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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The dilemma of "sustainable welfare" and the problem of the future in capacitating social policy

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses a dilemma of welfare states in the ecological transition. While the principle of "sustainability" is increasingly accepted, there are very different concrete declinations of it. I identify two broad interpretations of sustainability and corresponding paths of social change. The dominant approach, promoted by governments, businesses, and international organizations focuses on *inclusive green growth*. It aims to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation and seeks to make the transition to a green economy as socially inclusive as possible. In this context, "enabling" social policies mainly focus on employment promotion. The second approach, mostly embraced by heterodox academics and social movements, involves a deeper *social-ecological transformation* which attempts to lower the priority of economic growth and employment. Accordingly, the role of capacitating welfare states is to enable all individuals to flourish in a post-productivist society. I argue that while the second approach is normatively superior to the first one, it is also more difficult to realize, generating a dilemma for future-oriented politics.

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Introduction

The principle of sustainability is now widely accepted and more and more individuals, mainstream political parties, international organizations, and businesses largely agree that the dominant socio-economic model needs to be reformed with a view to addressing environmental demands. Yet, there is no agreement on the meaning of sustainability in terms of the values and goals that it entails and what it actually implies in practice. Thus, there are many possible "futures of sustainability" (Adloff and Neckel 2019) and, given the presence of different visions of the future, the political conflict is displaced—rather than eliminated—by the common reference to sustainability as an ideal for social change. The dominant interpretation of sustainability—the one supported by center-left, center-right, and green parties in governments; by business actors; and by most international organizations—is based on the concept of "inclusive" and "green" (or "sustainable") growth (e.g., OECD 2012; World Bank 2012; UNEP 2015; UNDP 2017; European Commission 2019). Although internally heterogeneous, the inclusive green-growth paradigm focuses on technological innovation for decoupling economic growth from resource use and emissions without substantially altering existing structures such as capitalist labor markets or elements of contemporary culture, such as consumerism (Adloff and Neckel 2019, 1018). In this approach, the ecological transition is made "inclusive" through a policy focus on the promotion of employment, especially "green jobs" (e.g., UNEP 2011; European Commission 2014; ILO 2018). An alternative potential trajectory of social change—mainly theorized by heterodox academics—relies on a "social-ecological transformation" based on conceptions of well-being opposing consumerism, productivism, and economic growth (e.g., Latouche 2010; Asara et al. 2015; Kallis et al. 2018; Rosa and Henning 2018; Brand, Görg, and Wissen 2020; Koch and Buch-Hansen 2021; Soper 2020; Hickel 2021). This more radical perspective is not a coherent and homogenous approach and includes different interpretations. I use in this article the notion of social-ecological transformation as an umbrella-concept to refer to these diverse positions, since they nevertheless generally agree on the need for much deeper reform of our socio-economic system in comparison to the inclusive green-growth approach (Adloff and Neckel 2019, 1020). In particular, as Hammond (2020, 222) argues, a "key dividing line" among different

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understandings of sustainability has been the question of economic growth: where sustainability is "taken to necessitate 'radical' or 'systemic' change, this implies the need to move beyond a mode of society based on growth"—whereas those less radical interpretations that currently dominate the political agenda centered on "sustainable development" are "committed to improving, not replacing, the functioning of the extant growth-based developmental model." Hence, in the more radical perspectives, the goal of economic growth is replaced by a commitment to human well-being, (global) justice, democracy, and respect of ecological limits.

Against this background, this article investigates the role that welfare states play—especially in their relation to "work"—in these two visions of sustainability. In particular, I focus on the potential of the capability approach as a normative framework for welfare reform both in the growth-based and in the post-growth scenarios. The capability approach defines progress in terms of the expansion of individuals' capabilities—their real freedom to lead a valuable life—rejecting its narrow identification with economic growth (e.g., Sen 1987, 1999, 2009; Nussbaum 2000, 2011). While the capability approach is usually used to justify "productivist" welfare reforms within the inclusive growth paradigm, I contend that it can also be used for defending a more radical social-ecological transformation centered on post-growth conceptions of well-being.

The article is organized as follows. The first section describes the inclusive and sustainable growth paradigm and the role that "capacitating" welfare states play within it. The second section presents the social-ecological transformation and its implications for welfare and work. This section also introduces a post-productivist version of the capability approach and discusses its consequences for a new welfare paradigm and a re-imagined welfare-work nexus. The final section connects the tension between the productivist and the post-productivist interpretations of the capability approach to the difficulty of defining the role that utopian thinking should play not only within the capability approach itself but also within social policy theorizing in general.

The dominant perspective: inclusive green growth and social investment

Inclusive green growth

Agenda 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (2015) represent the contemporary dominant "global social policy framework" (Deeming 2021a, 309), which aims to promote "sustainable development" in its economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This framework thus seeks to make compatible the promotion of economic growth and employment (Goal 8) with both human development—e.g., eliminating poverty and hunger (Goals 1 and 2), promoting health and well-being (Goal 3), reducing inequalities (Goals 5 and 10)—and fostering environmental sustainability (especially Goals 6, 12, 13, 14, and 15). In this context, *green growth* represents the main way of tackling the issue of sustainability at the global level, making economic growth and environmental sustainability compatible (e.g., OECD 2011). Green growth focuses on technological innovation for decoupling economic expansion from emissions and resource use through more efficient technologies and renewable energy. Greening the economy requires recognizing the "value" of and to "invest" in the environment, which is reframed as "natural capital" (UNEP 2011; World Bank 2012). In this framework, the goal is not only to make economic growth environment-friendly: the ecological transition itself should become an opportunity for economic growth so that "investing in climate" becomes a way of "investing in growth" (OECD 2017). Moreover, the attempt to reconcile economic growth and ecological demands is complemented by a commitment to social goals, focusing especially on "inclusion." The "inclusive growth" framework, as promoted for example by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018a), implies a transformation of economic growth so that it benefits and provides opportunities for all (and particularly for low-income groups). As for sustainability, there is no conflict between economic growth and the promotion of social goals: inequality has negative consequences for growth (OECD 2015) whereas "inclusiveness" and "productivity" reinforce each other (OECD 2018b).

