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Overcoming the jobs– versus–environment dilemma: a feminist analysis of the foundational economy

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Abstract: This paper examines the potential of the foundational economy as an industrial policy strategy for addressing the challenges posed by the socio-ecological transformation. Grounded in Marxist and feminist theories, the analysis sets out to deconstruct the jobs–versus–environment dilemma, revealing that dignified employment and climate mitigation are jointly imperiled by the capitalist mode of production. Nonetheless, ambitious environmental policies will necessitate structural economic changes and hence labor reallocations. In this context, the paper seeks to establish links between the foundational economy concept – which is primarily concerned with economic development and industrial policy – and sustainability research. I contend that the foundational economy emerges as a promising avenue for addressing potential adverse effects of the socio-ecological transformation for two main reasons. First, it serves as a practical guide for necessary labor reallocations, proposing the absorption of workers into low-carbon, welfare-oriented sectors. Second, it functions as a discursive strategy that directly engages with workers’ self-perception and concerns, prioritizing community health and offering socially sustainable and meaningful employment. Despite these merits, the paper underscores the need for the foundational economy to address feminist critiques of labor and unpaid social reproduction to fully unlock its transformative potential. Additionally, the role of trade unions in supporting and shaping the foundational economy warrants further investigation, urging future research to delineate the positionality and strategies of trade unions in the consolidation of this economic approach.

Keywords: employment, foundational economy, industrial policy, social reproduction, socio-ecological transformation, trade unions

JEL codes: B51, B54, J21, J51, L52, Q56, Q57

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1 Introduction

Given the magnitude and urgency of climate change, it is imperative for states to decarbonize swiftly and decisively (IPCC, 2021). This decarbonization requires a rapid shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources and implies deep structural transformations. While equitably reconfiguring our collective mode of production and consumption in the Global North certainly poses a tremendous challenge, its negative economic repercussions are commonly overstated due to vested interests in the continuation of fossil fuel extraction and combustion (Schuster, 2015; Tigue, 2022). Ultimately, this overemphasis on deindustrialization and employment loss creates a distorted discourse about a *jobs-versus-environment dilemma* (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2011).

From a theoretical standpoint, ecological integrity and workers' livelihoods do not stand in opposition to each other, but they are endangered by the same phenomenon: capitalism. On the one hand, workers are exploited by extracting their surplus value in the labor process; this intra-economic class conflict compromises working conditions and pay (Marx, 1976). On the other hand, capitalism 'cannibalizes' on its background conditions of possibility, and its inherent crisis tendencies derive from the premise that the accelerating logic of capital accumulation undermines its conditions of existence, amongst them the natural environment (Fraser, 2022).

Scholars use the – seemingly unrelated – concept of the foundational economy to describe a structural reorientation towards an economy that produces use values through physical and social infrastructures that promote well-being and prioritize the needs of individuals and communities (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). Hitherto, the idea has primarily been applied in the field of regional economic development to reduce social polarization (Calafati et al., 2019; Hansen, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this paper is motivated by the overarching question: *What is the potential of the foundational economy to overcome the jobs-versus-environment dilemma?* I aim to make two interconnected contributions. First, I seek to extend the literature on the foundational economy beyond the regional development perspective and toward the question of sustainability by examining how it may help resolve the employment and welfare concerns connected with the socio-ecological transformation. Second, I will scrutinize the concept from a feminist standpoint, revealing that it overlooks the role of unpaid care work and fails to reconsider the idea of work itself.

The paper is conceptualized as a theoretical literature review and outlined as follows. In section 2, I will introduce the jobs-versus-environment dilemma and reflect on its theoretical validity. Section 3

presents the foundational economy concept, situating it in the discourse on structural economic change and the socio-ecological transformation. In section 4, I will assess the approach using a feminist lens, inquiring its interrelation with social reproduction. Section 5 concludes.

2 The jobs–versus–environment dilemma as hegemonic capitalist discourse

Räthzel and Uzzell (2011) first formulated the jobs–versus–environment dilemma to characterize potential tensions between employment conservation and environmental policies. Convinced that changes in the production process are both a central component of emission reduction measures and an inevitable consequence of climate change, they emphasize the role of trade unions as social actors in influencing this transformation. Problematizing how “trade unions are typically represented as standing in the way of climate change measures” (p. 1216) despite striking evidence for the macroeconomic advantages of a low-carbon transition (e. g., European Commission, 2019; Neale, 2010; Pollin et al., 2009), the authors argue that workers’ perceptions are more strongly influenced by company-level narratives about strict environmental regulations imposing redundancies.

