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Emission Reductions Without Addressing Economic Inequality? Proportional Justice as a Path to a Fair Green Transition

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Abstract

The urgency of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 has intensified political commitments to a Green Transition. Yet, current strategies often overlook the structural links between carbon emissions and economic inequality. This paper argues that effective and fair climate action within developed liberal democracies must directly address economic disparities. I develop this claim through three main arguments. First, since the wealthiest 1% are disproportionately responsible for emissions, climate justice should shift its normative focus from the poor to the super-rich. While this resonates with emission limitarianism, its isolationist framework remains too narrow. Instead, I propose a non-monist integrationist approach that embeds climate justice within broader concerns of distributive justice. Second, extreme economic inequality erodes democratic institutions, fostering plutocratic tendencies, and also enables the super-rich to obstruct decarbonization through lobbying, litigation, and climate change denialism. Third, in developed liberal democracies, climate action centred solely on subsistence needs or poverty eradication lacks democratic legitimacy. If seen as worsening inequality, such policies face backlash. These concerns lead me to advocate for what I call the principle of proportionality, which requires that wealth and income inequalities be contained within well-defined limits. This principle offers a more viable and just framework for the Green Transition than competing distributive criteria.

Keywords: Green Transition; Emission Limitarianism; Economic Limitarianism; The Principle of Proportionality.

Summary: Introduction; I. Emission Limitarianism and The Shift of The Distributive Focus from The Poor to The Super-Rich Individuals; II. A Non-monist Integrationist Approach: The Proportional Justice for the Green Transition; III. A Family Quarrel: The Advantages of Proportional Justice over Economic Limitarianism for the Green Transition; Conclusion; References.

Introduction

The imperative for a rapid and far-reaching Green Transition to meet the Paris Agreement's mitigation goals has become central to international political discourse. According to the sixth AR6 Report and other official reports and treaties aimed at limiting global warming to around 1.5°C or 2°C, we should achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 (IPCC 2023). To achieve it, according to the World Inequality Report, "[this] implies a sustainable per capita budget, compatible with the +2°C temperature limit, of 3.4 tonnes per person per annum between now and 2050. This value is about half of the current global average" (2022, 118). However, one of the most significant problems we face today in achieving the carbon budget is the sheer fact that: (a) greenhouse gas emissions are highly *unequally* distributed among agents (countries and individuals); furthermore, (b) there is a direct and proven correlation between emissions-generating activities and the level of those *agents' affluence*.

Some numbers can clearly describe this picture. According to the World Inequality Report, per capita emissions in Sub-Saharan Africa (1.6 tCO2e/capita per annum) are just one quarter of the global average. Thus, average emissions in Sub-Saharan Africa are close to 50% above the 1.5°C sustainable level and about half of the 2°C budget (Chancel *et al.* 2022, 119). At the other end of the spectrum, per capita emissions in North America are 21 tCO2e/capita (three times the world average and six times higher than the 2°C sustainable level). In between, Europe has an average of 9.7 tCO2e/capita (Italy is around 9 tCO2e/capita). Europe's data are similar to those of East Asia and Russia and Central Asia, whose averages fall in the 8.6-9.9 tCO2e/capita range. It is 1.5 times the world average and around three times the 2°C sustainable level (Chancel *et al.* 2022, 119). Furthermore, as confirmed by the Oxfam Report *Carbon Inequality Kills* (Oxfam 2024), the richest 1% of the global population is responsible for 16% of total emissions, more than the poorest two-thirds combined. And if everyone emitted at the rate of the richest 1%, the entire global carbon budget would be exhausted in under five months (Ibid.).

Despite those critical numbers, carbon inequalities *within* countries are even larger. For example, in the USA, the bottom 50% and the top 1% emit, respectively, 9.7 and 269.3 tCO2e/capita (around 27 times more). In European countries, the carbon inequality is smaller, yet it remains significant. For example, in Germany, France, and Italy, the top 1% emit, respectively, 19.9, 15.5, and 12.1 times more carbon than the bottom 50%. In some developing countries, domestic carbon inequality is even more pronounced. For example, in Chile and

China, the top 1% emit 40 and 146.3 times more carbon, respectively, than the bottom 50%.