From this perspective, the prevailing paradigm today is one centered on "inclusive green growth" or "sustainable and inclusive growth" (e.g., European Commission 2010, 2019; OECD 2012; World Bank 2012; UNEP 2015; UNDP 2017). Attention to the social dimension of the ecological transition is not only motivated by the fact that a great part of the populations in the global South still lacks the means to satisfy its basic needs. The focus on social issues also derives from the observation that ecological policies (such as increasing taxes on oil and energy) have regressive consequences which can nourish social conflict in the global North (as shown for instance by the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) movement in France). Moreover, the importance of the social dimension of green growth is also the result of working-class struggles for a "just transition" in the global North: since moving to a "green

economy" may require downsizing or even extinguishing some economic sectors—and thus the elimination of jobs—workers demand protection and guarantees for obtaining other (equally good) jobs in green sectors. The notion of "just transition" is by now firmly established in the policy approaches of international and supranational organizations (ILO 2015; European Commission 2020a). On this basis, "inclusion" is to be secured mainly through the facilitation of people's participation in the labor market: the ecological transition is made socially inclusive through the promotion of employment, and especially of "green jobs." This vision of a "just transition" implies framing the "greening of economies" as a potential "new engine of growth" and "a net generator of decent, green jobs" (ILO 2015, 4; UNEP 2011; World Bank 2012; European Commission 2014; UNDP 2017). Thus, the promotion of green jobs generates win-win-win situations in which economic growth, environmental protection, and social inclusion reinforce each other. The basis for this optimistic picture is faith in technological progress and innovation. In this view, more efficient technologies are not only more environmentally responsible but they also generate savings which "drive new investment and employment" (ILO 2015, 4). Overall, then, public policies should focus on promoting "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (ILO 2019, 6; see also ILO 2012, 2018; UNEP 2011, 2015; European Commission 2014; UNDP 2017).

The role of capacitating welfare states

Within the inclusive green growth agenda, welfare states are called to make the ecological transition toward a green economy as inclusive as possible. Social policy should aim at enhancing people's capability to participate in the (green) economy as well as at offering social protection for those who temporarily face difficulties in the green transition (e.g., workers employed in highly polluting economic sectors). The main goal of welfare states is to promote social goals, which, in this agenda, are considered important also from an economic viewpoint. Crucially, while inequality, poverty, and social exclusion are regarded as negative elements, potentially undermining economic growth, it does not follow from this conception that all policies that promote social goals are automatically good for growth: what is required is a "pro-growth" strategy aimed at developing policies that "tackle inequality in a growth-friendly way" (Deeming 2021b, 259). Therefore, "inclusion" should be framed in productivist terms, centered on the promotion of labor-market participation.

In this context, a crucial role is played by the investment in human capital for enhancing "sustainable competitiveness": education should provide the "right skills" for the jobs of the future in the green economy and training should create lifelong opportunities for "up- and reskilling" (European Commission 2020b, 2). Indeed, the "transition to a greener economy" has a "significant impact on the skills needs, with increased demand for skilled workforce in growing eco-industries, upskilling of workers across all sectors, and re-skilling of workers in sectors vulnerable to restructuring" (European Commission 2014, 5). In particular, "across all sectors and occupations," it will be "necessary to acquire new skills and knowledge, such as knowledge of new insulation materials; new approaches to building materials, design, engineering; knowledge of regulations, and so forth. (European Commission 2014, 5). Hence, public policies should focus on facilitating "the adaptation of the workforce and of education and training systems" in order to "avoid skills bottlenecks, support occupational transitions and enhance the responsiveness of the education and training systems to emerging skill and qualification demands" (European Commission 2014, 5).

This approach thus reinforces the centrality of employment and paid work as means for social integration. Moreover, this model is based on a virtuous and self-reinforcing cycle between economic growth and welfare states: sustained economic growth is needed to finance welfare states whereas the latter are called upon to positively contribute to economic growth through human-capital investments that enhance productivity and labor-market participation. Hence, the welfare approach most consistent with the inclusive green-growth agenda is "social investment," as promoted by organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, and the European Union (e.g., Jenson 2010, 2017; Mahon 2010; Hasmath 2015a; Hemerijck 2018; Deeming and Smyth 2019; Deeming 2021b). In this perspective, social policy can be regarded as an investment with both social and economic returns that improves individuals' health and education while also enhancing labor-market participation and productivity. The fact that in this approach social expenditure is viewed as an investment rather than a cost implies an economically productive understanding of social policy: welfare states are called to "support employment" and foster "human capital," thereby becoming "a precondition for economic growth" (Morel, Palier, and Palme 2012, 9–11).

The focus on promoting people's participation in the economy through human-capital investments is often justified, at the normative level, with reference to Sen's capability approach. Thus, Hasmath (2015b, 3) argues that the "inclusive growth paradigm"—with its emphasis on the "role of education and employment"—"stems from the philosophical roots of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach." Similarly, for Jayasuriya (2006, 34–55), the capability approach normatively underpins social inclusion policies which strengthen individuals' capacity to participate in a market-dominated and technologically-driven economy through human-capital enhancement. In the same vein, Hemerijck (2017, 12) contends that the capability approach provides the normative basis for social investment: rather than redistributing income (treating individuals as passive receivers of benefits), social investment refers to a "capacitating social justice" where the aim is to increase the opportunities for participation and inclusion and to enhance individuals' "freedom to act" (see also Morel and Palme 2017).