Based on discourse analysis of interviews with trade union officials, Räthzel and Uzzell (2011) establish four distinct trade union strategies toward environmental policies. Unions of the first type, ‘technological fix’, believe that economic growth and emission reductions are reconcilable through efficiency improvements and technological advancements. Second, the ‘social transformation’ discourse is found in trade unions that acknowledge the necessity of societal change but recognize that the identity-shaping nature of work exacerbates the fear of job loss. The third ideal type accentuates horizontal ‘mutual interest’, cooperation, and solidarity between workers. Finally, the ‘social movement’ perspective situates trade unions in a larger context of representing broader societal interests; this self-perception exemplifies *social movement unionism*, which describes trade unions with a radical agenda for social and economic change and the capacity to lead community struggles beyond its membership (Moody, 1997).

Industrialized countries need to undergo economic transformations which will certainly entail fundamental changes in economic structure and hence significant labor reallocations (e. g., European Commission, 2019; Krishnan et al., 2022). Therefore, while the macroeconomic net employment effect of a zero-carbon economy is expected to be positive, the dilemma that workers perceive may indeed manifest in their lived realities, especially for those employed in fossil fuel dependent industries (Czako,

2020; IEA, 2022). Nonetheless, I argue that this transformational process must not inevitably entail adverse economic consequences as postulated by the jobs–versus–environment dilemma. In the remainder of this section, I thus aim to deconstruct this notion theoretically by drawing on traditional Marxist theory as well as more recent Eco-Marxist and feminist insights.

The jobs–versus–environment dilemma is constituted by the fact that capitalism “has tied working-class survival to the infinite expansion of the forces of production, including the production of waste” (Barca, 2020, p. 43). Within a capitalist system, limiting the expansion of production and its ecological impact would hence imply material losses for the working class.¹ Reversing the causality of this claim allows us to comprehend that in theory, ecological integrity and workers’ livelihoods do not contradict one other; on the contrary, both are imperiled by capitalism. From a Marxist perspective on intra-economic class conflict, workers are exploited by extracting their surplus value in the labor process, undermining their working conditions and pay (Marx, 1976). Moreover, Marx (1976, p. 284) himself pointed out an inherent interconnection between labor and nature, the former being a process “by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.”

While this transformation of nature is a universal fact applicable to all societies, its specific expression differs historically and spatially (Görg, 2003). The current domination of nature by humans and the resulting ecological crisis therefore stem from the capitalist form of the labor–nature relationship – i. e., the primacy of the valorization process by which abstract labor produces exchange values and maximizes the surplus value appropriated by capitalists – which threatens “the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker” (Marx, 1976, p. 638). At the core of this argument lie processes of *primitive accumulation* which have separated workers from their means of subsistence and therefore divorced labor from nature (Wissen & Brand, 2021). Essentially, *Marx’s ecology* already recognized the fundamental contradiction between the formal logic of capital and the material logic of nature (Saito, 2017). Labor power and non-human nature are jointly exploited in capitalist production which is systematically indifferent to their reproductive needs.

Complementing this insight with a feminist theory of capitalism’s boundary struggles extends our understanding of the labor–nature relationship beyond the production process itself. Specifically, Fraser (2022) illuminates capitalism’s ‘cannibalistic’ relation to its non-economic conditions of possibility, namely social reproduction, nonhuman nature, wealth extraction from racialized subjects, and public

¹ I deliberately disregard the idea of green economic growth – which may theoretically evade this dilemma – due to scientific evidence for its unfeasibility (e. g., Hickel & Kallis, 2020).

power. In the context of the jobs–versus–environment dilemma, the *externalization and appropriation of nonhuman nature* are the distinctive features of capitalist economies.

Similar to Marx’s original elaborations, Fraser (2022) posits that capitalism’s inherent crisis tendencies derive from the premise that the accelerating logic of capital accumulation systematically undermines its finite conditions of existence. Yet, she broadens Marx’s critique by understanding capitalism not merely as an economic system of production and exchange but as an institutionalized social order that encompasses the relation of the economy to its indispensable presuppositions while presenting them as external to it. Fraser (2022, pp. 83–84) captures the relation between capital and natural processes in capitalist societies in four words: Capitalist economies *depend* on nature while ontologically *dividing* them into two separate realms, where only the former produces value while the latter is stylized as infinitely self-replenishing. This results in the *disavowal* of the ecological reproduction costs that constitute the accumulation of value and ultimately in the *destabilization* of its vital ecosystems. She adds that it is specifically the capitalist class that appropriates the basic conditions of life on earth, hence controlling and slowly eliminating workers’ means of sustenance. Feminist theory, too, debunks the dilemma between employment and environmental protection: Capitalist societies are entrenched with class-based economic contradictions and simultaneously produce recurrent ecological crises.

