socialeurope.eu/podcast>

privately wealthy societies, even if fairly equal, are publicly poor as essential public services were being sacrificed starved of funds. We might also do well to recall that totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe created societies that were egalitarian but certainly not solidaristic as the combination between discretionary political power and poorly governed economy created an atmosphere of mutual mistrust and competition for scarce resources.

Pledges to oppose neoliberalism by fighting inequality now invoke the policy formula of growth-and-redistribution that had ensured the (relative) equality in prosperity of the post-WWII welfare state. However, this prosperity – obtained via intensified production and consumption -- proved deleterious for the environment. The return to the post-war welfare state, to Social Europe of the inclusive prosperity of the 1960s should be undesirable, even if it might be obtainable.

A third core element of popular proposals for a radical left alternative to neoliberal capitalism is the democratization of the control over productive capital – either via the socialization of the means of production or through significant involvement of workers in the management of companies. This is the second pillar of Thomas Piketty's proposal of 'participatory socialism' which is representative of political and intellectual ambitions on the Left.

Indeed, such proposals are in line with Marxist orthodoxy. Marx and most of his contemporaries saw emancipation primarily as a matter of liberation of labor from exploitation. This has been the predominant position of the Left in the course of the twentieth century. This objective has been pursued along two paths. The Social Democratic solution ran along the trajectory of fighting relational domination. The animating idea is that wealth redistribution from capital to labour would diminish exploitation. Similarly, the increase of worker representation on company boards – as advocated by eminent public figures such as US senator Elisabeth Warren as well as in programmatic documents of the European Left – would diminish the power asymmetry between labor and capital.

If a Social democratic alternative to the neoliberal consensus emerges along the trajectory of relational domination (fighting inequality and exclusion), the more radical path preferred by the Socialist left is along the path of structural domination -- the expropriation of

the means of production and the socialization of the economic process. However, even as these proposals go a long way in countering relational and structural domination, they do not diminish systemic domination – they do not necessarily abate the competitive production of profit and its attendant alienation, as the experience of “real socialism” in Eastern Europe and elsewhere has made clear.

One could take this argument further and note that against its purported emancipatory ambitions, such proposals in fact strengthen neoliberal capitalism. In conditions of globalised capitalism through market integration, even state-owned companies or companies owned by the workers they employ, would behave like capitalist actors in the pursuit of profit. Involving workers in the companies’ management would only increase workers’ vested interest in the capacity of their company to pursue profit – with all the familiar negative impact on human beings and nature: from self-exploitation, poor work-life balance, mental health disorders, and extractive economic practices that destroy the ecosystem. Thus, the solutions to relational and structural injustice that proposals like Piketty’s ‘participatory socialism’ advance would inadvertently deepen systemic domination as it will enhance the logic of competitive pursuit of profit that is constitutive of capitalism. Such modes of critique are trapped in what I have called the paradox of emancipation: as we seek inclusion and equality within one model of well-being, we further validate that model of wellbeing, together with all the injustices it might contain beyond inequality and exclusion (Azmanova 2020a, 2020b). If we redistribute wealth in an egalitarian manner, this will neither help us have better public services nor will it do much to safeguard the natural environment – the two grave concerns of our time: the public commons and the ecosystem.

Subverting Capitalism by Fighting Precarity

A radical alternative is, however, available. It is contained in some distinctive features of contemporary capitalism. We stand at a tipping point in history, when acute dissatisfaction with capitalism is rising, not on account of its poor economic performance or the unfair distribution of wealth, but rather its excellent economic performance, its intensity.