Indeed, the emphasis on "active" and "enabling" policies (Bonoli 2012; Kenworthy 2017) clearly resonates with the capability approach which considers individuals as actors rather than as passive receivers of benefits (e.g., Sen 1987). However, within this dominant paradigm, "inclusion," "capacitating social justice," and individuals' "freedom to act" are framed mainly in relation with people's opportunities to engage in paid work. The central capability here is the capability to participate in capitalist economies. This productivist version of the capability approach thus establishes a strong link between "capability" and "employability," conceiving individuals mainly as economic actors or "human capital." In short, this interpretation of the capability approach assumes the desirability of employment promotion and economic growth, albeit as a means for promoting people's capabilities. In the next section, after presenting the critiques and alternatives to the inclusive green-growth agenda, I explore the possibility of developing a post-productivist version of the capability approach which problematizes the connection between the promotion of growth and employment and the advancement of human capabilities on a finite planet.

The radical perspective: re-thinking work and welfare for a social-ecological transformation

Critiques of the dominant paradigm and radical alternatives

The inclusive green-growth agenda can be criticized from several perspectives. First of all, looking at the empirical evidence, it is highly uncertain whether "green growth" is a realistic option—if it is actually possible, beyond ideology and rhetoric, to pursue economic growth without damaging the natural environment (e.g., Hickel and Kallis 2020). Among the many reasons for doubt, two appear central: green technologies often involve the use of polluting materials and minerals, making them far less "green" than commonly assumed; and within capitalism improvements of efficiency achieved through technological innovation are generally used to increase production and/or consumption rather than to reduce resource exploitation. There is also the argument that not only green growth but economic growth more generally will be more and more difficult to achieve in the rich countries of the global North. To the extent that low growth rates are and will remain a normal condition in these countries, it can be argued that the latter already find themselves in a "post-growth" situation (e.g., Jackson 2019). But even if it would be possible to effectively generate green growth, there is persistence of strong doubt on the validity of choosing economic growth as a good objective for public action (for a recent discussion see e.g., Spash 2021). For example, economic growth does not necessarily increase—and in many cases even undermines—human well-being (e.g., Soper 2020).

More specifically, in the inclusive green-growth approach there is no contestation of capitalist modes of production—and of the power asymmetry that characterizes the employment relationship between employers and workers (Velicu and Barca 2020)—nor is there an interrogation of the purpose of ever-increasing production. On the contrary, the ecological transition is conceived as an opportunity for reinforcing employment-centered economic growth. Thus, this paradigm implies a specific way of envisioning the relationship between work and the transition toward a sustainable economy—one that *reinforces* the centrality of paid employment, without questioning "the necessity of working more and creating new employment" and "without examining the meaning of our activities" (Bottazzi 2019, 5). Hence, the inclusive green-growth approach does not challenge the productivist-consumerist Western lifestyle—it actually aims precisely to maintain it in face of ecological imperatives.

In this vision of the future, then, the main characteristics of the present are depoliticized and removed from the discussion so that the future appears as the prolongation of the present. Moreover, at the "procedural" level, the question of the future is largely "delegated" to the market, conceiving the market as a mechanism able to assess the value of social objects and coordinate dispersed

knowledge in society. For example, the solution to environmental problems is not seen in the decommodification of nature as a sphere that, in order to be protected, needs to be removed from the economic logic of accumulation but in further commodification through, for example, emissions trading (e.g., Felli 2015). Policy solutions are thus mainly envisioned within an economic framework—whereby solving environmental problems should become economically attractive—and in a depoliticized and technocratic manner that does not confront power asymmetries (see also Wanner 2015).

In contrast to the inclusive green-growth paradigm, a radical approach to sustainability involves the political project of abandoning—rather than "greening"—economic growth. This entails a profound transformation not only of the economy but also of culture and a wide range of societal practices, requiring changes to people's values, consumption behaviors, and daily habits. In order to emphasize the deepening of this process, scholars usually refer to the concept of "transformation" as opposed to "transition" (Goetz et al. 2020, 338). Referencing notions such as "post-growth" and "degrowth," a *social-ecological transformation* aims to build a just society that guarantees human-flourishing opportunities for all while respecting environmental demands through the reduction of material production and consumption in the global North (Latouche 2010; Asara et al. 2015; Kallis et al. 2018; Rosa and Henning 2018; Brand, Görg, and Wissen 2020; Koch and Buch-Hansen 2021; Soper 2020; Hickel 2021). Thus, while the green-growth agenda aims to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, the goal of the social-ecological transformation is to decouple social progress —the promotion of values such as human well-being, social justice, and democracy—from economic growth (which is considered incompatible not only with environmental protection but also with these other values).

In abandoning the commitment to economic growth, this approach to sustainability also entails a fundamental problematization of "work" and of the place that paid employment occupies in contemporary societies. The centrality of productive work is criticized not only for its unsustainability and ecologically destructive consequences but also for its negative impact on people's quality of life (see also Schor 2010; Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020). Moreover, building on feminist theories (e.g., Tronto 2013), some scholars suggest using the lenses of "care" not only for broadening the concept of work beyond employment but also for redefining the very meaning of work in terms of taking care (e.g., Littig 2018). In this view, the whole economic system should be reoriented away from the creation of monetary value and commodity production and toward the care of people and planet. This perspective thus asserts the priority of "care" and "social reproduction" over profits-led production (Bhattacharya 2017; The Care Collective 2020; see also Barca and Leonardi 2018; Pusceddu 2020).