Consequently, the alleged trade-off between effective climate policies and safeguarding workers’ livelihoods must be considered a hegemonic strategy; for recognizing how in reality, both are compromised by capitalism, would fundamentally challenge how we organize the economy. Again, I do not claim that workers will not be affected by job loss during the transition to a zero-carbon economy – this will be inevitable. Nonetheless, Räthzel and Uzzel’s (2011) study reveals that unions’ perceptions of the socio-ecological transformation are malleable and how they can indeed positively contribute to reshaping production processes in a more equitable and sustainable manner. As this would, however, require anti-capitalist sentiments and strategies, the fossil fuel and other environmentally destructive industries harness workers’ subjective concerns to obstruct more radical change (Schuster, 2015; Tigue, 2022). Following Fraser’s (2022, p. 77) assertion that “safeguarding the planet requires building a counterhegemony” which is trans-environmental and suited to resolve capitalism’s multifaceted crises in unison, I will now turn towards examining the potential of the foundational economy for this pursuit.

3 Mapping the foundational economy: socio-ecological transformations and structural change

After having shown that meaningful, non-exploitative employment and environmental protection are not exclusionary but rather symbiotic objectives in (Eco-)Marxist and feminist thought, this section is dedicated to practical solutions for the jobs–versus–environment dilemma. In the current context of fossil fuel-based mass production and consumption in the Global North (Wissen & Brand, 2021), many people’s livelihoods depend on unsustainable jobs and significant parts of the workforce will need to relocate into low-carbon industries (e. g., European Commission, 2019; Krishnan et al., 2022). As political foresight is imperative to cushion the economic repercussions of this structural economic change, I will now interrogate the potential of a strategy revolving around the foundational economy to anticipate and preemptively address workers’ concerns about climate change mitigation.

Marxist and feminist scholars alike implore that the labor–nature relationship be transformed by replacing capitalism with a use-value oriented economy which is consciously organized in line with societal and ecological needs. Moreover, the feminist perspective puts particular emphasis on cooperation and care as guiding principles and stresses the importance of infrastructure provision. In 2018, the Foundational Economy Collective published a comprehensive analysis of the foundational economy which strongly resonates with these claims. Beyond a theoretical and historical description, the authors present concrete political proposals to restore the collective foundations of everyday life.

At the most basic level, the book is concerned with the access and quality of what is called *foundational consumption*. This concept describes the essential yet mundane goods and services upon which all households depend in their daily lives and captures the social as well as material infrastructure required for their provision. For further clarification, the authors distinguish between two welfare-critical domains (pp. 20–21): While the *material foundational economy* provides the cables, pipes, and networks which supply daily essentials like water, food, electricity, or retail banking to households, the *providential foundational economy* consists of public-sector universal services such as healthcare and education as well as income transfers available for all citizens. Problematizing the outsourcing and privatization which have impaired the non-market provision of these goods and services since the ascent of financialized capitalism in the early 1980s, the Collective (2018) asserts that states’ primary responsibility is supplying this infrastructure.

Since the foundational economy pivots on citizen entitlements to these utilities and universal services,

it ultimately assumes a consumption-based perspective, rethinking the notion of economic welfare as warranting “minimum standards for all citizens” (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018, p. 14). Contrary to distributing welfare through individual consumption, which depends on households’ market income and therefore exacerbates inequalities, foundational consumption is guaranteed through infrastructure. Nonetheless, this view has consequential repercussions for production and employment. The authors criticize European policymakers’ emphasis on ‘glamorous’ high-technology manufacturing which strives for international competitiveness as source of economic welfare because it provides very little employment; across Europe, 4% of the active population is employed in high-tech manufacturing or knowledge-intensive high-tech services (p. 15). Instead, they propose an industrial policy that supports ‘sheltered’ activities in the foundational economy which currently offers a source of employment to 40% of the European workforce (p. 3). As these sectors usually do not compete internationally, they entail opportunities for a local, community-based determination of working conditions (p. 23).

With this brief outline of the foundational economy in mind, we are able to conceptualize its relation to the jobs–versus–environment dilemma. It is striking that the Collective (2018) itself does not explicitly establish links to the ecological crisis and environmental struggles – for instance, they are not mentioned once in the introduction.² Yet, I believe that the foundational economy concept can contribute to overcoming the jobs–versus–environment dilemma in three interconnected ways.