The current inequality in emissions and economic resources raises pressing questions of distributive justice. Most notably, from a political and philosophical perspective, it is more critical than ever to ask: How should the socioeconomic costs of climate policies aimed at the Green Transition be *fairly distributed* among individuals alive today? In the current literature on climate justice, this question is often addressed by considering the distributive implications between *countries*. It is easy to understand why this approach is dominant. Countries are seen as the primary responsible agents in the current international scenario. In the absence of a supranational global institution and given the worldwide nature of the climate change problem, states appear to be the principal subjects with the power to pursue the Green Transition.

In the debate on global distributive justice applied to carbon inequality, two main egalitarian considerations have emerged and gained significant consensus. *First*, based on the historical and current levels of emissions, high-income developed countries from the Global North should bear primary responsibility for emission reductions, to the point that some studies indicate these countries have no carbon budget left (Williges *et al.* 2022). *Second*, but no less important, given that fossil fuel energy models remain the most cost-effective, this entails allowing developing countries to emit greenhouse gases to meet subsistence needs or fight poverty. The remaining carbon budget should be allocated in a manner that enables the poorest and least developed countries to eradicate poverty and ensure that all citizens have a sufficient standard of living (see Shue 2010; Moellendorf 2014, 2022). In this respect, and not surprisingly, sufficientarianism has predominated in the climate justice debate.

While the two aforementioned distributive criteria are plausible when discussing the distribution of the remaining budget at the global level, the debate shaped by these egalitarian considerations has largely overlooked the carbon inequality between individuals *within* their own countries. In particular, little attention has been paid to the socioeconomic costs of implementing the climate policies each country would need to pursue domestically to achieve this goal (Williges *et al.* 2022). Even when issues related to domestic carbon inequalities have emerged forcefully – for example, due to the regressive effects of carbon taxes – the debate has often provided normative answers within the sufficientarian framework. In doing so, rather than addressing inequality among citizens, the discussion on climate justice typically focuses exclusively on poor people. This normative orientation is implicit, albeit rarely highlighted, in the famous debate on *subsistence* vs. *luxury* emissions (Shue 2010). Although at first glance

the target appears to be luxury emissions (i.e., those emissions beyond what human beings' basic necessities require to have a decent life), the primary political commitment is to use the remaining GHG emissions allowed to prioritise and then *satisfy* people's basic needs. However, this dichotomic classification overlooks the significant difference between non-subsistence emissions and luxury emissions, or, in other words, between the non-urgent needs of the middle class and those of the wealthiest 1% or 0.1%. Fortunately, this normative distributive consideration has recently been introduced into the debate on the carbon budget (see Chancel and Piketty 2015; Piketty 2020; World Inequality Report 2022; Corvino 2024, 2025).

In line with this recent literature, my aim here is to argue that climate mitigation and adaptation actions should be guided by a normative principle aimed at reducing economic inequality. I believe we have not only normative but also motivational reasons, particularly in liberal democratic societies, to *convince* average citizens today to assume the significant burdens of financing the Green Transition. Indeed, due to the undeniable temporal asymmetry between the benefits and costs of climate policies—present generations shouldering special burdens while future generations are most likely to reap the benefits—the Green Transition requires not only extraordinary political will from institutions but also substantive civic engagement (Moellendorf 2022). In liberal democracies, this motivation should also (but not only) be fostered through ambitious distributive policies to address socioeconomic inequalities and, at the same time, enhance the inclusiveness and effectiveness of democratic institutions. In other words, in light of Gosseries (2014, 2023), the Green Transition should not be viewed as a neutral process, but rather as an "opportunity concept" to have a more just society now.