The social-ecological transformation perspective also has far-reaching implications for social policy. These are theorized in the rapidly expanding literature on "sustainable welfare," "post-productivism," and "eco-social policies" which investigates the possibility of moving to welfare states independent of growth (e.g., Fitzpatrick 2004; Gough 2017; Hirvilammi and Koch 2020; Koch 2022; Dukelow 2022; Dukelow and Murphy 2022). In this perspective, a sustainable welfare state needs to become autonomous from economic growth through reduction of the *mutual dependencies* between economic growth and welfare (Büchs 2021, 323). Thus, making welfare states independent from economic growth not only requires alternative bases for funding welfare provisioning beyond employment and growth, it also involves switching "funding sources to those that are less affected by economic fluctuations, such as taxes on property, land, financial wealth, or inheritance" (Büchs 2021, 325). Independence from economic growth also entails "a radical reorientation of the roles and goals of social policy": instead of aiming to promote growth and employment, "sustainable welfare policies would focus on guaranteeing needs satisfaction for everyone at minimal environmental impacts" (Büchs 2021, 325–326). The virtuous circle between social policy and economic growth would then be replaced by a virtuous circle of "sustainable welfare" independent from economic growth (Hirvilammi 2020).

Crucially, moving to growth-independent welfare states and questioning the centrality of employment in society implies overcoming major obstacles (e.g., Corlet Walker, Druckman, and Jackson 2021). In turn, the normativity and scale of these challenges make the needed transformation "a highly political, as opposed to a technical" matter (Hammond 2020, 221). Since the growth-dependent capitalist state appears unable to address the structural unsustainability of the current system (e.g., Hausknost 2020), a deeper transformation must emanate from outside this system, thereby making democracy absolutely central (Hammond 2020; Machin 2020). Thus, in contrast to elite-driven, top-down, managerial approaches focused on finding technical solutions to environmental problems *within* the current system, a structural transformation needs to put democratization at its core (see also Coote 2015). This does not imply a marginalization of representative

democracy—since the state and its political-institutional apparatus remain central for any transformation (Machin 2020, 167)—but representative democracy needs to be complemented by a more informal and inclusive political sphere. Yet, rather than dispassionate and consensus-oriented deliberation among citizens in specifically designed fora (such as mini-publics, consensus conferences, citizen juries, and stakeholder dialogues)—venues that are usually organized by political authorities with a view to improving policy making within the current system—democratization for transformation requires giving more room to disagreement and to bottom-up agonistic-disruptive democratic practices, assigning a key role to social movements and protest initiatives (Hammond 2020; Machin 2020).[1]

Toward a capability-oriented eco-social politics

To what extent is the capability approach compatible with ideas of a growth-independent social policy, a care-oriented understanding of work, and an agonistic interpretation of democracy? A growing body of literature shows that the capability approach can be fruitfully used for framing issues of environmental justice and sustainability (Schlosberg 2007; Holland 2008a, 2008b; Burger and Christen 2011; Leßmann and Rauschmayer 2014; Hillerbrand 2018). However, the capability literature in general (including Sen's own work) usually sees economic growth rather positively. To be sure, the capability approach emphasizes the difference between development—conceptualized as the expansion of people's capabilities—and economic growth. Yet, the point of divergence with respect to mainstream economics lies in the fact that the latter conceives economic growth as an end in itself whereas the capability approach emphasizes that economic growth is only a means for capability-expansion. Similarly, including people in the labor market is often seen as a good way to promote their capabilities (e.g., Sen 1997).

However, I would challenge the view that economic growth is a suitable means for realizing and enhancing capabilities. As it emerges from the post-growth literature cited above, economic growth can be considered a "threat to the common good" and the dominance of employment can be problematized in terms of "wage-slavery" and "productive unfreedom" (Barry 2021, 7–15). To the extent that economic growth and the fixation with employment are conceived as obstacles to freedom, equality, democracy, well-being and justice, they become impediments rather than enabling factors in the promotion of capabilities. From this perspective, I argue that capability-oriented public action should abandon the goal of economic growth altogether, focusing instead on promoting individuals' opportunities to lead *valuable* lives, whereby they are called to democratically co-determine what is valuable. In this context, participatory-deliberative democracy—rather than the market—would be used as a mechanism for establishing what is valuable. I argue that this interpretation is coherent with the importance of democracy in the capability approach (e.g., Sen 1999, 2009; Anderson 2003; Crocker 2006), whereby the public is conceived "as an active participant in change, rather than as a passive and docile recipient of instructions or of dispensed assistance" (Sen 1999, 281)—and not only quiet and rational deliberation but also protest and "public agitation" are essential elements of this democratic process (Sen 2009, 351). Thus, rather than focus on "inclusion," the emphasis of capability-enhancing public action should be on "democratic citizenship" (Jayal 2009). From this perspective, not only progress is dissociated from economic growth, but defining the meaning of progress and quality of life—and establishing what it means to contribute to these goals through "work"—becomes a task for democratic deliberation, public discussion, and contestation.