Above all else, facilitating the access to and improving the quality of material and provisional foundational infrastructure harbors the potential for considerable employment creation in ecologically sustainable sectors. On the one hand, the provisional foundational infrastructure – services like education or childcare – inherently has a low environmental impact as it is labor intensive (ILO, 2018, p. 12). Although these sectors already employ large parts of the workforce, the escalating care crisis clearly demonstrates that education, health, and childcare can absorb many more workers (Fraser, 2016; ILO, 2018).³ Material foundational services such as housing, transport, and food, on the other hand, unde-

² The main application of the approach to date has been to design policies for regional economic development, as the focus on citizens’ rights and rebuilding the economy to serve communities’ needs is indeed well-suited to address interregional disparities and social polarization (Calafati et al., 2019; Hansen, 2022). According to the Foundational Economy Collective (2018, p. 11) itself, job creation and economic growth in laggard regions are of central importance, which is aligned with the agenda on place-based industrial policy (Südekum, 2021).

³ Productivity is a crucial variable for employment generation in the foundational economy. The authors challenge commonly held beliefs about productivity-enhancing technology, which usually carries a positive connotation in the context of international competitiveness, and propose a novel perspective which replaces the aim of monetizing innovation with supporting workers’ needs (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018, p. 31). Low productivity in the providential foundational economy may even be desirable because it allows for employing more people, alleviating the jobs–versus–environment dilemma (Froud et al., 2020). Crucially, this positive effect of ‘deficient’ productivity levels is conditional

niably require further decarbonization (Calafati et al., 2019). This necessity facilitates additional employment creation; for instance, scaling up the deployment of renewable energy in line with the EU's REPowerEU targets alone will provide 3.5 million jobs until 2030 (European Commission, 2023).

Second, the foundational approach may help overcome the narrative that pits environmental protection against workers by cultivating socially sustainable employment. It serves as a strategic approach that re-centers workers in- and outside of their work, safeguarding meaningful – and low-carbon – employment as well as the prosperity of their communities. Seeing workers and trade unions as agents of change in the socio-ecological transition aligns with Barca's (2012) theory of *working-class environmentalism*: Due to workers' alienation from nature, the essential precondition for synergies between labor and environmental struggles is a focus on workers' health and the wellbeing of their communities instead. Consequentially, this fosters a social movement unionism as identified by Räthzel and Uzzell (2011; see also Moody, 1997). Putting technology at the service of workers instead of seeking to replace them, the foundational economy prioritizes the democratization of workplaces and “restores the importance of unappreciated and unacknowledged tacit skills” (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018, pp. 30–31). Moreover, the authors propose to fundamentally transform the relationship between corporations and the state by constitutionally transferring the operations of privately owned companies into the public domain (p. 5). As argued above, organizing the economy through social enterprises implies determining working conditions at the local level and provides greater say to workers. Finally, Räthzel and Uzzell's (2011) analysis revealed a decisive concern of workers in unsustainable industries to be the loss of identity – catering to one's community's essential needs can potentially offer a newfound sense of purpose.

Third, the policymaking method presented by the Collective (2018) at least partially resolves the tensions inherent in capitalist societies which ultimately produce the jobs-versus-environment dilemma. Workers are currently made dependent on exploitative, ecologically harmful jobs because personal income is the sole guarantor of wellbeing; strengthening foundational consumption and thus decoupling all citizens' livelihoods from their personal income levels may ease the fear of temporary job loss. The potential of nurturing neighborhoods and connecting communities as a supplementary source of prosperity is illustrated by a Welsh pilot project: Motivated by the detrimental economic consequences of deindustrialization in the twentieth century, the government introduced foundational principles in several peripheral regions which specifically aim to improve citizens' quality of life and impel young

on wages being decoupled from productivity and rather determined by the social value of respective activities; otherwise, low productivity will further undermine the wages of care workers (Froud et al., 2020; ILO, 2018, p. 12).

inhabitants to remain in the area (Cunnington Wynn et al., 2022; Welsh Government, 2023).