The paper will proceed as follows. In the first section, I argue for shifting the normative focus of climate justice from the poor to the *super-rich*, in line with the so-called "emission limitarianism" (Corvino 2024, 2025). Although this distributive position rightly targets the top emitters, I believe it still falls short by advocating an isolationist approach that is too narrow and short-term. [1] In the second section, I defend what I shall refer to as a *non-monist integrationist position*. Drawing on Rawlsian insights, my non-monist integrationist position will endorse a pluralist and context-sensitive framework: in simple terms, *different types of goods require different distributive principles*, and domestic justice may rightfully differ from global or intergenerational justice. In this respect,

[1] For other attempts to apply limitarianism to climate change and ecological limits, see Hickey 2023 and Green 2023.

I propose the "principle of proportionality" (see Alì and Caranti 2021; Alì 2022) aimed at containing domestic economic inequality within certain well-defined limits. This principle offers a stronger alternative to other dominant distributive criteria, such as sufficientarianism, the difference principle, prioritarianism, and moderate egalitarianism. In particular, I will demonstrate how the "principle of proportionality" can serve as a more comprehensive normative guide to mitigate economic inequality *during* and *after* the Green Transition. Finally, in the third section, for those who might object that economic limitarianism can achieve the same results, I will highlight the main differences and advantages between economic limitarianism and the principle of proportionality. My conclusion is that addressing inequality also enhances the implementation of the green transition.

I. Emission Limitarianism and The Shift of The Distributive Focus from The Poor to The Super-Rich Individuals

The climate justice debate typically focuses on the *impoverishment* of populations already living in poverty or at risk of falling into it due to the effects of climate change and the corresponding mitigation measures. I do not deny that a normative focus on 'subsistence emissions' or the "Anti-Poverty Principle" (Shue 2010; Moellendorf 2014, 2022) can help as a crucial distributive constraint on Green Transition policies in the current scenario; nonetheless, these sufficientarian criteria are unable to capture the full range of distributive conflicts related to the Green Transition at the domestic level.

First of all, sufficientarianism typically overlooks extreme inequalities in emissions between the super-rich and the rest of the population. Once the emissions budget for meeting people's basic needs is satisfied, it cannot capture the moral significance of emission distribution *above* the sufficiency line. However, as Corvino (2025) correctly highlighted, there is a crucial distinction to be made between *subsistence*, non-subsistence, and *high-wealth* emissions. In particular, in high-income liberal democracies, the majority of the middle-class population, which typically produces those 'non-subsistence' emissions, primarily wants to know how the costs of the green transition will be shared among those individuals above the poverty (or subsistence) line and the most affluent. See, for example, the widespread protests by the yellow-jacket movement against the French Carbon Tax and the recent protests by farmers against the EU and national governments (Toygüra and Sojka 2025).

One of the main problems of emissions linked to the super-rich lies not merely in their disproportionate emissions compared to the rest of the population, but

also in their insensitivity to price mechanisms and social solidarity. The super-rich have economic resources to pay for the externalities associated with carbon taxes and carbon offsets without changing their consumption patterns.

Carbon taxes typically have regressive distributive effects because, on average, lower-income households allocate a larger share of their income to basic goods that contribute to pollution. [2] Thus, carbon taxes seriously risk exacerbating economic inequalities. Most importantly, wealthy individuals can easily afford the additional costs associated with carbon taxes. Carbon offsets are also ineffective in addressing emissions from the rich and super-rich. Carbon offsets are based on the carbon trading system, which enables individuals and companies (including states) to pay others for reducing emissions instead of reducing them themselves. These mechanisms to avoid cutting individual emissions are available only to affluent people, particularly the super-rich, who seriously risk becoming a carbon aristocracy (Corvino 2025).