This interpretation of the capability approach emphasizes that the notion of capability is not necessarily related to the labor market, as there is no automatic link between employment and capability-expansion. On one hand, employment is valuable only to the extent that it contributes to the promotion of capabilities (Koggel 2003; Orton 2011; Bonvin 2012). On the other hand, human beings are free to flourish also through activities beyond employment, such as care work (e.g., Anderson 2003; Lewis and Giullari 2005; Hobson 2014), community involvement, play, and leisure (Nussbaum 2000, 79–80). Moreover, the capability approach considers individuals as political beings not only when they act in the formal political arena but also when they are involved in economic activities, for example, as workers. Indeed, from a capability perspective, "autonomy at work" cannot be reduced to workers' freedom to choose the means for attaining already established ends but should also entail the possibility to participate at co-determining the *ends* of production (Zimmermann 2014, 209–214). This in turn implies that capitalist labor markets need to be profoundly reformed—for instance through the establishment of workplace democracy—in order to promote people's political agency at work (Yeoman 2014).

Redefining work

In this interpretation, the capability approach implies the subordination of economic production

to democratic will and the democratization of economic relationships. Rather than implementing social policies that aim at making society fit for international competitiveness and economic growth, this understanding suggests reforming the economy so that it satisfies democratically defined social needs. This would then allow a shift of emphasis away from pointless and ever-increasing economic production, toward meaningful, life-preserving social reproduction. Thus, social policy can still be conceived as an "investment"—as in the social investment discourse—but in this case the investment is socially and ecologically purposeful rather than economically valuable.

In this context, the meaning of work also evolves: rather than as a commodity and a factor of production valued for its contribution to productivity and economic growth, work is conceived in terms of its double contribution to workers' capabilities and to social progress. Indeed, building on the capability approach (among other philosophical frameworks), Ruth Yeoman (2014) argues that *meaningful work* is an activity accomplished within or outside the labor market that offers human-flourishing opportunities for the individuals performing it and that contributes to society in an "objectively" valuable way—and all citizens are equally entitled to participate in the democratic debate on what is valuable. The sustainability imperative obviously plays an important role in determining what is meaningful. For example, economic production oriented to the maximization of profits for shareholders may appear meaningless if it causes environmental degradation whereas working for protecting and/or repairing the natural environment may be considered highly meaningful activities even if they do not contribute to economic growth.

Similarly, Bueno (2022) argues that labor should be capability-enhancing not only for the workers themselves but also for society at large. However, while mainstream economics defines "productive" work in terms of its contribution to wealth-generation, the capability approach embraces a different, "human-centered" framework for assessing the value of work for society. In particular, the concept of "socially capability-enhancing labour" (Bueno 2022, 8–10) allows interrogation of the usefulness of work in terms of its contribution to the "capabilities of others," enabling a debate on "what makes work useful, on what grounds and for whom" (Bueno 2022, 15). In this context, what mainstream economics considers "unproductive" work (i.e., work performed outside the labor market on an unpaid basis such as caring for children or elders) may actually contribute more to social welfare and to the "capabilities of others" than "productive" work performed in the market. Indeed, certain types of work such as speculating on food or housing—while being well-paid and wealth-creating—may actually *reduce* the capabilities of others and undermine social well-being.

Combining this argument with the feminist "ethics of care," I argue that capability-enhancing social policies should focus on promoting people's "capability to take care of the world" through a plurality of activities within and beyond employment (Laruffa 2021, 2022). From this perspective, work is redefined in terms of the care for oneself, for others, for society, and for the natural environment. The policy focus thus shifts away from the promotion of jobs—however green—toward the support of valuable activities that *meaningfully* contribute to social well-being and sustainability. This shift entails a move from rewarding economic production to rewarding social and cultural reproduction (e.g., care, health, education, arts) and the protection/maintenance as well as the reparation of the natural environment. Crucially, the capability to take care of the world also implies that all members of society are equally entitled to participate in the democratic debate on what "taking care of the world" actually means in practice and what counts as a valuable contribution in this direction. Indeed, the advantage of this definition of work is that it is democratically malleable and "open-ended." In this context, democratic deliberation (partially) replaces the market mechanism in establishing what are valuable contributions to society. Indeed, the task of allocating meaningful work in society cannot be delegated to capitalist labor markets, as they generally fail both at the individual and collective levels (Laruffa 2022, 134). At the individual level, they frequently do not generate human-flourishing opportunities for workers, who are exploited and/or misrecognized (e.g., Koggel 2003). At the collective level, they too often fail to reward and encourage activities that contribute to social welfare—in many cases labor markets actually remunerate and incite activities that undermine social well-being and environmental sustainability (e.g., Bueno 2022).

Policy implications

To summarize the main elements of this capability-oriented eco-social policy, it is possible to refer to the "anthropology" (i.e., the vision of human being) that informs it. In this welfare model the person is conceived as a "receiver," a "doer," and a "judge": individuals are seen not only as "receivers" of welfare benefits and services and as "doers" who flourish through various activities—both within and beyond work—but also as "judges," that is, as political beings whose voices count (Bonvin and Laruffa 2022).

First, concerning the "receiver" dimension, a combination of "universal basic services" and a "participation income" seem especially congenial for a capability-oriented eco-social state (Laruffa, McGann, and Murphy 2022). These disbursements not only insure that individuals live in dignity but also provide them with a valuable exit-option if they decide not to participate in the labor market. Social policy would thus entail high degrees of decommodification, guaranteeing universal access to social services and generous income support. However, in light of the environmental dimension, the question is not only that of guaranteeing each person access to a minimal amount of resources permitting her to live a decent life but also to problematize the control over too many resources and excessively high levels of consumption. In this case, the focus is on reducing inequality and "extreme wealth," putting "ceilings" on capabilities (Holland 2008b; Burchardt and Hick 2018; Robeyns 2019).