Despite these strengths, the foundational project entails several caveats. The first refers to its territorial and temporal scope: Thus far, the concept has only been applied to local contexts. While the authors posit that “from such radical experiments can come learning and political mobilisation that begin to shift constraints” (2018, pp. 6–7), it remains unclear how the foundational economy approach could be scaled up to the (inter-)national level. Moreover, the pilot projects cannot provide insights into how policies that have to date only been employed to *react* to previous damage of deindustrialization could be translated into actively initiating structural economic change. Second, a common argument against focusing on essential goods and services is that their public provision depends on the success of tradable, internationally competitive industries to secure funding through taxes. However, the Foundational Economy Collective (2018, p. 18) argues that the question which sector acts as ‘engine’ of the economy is not a technical but a normative one, subject to political contestation: “the line between tax revenue producing and consuming can be changed by legislative fiat as privatisation and nationalisation move activities between state and private sector”. Finally, while the foundational economy is promising on a conceptual level, it is crucial to concede that the reality of such radical change will involve substantial frictions, most prominently the skills retraining required by large-scale labor reallocations (Czako, 2020; European Commission, 2019; IEA, 2022).

All in all, an industrial policy approach that promotes the foundational economy to preemptively induce structural change produces powerful levers for alleviating the jobs–versus–environment dilemma associated with a radical socio-ecological transformation. Shifting policy emphasis towards essential, welfare-critical goods and services is both a discursive strategy and a practical solution: It effectively addresses workers’ concerns of employment loss and expands alternative sources of wellbeing, most importantly resilient communities, universal access to foundational consumption, and the prospect of meaningful, ecologically and socially sustainable jobs.

4 A fundament for the foundational?

Despite its pronounced considerations of services that can be subsumed under the concept of *care work*, the Foundational Economy Collective (2018) disregards the gendered distribution of care responsibilities both within households and in the care industry. Therefore, I will refer to Fraser's (2016; 2022) feminist theory of capitalism to assess how the contradictions between capital and care relate to the foundational economy approach.

Feminist scholars conceptualize labor as transcending (industrial) wage labor, which produces the means of life and means of production, and extends it to *social reproductive* activities. Generally, social reproduction encompasses but also goes beyond care work, referring to "all the activities, social relationships and institutions that are necessary for the reproduction of life, now and for the next generations. [It] includes the renewal of the workforce, caring for oneself and the others – dependent persons as well as non-dependent persons – and caring for the environment. It implies maintaining the social fabric and social institutions" (Guérin et al., 2021, p. 13). While social reproduction is one essential precondition for any society, capitalism externalizes and appropriates this labor in a way that fosters a contradiction between its own accelerating logic of surplus accumulation and the tender, patient logic of caring. Fraser (2016, p. 103) postulates that the crisis, which is latent most of the time, becomes acute whenever "the logic of economic production overrides that of social reproduction."

She delineates how economic activities were facilitated through social reproductive labor in three distinct periods of capitalist development. Indeed, the gendered dichotomy between paid commodity production and the invisible, often unpaid realm of reproduction that perpetuates the subordination of women is an inherent characteristic of capitalism; in earlier epochs, while a similar division may have existed, reproductive labor was publicly recognized, valued, and deemed crucial for upholding the socioeconomic fabric of society (Fraser, 2022, p. 10). The initial regime thus pertains to the competitive liberalism of nineteenth-century capitalism, which compelled industrial laborers to autonomously manage reproduction within a separate domestic realm. During this phase of 'housewifization', the bourgeois concept of domesticity cast women as the organizers of social reproduction within households: "As a result, the struggle to ensure the integrity of social reproduction became entangled with the defense of male domination" (Fraser, 2016, p. 106). The second, Fordist regime emerged in the postwar period as state-managed capitalism. To mitigate the self-destabilizing tendencies of capitalism, democratic welfare states internalized and stabilized reproduction through social welfare provision while the family wage earned by the male breadwinner perpetuated the gendered family concept.

Fraser (2016) asserts that the contradiction between the imperatives of capital accumulation and care has become acute and resulted in a crisis of social reproduction during the third regime. In the current state of financialized capitalism, neoliberal policies have disrupted the preceding system of care provision through two conflicting processes: While the discouragement of public and corporate investments in social welfare led to an increased reliance on domestic care labor or paid care services, the liberal-individualist and gender-egalitarian vision of female empowerment and the two-income household have drawn women into the paid workforce, diminishing their capacity for unpaid reproductive work. Portraying reproduction as a hindrance to progress has resulted in a bifurcation: Wealthy individuals and families have commodified reproductive tasks, addressing the care deficit by employing migrant workers from peripheral nations (Herrera, 2020). Conversely, for the majority who cannot afford paid care, reproduction has become reprivatized, imposing a double burden on women who juggle their gender-assigned roles as wives, mothers, or homemakers alongside aspirations for professional careers akin to their male counterparts (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). The Foundational Economy Collective (2018, p. 2) similarly problematizes the subordination of essential services and infrastructures under neoliberalism due to processes of privatization and outsourcing.