Towards the close of the twentieth century, the policy priority of enforcing competition, which had been a trademark of neoliberal state, was replaced with the imperative of remaining competitive in the global economy. Thus, I have argued that since the early twenty-first century we inhabit yet another modality of capitalism, what I have called 'precarity capitalism'. One of the peculiar features of this new model of capitalism is that the state actively helps specific economic actors by enhancing the advantage they already have in the global economy, for the sake of ensuring national competitiveness. In this situation, the privileged position of select corporations which are sheltered from competition intensifies the competitive pressures on all the rest -- people compete for fewer and fewer jobs, employment insecurity rises for all, funds for public services and public goods are slashed -- all for the sake of remaining competitive in the global economy. The trouble is not only for the underclass of workers on insecure and poorly paid jobs -- the 'precariat'. The insecurity has become massive -- it afflicts highly educated employees in the legal profession, in Information Technology, and the medical service. Insecurity is forcing the labour-market insiders to work more than they would normally like to -- but under the competitive pressures of globally integrated capitalism, they remain in the race out of uncertainty. On the other hand, this precludes access to the labour market for others -- generating long-term unemployment as a source of precarity.

As the real income and the social clout of the working class has risen, exploitation (enabled by the private ownership and management of productive capital) is no longer the key engine of social injustice. Moreover, the proliferation of forms of property ownership and professional tenure have increased the complexity of the structural dimension of domination. Thus, the investment of pension funds in publicly traded equities means that workers, often unawares, assume the ownership, if not the control, of productive capital. At the same time, these new forms of ownership also decreases the relevance of structuring institutions in the allocation of social advantage and disadvantage: owning property no longer provides a shelter from risk. Instead, it is the competitive production of profit -- the key dynamic of capitalism -- that has become the decisive factor. At the root of discontent is not simply the unfair distribution of wealth, but, importantly, the very process through which wealth is generated as well as the impact this has on individuals, communities, and nature.

The trouble with current-day capitalism is not just material inequality, but a massive economic and social uncertainty – precarity afflicts a growing multitude of groups beyond the poor and the excluded. The intensified competitive pressures of globally integrated capitalism have harmed not only the losers of globalisation – the ‘the precariat’. Intensified global economic competition has also done tangible damage to the *winners* in the distribution of power—labor market insiders with good and well-paid jobs, owners and managers of capital—and is triggering their discontent.

This multifaceted discontent is shaping up into a powerful political force. A variety of interests across class divides, educational levels, and cultural identities are bringing together a multitude of strange bedfellows, united by an overarching grievance against the impact the competitive production of profit is having on their lives as well as on their social and natural environment. Mobilized in a mundane and inglorious anti-capitalist revolution, these forces could perform a social transformation still more radical than any proletarian class struggle could ever achieve.

This recasting of the diagnosis of the social question of our times – as a matter of precarity rather than inequality – articulates the possibility of reconciling social and environmental justice we so urgently need. If social justice is redefined away from material prosperity and in the direction of stabilising livelihoods, this solves the conflict between ecological justice and a vision of social justice predicated on a growth-and-redistribution policy formula. Only in this way is a social and Green Europe thinkable.

A policy strategy for fighting precarity should be sought not so much in terms of active job creation or universal basic income – currently the two competing economic panaceas. On the one hand, depleted public budgets, especially after the pandemic-induced economic crisis, would necessitate spending on public services (building up the commons) to take priority over supplementing individual incomes. On the other hand, intensive technological innovation has decreased the number of jobs necessary to effectively satisfy needs. The anthropologist David Graeber has noted that currently over half of societal work is pointless, while meaningless jobs are psychologically harmful.¹⁰ An alternative to both job-creation and universal basic income is

¹⁰ David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.

available, which I have discussed in terms of a 'right to minimum employment', to be obtained via job sharing in view of maximization of voluntary employment flexibility. We should all work, but all should work less, and accept lower revenues in exchange for secure income and increased leisure time. A wide-spectrum policy reform would enable such a transition towards less affluent, but more stable livelihoods: from a trans-European social security provision which is independent from the employment contract to an affordable housing provision, and building a trans-European public sector.¹¹ This will decrease the time we spend in gainful employment, while distributing access to jobs more fairly. Ultimately, this would amount to a revolution in the way we perceive and deliver social fairness – from the model of equality-in-prosperity which has proven so deleterious to the environment to a model of solidarity-in-wellbeing. No, we do not have the right to be middle class and affluent. But we have the right to live in dignity. Marx would approve.

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¹¹ For a more detailed account of specific policy reforms in this direction see Azmanova 2020a, and 2021.

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