Second, regarding the "doer" dimension, social policy would aim to increase individuals' freedom to engage in a broad range of valuable activities within and beyond the labor market. On one hand, this would require reforming the labor market along capability-friendly lines, a process that would involve, for instance, promoting workplace democracy and meaningful work. On the other hand, this policy focus would also entail the support of activities beyond employment, including care work and civic involvement. In both cases, the goal would be to encourage individuals to engage in those activities that contribute not only to their own well-being but also to a sustainable and just society, redefining "work" as the "practice of taking care of the world." Moreover, also in this case, sustainability requires some restrictions and public action that should discourage (and whenever possible forbid) environmentally destructive practices in in terms of both consumption and production.

Finally, the "judge" dimension refers to democratization processes whereby individuals would be involved in the "co-production" of social and employment policies (e.g., Laruffa, McGann, and Murphy 2022). People would thus have the opportunity to define the content of social services; the nature of the "valuable activities" beyond employment that should be supported by social policy; the "meaningfulness" of work and economic activities; and the "ends" of production. In other words, individuals would be encouraged to participate in debates on the "good society," defining the meaning of "progress" and what it means to contribute to it. These debates should not be confined to the formal political arena but they should rather become part of all spheres of social life—from workplaces to public services. Possibly, there is a role for both civil society organizations (nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, grassroot organizations, and social movements) and engaged scholars/intellectuals in enabling these debates and in creating pressure on governments, local authorities, and private enterprises to effectively take these ideas into account. In short, the "judge" dimension implies that people should not be conceived by policy makers as passive "objects" of policies—"human capital" that have to be displaced to greener economic sectors—but as active "subjects" whose voices political and economic actors need to consider when formulating visions for the future and policies.

Table 1 summarizes the main policies involved in this capability-oriented eco-social model according to their "anthropological" dimensions.

In concluding this section, I should clarify that my purpose is *not* to argue that the capability approach provides a better normative framework than the universal/basic human needs approach which usually informs degrowth-oriented eco-social policy proposals (for a comparison between the capability and the needs approaches see Gough 2014). My point here is rather to show that a radical interpretation of the capability approach is *compatible* with degrowth theories and agendas, further reinforcing previous arguments going in this direction (see Beling et al. 2018).

Social policy, the future, and utopian thinking

The discussion in the previous sections shows that the capability approach can potentially be used as a normative framework both for inclusive green

Table 1. Main policies involved in the capability-oriented eco-welfare model according to their "anthropological" dimensions.

Anthropological dimension informing capability-enhancing social policy	Policy implications
Receiver	Provision of "universal basic services" and a "participation income" for fulfilling basic needs/rights and for guaranteeing a valuable exit-option from the labor market. Limitation of the amount of resources controlled by single persons or groups, taxation on wealth, high income, luxury consumption, and inheritance.
Doer	Reform of the labor market with a view to promoting individuals' well-being and agency at work (e.g., through workplace democracy). Promotion of those activities that—both within and beyond the labor market—are concerned with "taking care of the world." Limitation of "meaningless" and unsustainable production and consumption.
Judge	Co-creation of social and economic policies: citizens participate in the definition of "progress" and what it means to contribute to it, establishing what constitutes meaningful economic activities and valuable work (what "taking care of the world" means).

growth (where the focus is on making the ecological transition as employment-friendly as possible) and for a social-ecological transformation (which rejects employment-friendly economic growth as a political goal and aims at subordinating the economy to democratically-defined social needs). This second understanding of the capability approach explicitly problematizes the link between the promotion of employment and growth and the expansion of capabilities. Refusing the identification of social progress with economic growth, this perspective requires a democratic debate on the concrete meaning of well-being and quality of life. This amounts to a radical redefinition of the tasks of social policy and of the connection between welfare and work, whereby the latter too is fundamentally reimagined beyond employment.

Clearly, inclusive green growth attempts to prolong the main features of the present society within a "business as usual" approach whereas the social-ecological transformation would demand a "rupture" from today's hegemonic economic and socio-cultural practices. In the field of social policy, both academics and policy makers generally assume the desirability of both employment and economic growth because real-world welfare states are heavily dependent on them. In this context, "social investment" appears as a valuable framework for reforming contemporary welfare states because it allows us to tackle complex issues such as population aging, gender inequality in the labor market, and intergenerational reproduction of social inequalities. Moreover, improving people's human capital and facilitating their inclusion in the economy, investment-oriented social policy contributes to economic growth. The latter in turn can be used to further support generous welfare states in a self-reinforcing virtuous circle made of inclusive (employment-friendly) economic growth and strong social policies.

From this pragmatic perspective, efforts to imagine "social policy without growth" may be easily labeled as unrealistic and utopian. Thus, even if the social-ecological transformation appears normatively superior in the sense of better in promoting well-being, justice, democracy, and environmental sustainability than the inclusive green-growth paradigm (Sandberg, Klockars, and Wilén 2019), it is nevertheless possible to argue that social investment represents a pragmatic and realistic option whereas the post-growth welfare state constitutes an abstract and unrealizable ideal. This directly relates to the difficulty of deciding the role that "ideal" thinking should play in social policy.

Interestingly, the tension between pragmatic-incremental and ideal-transcendental approaches is thematized also by Sen himself in his book on social justice (Sen 2009). In that context, he argues that transcendental theories of justice aimed at describing the ideal of a perfectly just society are not only unnecessary but may even constitute an obstacle in the promotion of justice in the real world. This is because of the different interpretations of social justice, as people do not generally agree on a single ideal of what a just society is. In Sen's view, this is not a problem because we do not need such a transcendental or ideal theory to guide political action. He contends that a comparative approach to justice is sufficient: here the focus is on feasible options that make society comparatively more just (or less unjust) rather than perfectly just.