Beyond this congruent historical classification, the foundational economy approach and Fraser's theory of social reproduction are characterized by an ambivalent relationship. The Collective (2018) confronts the contradictions between capital and care provided by the providential foundational economy and challenges economic policy to acknowledge the centrality of infrastructures and essential services. Exhibiting a feminist understanding of social reproduction, they enrich its commonly understood function of replenishing the labor force with a holistic view of reproductive activities as maintaining the social fabric of life itself. By conceptually intertwining the wellbeing of workers and communities, the foundational project is concerned with "expanding human capabilities and establishing the conditions of flourishing" (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018, p. 6). In line with social reproduction theorists' claims, it aims to reverse the capitalist separation of the reproductive from the productive realm of the economy, which devalues and appropriates the former despite being fundamentally dependent on it, by making visible the irrefutable role of care work (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018, p. 30; Fraser, 2016, p. 103).

Nonetheless, an analytical void gapes at the core of the concept. To offer practical solutions for policymakers, which necessarily implies a state-centered perspective, the Collective (2018) concentrates on expanding the publicly organized provision of remunerated care services. A corollary of this empha-

sis is the authors' *disregard for non-remunerated care* performed in the domestic sphere, ignoring the intricate interplay between paid and unpaid care labor – both of which are shouldered predominantly by women, which presently constitutes the essence of gendered inequalities (Fraser, 2016, 2022).

Ultimately, the authors seem indifferent to the fact that the foundational economy also requires a fundamen-
tament of unpaid social reproduction: As any society, one modeled after the foundational approach, too, depends on a healthy and educated labor force. Turning a blind eye to unpaid care work exacerbates the subordination of women in the name of progressive industrial policies. The Collective (2018) may believe that the absolute amount of unpaid work should be reduced by shifting it into the public sphere, hoping that this will also alleviate its gendered distribution. This belief is not only unrealistic because paid care work is also predominantly performed by women (ILO, 2018, p. 172); it also reflects a refusal to rethink the significance of employment and its relation to domestic social reproductive activities. I argue that this neglect of unpaid care work misconstrues the role of community ties – which cannot be fostered through foundational consumption alone. From a radical feminist perspective, social reproduction embraces emancipatory and revolutionary elements, as scholars explore the links between transcending capitalism and transforming our perceptions of kinship, family, and social connections (Lewis, 2023). Feminist Marxists hence implore to solve the crisis of care through decommodifying and socializing reproductive work instead of marketizing it (Dengler & Lang, 2022; Lewis, 2019; Morrow & Parker, 2020). Moreover, while creating non-exploitative, meaningful workplaces is a legitimate policy priority, using remunerated labor as a focal point forestalls the opportunity of integrating a comprehensive critique of work into sustainability research. Engaging with the post-work literature to scrutinize the structural dependencies on work in modern societies may elevate the deconstruction of the jobs-versus-environment dilemma (Hoffmann & Paulsen, 2020).

5 Conclusions

I set out to explore the foundational economy's potential as a policy strategy for the socio-ecological transformation in light of (1) the jobs-versus-environment dilemma and (2) its implications for the realm of unpaid reproductive work. Drawing on Marxist and feminist theory, I deconstructed the dilemma and showed that instead of opposing each other, dignified employment and planetary health are simultaneously threatened by the capitalist mode of production. The foundational economy approach may be valuable for resolving the potentially negative side-effects of the socio-ecological transformation for two reasons: It provides a practical guide to necessary labor reallocations, accentuating that workers can be absorbed by low-carbon, welfare-creating sectors; and it is a discursive strategy which directly addresses workers' self-perception and subjective concerns by focusing on their communities' health while providing socially sustainable and meaningful employment. However, to harness the foundational project's full potential for generating transformative change, it must engage with feminist critiques of labor in general and the role of unpaid social reproduction in particular.

Seeking to provide a conceptual answer to the research question, I disregarded its similarly significant empirical aspects. Therefore, my insights must be complemented with a quantitative assessment of whether the foundational economy will provide sufficient employment for those currently dependent on ecologically destructive activities, perhaps considering relevant policy scenarios such as productivity levels or working time reductions. Moreover, I abstracted from the concrete role of trade unions in this struggle; further research should hence delineate the positionality and strategies of trade unions in the consolidation of the foundational economy.

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