Sen's proposal has been criticized from different perspectives but three limitations appear especially relevant. First, as Ege, Igersheim, and Le Chapelain (2016) have argued, a comparative approach cannot exist without a transcendental dimension. In other words, a transcendental element is a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for framing comparative judgments. In the context of this article, it is important to note that inclusive green growth is not simply a "pragmatic" step in the direction of a social-ecological transformation—and with respect to some issues the kind of social change promoted by inclusive green growth goes in a direction that is not only different but *opposite* with respect to the social-ecological transformation. For example, the inclusive green-growth approach calls for sustaining economic growth and for further commodifying both human labor (through the promotion of employment) and the natural environment (e.g., through emissions trading). In contrast, the social-ecological transformation requires the abandonment of economic growth as a political goal; to promote decommodification (protecting both labor and nature from the economic logic of profit-maximization and from the market mechanism); and to deprioritize employment as a gateway to social inclusion. From this perspective, referring to "transcendental" visions of society and to the "final ends" of public action seem relevant also when we compare concrete policy options.

Second, as Meshelski (2019, 43) argues, the exercise of comparing two or more options is relevant in real-world democratic life mostly when the time comes to vote whereas for the majority of political activities—and especially when people engage in "public debate"—it seems that clarifying *ideals* is extremely important. Thus, Sen's theory appears less useful to common people engaged in deliberations than to technocratic experts "in positions of power" who, faced with the choice between two or more policy options, have the authority to "impose"

reforms on society: "If we imagine Sen's recommendations being implemented, we can only imagine them being implemented by some kind of expert in governance, who is understood to be acting from a position outside of that society's substantive political disputes" (Meshelski 2019, 43–44). Hence, despite Sen's continuous insistence on the importance of democracy and public debate, his comparative approach to justice risks being useful mainly in a society ruled by experts, where technocrats are considered neutral or nonpartisan because they have access to a purely factual truth (i.e., not based on values) and where they "promote themselves as rising above disputes about justice on the basis of their knowledge" (Meshelski 2019, 44).

In the context of this article, inclusive green growth mainly appears as a technocratic strategy that aims to provide a solution to predefined challenges (e.g., increase employment and economic growth in the face of ecological emergency). While this approach comparatively improves the situation with respect to the status quo (e.g., reducing unemployment and using greener technologies), it entails depoliticization and stabilization of power asymmetries. Actually, inclusive green growth appears to be pragmatic precisely because it does not aim to redistribute political power. The focus is on technological solutions (e.g., promoting renewable energy) without confronting inequality and powerful interests.

This technocratic project, where the main features of the present (such as the dependence of social policy on economic growth or the centrality of employment in contemporary society) remain depoliticized, can be contrasted with a *utopian* approach to social policy. Instead of extrapolating the future from the present—thereby remaining rooted in the present and accepting as given "the major contours of present society"—the utopian approach allows to "think first about where we want to be, and then about how we might get there" (Levitas 2001, 450). The point here is that such a utopian approach is more democratic than the technocratic and depoliticized alternative. Indeed, democratic societies should be able to actively steer social developments and this requires an "open" vision of the future, whereby the future can be conceived as radically different from the present—recognizing that society could always be organized otherwise and that citizens should be free to choose among different possible futures (Kelz 2019).

Finally, in light of the depth of the ecological crisis that we face today, the reformist-comparative approach may be insufficient and more transcendental-utopian approaches are possibly needed. Indeed, what is at stake is probably a matter not of better managing the current system but of system change. What are likely needed then are "non-reformist reforms" or "revolutionary reforms" as opposed to "reformist reforms" (Gorz 1964, 6–8). A *reformist* reform subordinates its goals "to the criteria of rationality and predictability of a given system," thereby rejecting those objectives that—"however deep the need for them"—are "incompatible with the preservation of the system." In contrast, a *non-reformist* reform is "conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system" but "in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands." The goal of these structural, non-reformist reforms is the "implementation of fundamental political and economic changes"; and while these changes can be "sudden" or "gradual," they always "assume a modification of the relations of power."

On the basis of this discussion, I argue that the utopian approach to social policy seems more coherent with the importance of democracy in the capability approach than the comparative perspective on justice proposed by Sen himself. In particular, against the comparative approach and its risks of technocratic degenerations, the rehabilitation of "transcendental" (normative-ideal) thinking in social policy has the potential to enable people's deliberation in terms of "final ends," promoting a debate on the kind of society we want to build. From this viewpoint, I contend that seeking to realize the utopian ideal of a political agenda freed from the imperatives of economic growth is more in line with the capability approach than following the more pragmatic inclusive green-growth strategy. In this context, an essential step involves the rejection of the "capitalist realism" (Fisher 2009), which affirms the impossibility of other ways of organizing the economy beyond growth-dependent capitalism.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented the dilemmatic position that characterizes contemporary welfare states as fundamental infrastructures of society. In order to address the ecological crisis, welfare states should adopt the principle of sustainability. However, there are at least two broad interpretations of sustainability. In the dominant perspective welfare states should adapt people to the needs of the "green economy" (mainly through education and training); facilitate individuals' inclusion in the labor market (especially through "green jobs"); and provide social protection during the transition to a sustainable economy. From the standpoint of a second, more radical and more marginalized perspective, welfare states (including social policies in the fields of, for

Table 2. Comparison of two alternative sustainability-informed interpretations of the capability approach in welfare politics.

Vision of sustainability	Inclusive green growth	Social-ecological transformation
Central capability	Capability to participate in the economy through paid employment (especially "green jobs")	Capability to take care of the world through "meaningful work" (within or beyond the labor market)—which also entails the capability to participate in the debate on what is meaningful
Redistribution of political power?	No: power inequalities within the (green) economy (e.g., between employers and workers) are largely left unchallenged	Yes: the economy is democratized (including through workplace democracy)
Policy approach	Technocratic/depoliticized, top-down: centrality of "experts"	Politicized, bottom-up, centrality of democracy: citizen participation (including social movements), deliberation, and contestation (including protest and "public agitation")
Main social policy implications	Employment-friendly social policy: investments in people's human capital (retraining workers for the green economy); social protection for workers during the transition	Eco-social policy: universal basic services and eco-social activation through participation income for satisfaction of basic needs; establishment of ceilings on production and consumption levels; democratization of policy making
Approach to the future	Closed: "capitalist realism"	Open-ended: utopian-democratic

example, education and labor-market policies) should support a social-ecological transformation, whereby the economy is subordinated to the satisfaction of democratically-defined social needs within planetary boundaries. This involves abandoning economic growth as a political goal, pursuing instead a less materialistic politics of well-being as well as social justice at the global level.

I have argued that the capability approach can provide the normative framework for welfare reform in both these perspectives (Table 2). In the first interpretation, the notion of capability is strongly linked to people's participation in the economy, whereas in the second understanding more emphasis is put on their political agency and on democratic renewal, whereby individuals should be enabled to participate in the debate on the "good society," defining the very meaning of quality of life and progress, as well as what it means to contribute to these goals. In this understanding, also the notion of "work" is deeply redefined: rather than being identified with paid employment, work embraces all those meaningful activities undertaken within or beyond the labor market that involve the "care for the world." This underspecified and thus politicized understanding of work also implies that all members of society are equally entitled to participate in the democratic debate on what is worthy of care and what is meaningful and valuable.

Finally, I have discussed the problems associated with the fact that inclusive green growth appears to be more realistic and feasible than the social-ecological transformation. Indeed, this is true especially because the former—in contrast to the latter—does not require far-reaching reforms of fundamental institutions (such as the labor market) and does not substantially challenge either power inequalities or the dominant consumerist culture. In this context, I have discussed three main limits of Sen's comparative approach (which downplays the need for ideal normative theories with the assumption that for improving the world it is enough to compare different options and choose the best among them).

First, a comparative approach implies a "transcendental" dimension because concrete policy options involve different normative ideals. Inclusive green growth, for example, while "comparatively" advancing social justice and sustainability with respect to the status quo, is simply not a realistic step in the direction of a social-ecological transformation but goes in a different—and to some extent opposite—direction. This means that when we are facing several policy options it is not enough to compare them and choose the best one: we also need to scrutinize their implicit "transcendental" dimension in order to understand the broader path of social change that they are promoting.

Second, the risk of a comparative approach is its likelihood of being useful mainly to technocratic experts, as the majority of people most of the time think in terms of political ideals instead of ranking policy options. In this context, the problem of "realistic" approaches—such as inclusive green growth—is that they tend to depoliticize the main features of the present society, thereby limiting the choice among possible futures. In so doing, the array of "feasible" options ultimately undermines democracy which needs an open vision of the future so that it can, at least potentially, be radically different from the present.

Finally, a comparative approach may be insufficient and ill-suited in the contemporary context which is marked by profound socio-political and ecological challenges. In the face of these urgent and far-reaching problems, a utopian approach to social policy theorizing may be better suited in responding to them than a "realistic" or "pragmatic" approach. This is especially true with respect to "green growth," which seems largely uncapable of solving the ecological crisis.

Taken together, the weaknesses of the comparative approach to justice suggest that the commitment to democracy at the core of the capability approach is better respected in the utopian approach to social policy. Thus, a "social-ecological transformation," whereby economic growth is no longer

the focus of policy making and efforts to redefine the meaning of progress become a central democratic task, appears more coherent with the normative ambition of the capability approach than the more pragmatic attempt of rendering green economic growth inclusive.

Yet, the utopian approach to social policy is not without problems. Even if people would agree on certain ideals, how can they be realized in the world? How can we move from the status quo toward the ideal? Moreover, while the urgency of the problems we face suggests that the utopian approach is better suited than the pragmatic one for inspiring more radical reforms, the risk of the utopian approach is that of appearing useless for guiding policies in the immediate present. In other words, to the extent that many of these much-needed deeper reforms appear unrealizable and unrealistic under the present conditions, they may lose appeal and political support. In contrast, more pragmatic steps can be undertaken right now without further waiting—and this makes them highly attractive not only to political elites but, potentially, also to social movements. Overall, the fact that in the contemporary context inclusive green growth seems a feasible option, which comparatively improves the situation with respect to the status quo, generates a dilemma for those interested in promoting progressive social change. Should political and intellectual effort primarily be put to criticizing this approach as insufficient and misleading? Or should progressive forces accept the compromise of inclusive green growth, struggling to make this paradigm also as democratic, just, and ecological as possible? Without wanting to provide a definitive answer to this question (which is a task for democratic discussion anyway), I think that progressive forces should try to do both: they should continue struggling to promote justice, democracy, and sustainability within the current system while at the same time refusing to accept the latter as the best (or the only) possible system—and thus fighting for overcoming it.

Note

1. There is of course no guarantee that democratic processes will generate sustainable and just policies. Promoting sustainability and social justice requires challenging the power of those actors that currently benefit from an unjust and unsustainable system—and this in turn requires democratization through the redistribution of power away from the top and toward the bottom. Indeed, since powerful individuals and organizations benefiting from the current system want to maintain it, a radical transformation will have to come from those actors that are today powerless and struggle to seize power. Yet, however essential, democratization alone is not enough: a politics of culture that challenges consumerist/materialist visions of the good life and nourishes global solidarity is also necessary for making democracy converge with sustainability and global justice.

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