In light of these considerations, Corvino (2024, 2025) proposes emission limitarianism, inspired by the same axiological premise as Robeyns' limitarianism, namely that no one should have more economic resources than are necessary to fully flourish in life (Robeyns 2022, 2024). The wealth surplus above a certain rich-line can be allocated to other morally relevant goals, such as addressing urgent unmet needs or promoting substantive political equality. In the case of emission limitarianism, the currency is greenhouse gas emissions. It prescribes an emissions ceiling that prohibits high-wealth emissions from goods and services that do not contribute to achieving a fully flourishing life. In other words, the super-rich emit emissions for luxury goods that can be considered wasteful because they do not substantially enhance their flourishing life. For instance, you can travel from London to New York in business class instead of using a private jet, without this trade-off reducing your chances of reaching a fully flourishing life.

For sure, while implementing Emissions Limitarianism is demanding, it is not unfeasible. There are two main paths. First, we can impose a prohibition on high-wealth emissions. For example, a ban on private jets, space travel, yachts, and other luxury high-emitting goods. However, it would have serious consequences for actors in the luxury industry, especially for workers. Second, we can apply very progressive carbon taxes (Chancel and Piketty 2015; Piketty 2020) to disincentivise the super-rich from using high-emission goods, raise

[2] A partial solution is that carbon revenues might be distributed equally per capita, mitigating regressive effects.

significant revenues to reinvest in the green transition, and cover the costs of workers in the luxury industry to transition their jobs. It is, however, true that even very high progressive carbon taxation could be absorbed by the 0.1% of the top super-rich. They could maintain their aristocratic privilege to produce emissions as they please, but still at a high economic cost (however, for oligarchs like Bezos, Musk, or Zuckerberg, this extra cost would be negligible).

Now, is Emissions Limitarianism attractive? Its strong point seems to be its isolationist approach. Corvino (2025) wants simply to know "whether it is possible to justify policies that would curb high-wealth emissions without recourse to a specific theory of justice in holdings" (3). In this sense, the aim is to defend the idea of an emissions ceiling on purely climatic grounds. The isolationist approach certainly has the merit of realising the shift in the focus from the poor to the super-rich in emissions distribution. And in doing so, first, it seems to be an attractive strategy because the super-rich have no valid counterargument against emission limitarianism, since the emissions ceiling will neither affect their wealth nor prevent them from acquiring social goods commensurate with their wealth (of course, provided they respect the emissions ceiling). Thus, they can remain very rich. Second, it seems to be a realistic strategy because the super-rich possess economic power that can be converted into political power; therefore, a policy that targets only their luxury habits but does not affect their wealth may encounter less resistance than robust redistributive policies. In other words, it is a way to escape the problem of current plutocratic tendencies, which rely on several mechanisms that easily convert wealth inequality into political inequality (Winters 2011; Gilens 2012; Moellendorf 2022). [3]

Although in the current debate, emissions limitarianism represents a significant step forward in terms of emission fairness, I believe it is insufficient, even from purely climatic grounds. This is because Green Transition is a complex phenomenon that requires socioeconomic costs (and cultural ones, too) that extend far beyond reductions in consumption emissions. [4] In other words, the zero-net emission target necessitates an extensive reconfiguration of our current capitalist economic system of production, distribution, and consumption. This means that climate justice requires a structural approach. As Moellendorf (2022, 125-128; 2024, 10) correctly asserts, the green transition challenge neither primarily concerns the moral failing of individuals nor collective action problems;

[3] These mechanisms cannot be fully neutralised by the so-called "isolationist strategy" summarised by the slogan *"keep the money out of politics*." See Christiano 2012; Alì and Caranti 2021; and Robeyns 2024.

[4] To the cultural-recognition dimension of climate justice, see Piroli 2025.

instead, it primarily concerns the background problem of political economy. He identifies four main problems: a) international structure problems; b) the need for policy trial and error; c) coordinating domestic regulators; and d) competing domestic interests. Here, I will focus on the last problem, as it pertains to distributive conflicts, and even Moellendorf (2024, 10) considers it the most serious of the four. In other words, the Green Transition will result in both winners and losers. Transitioning to a green economy carries risks of job losses, particularly in fossil fuel industries. Even though green sectors may grow, they may not be able to absorb all displaced workers in the short to medium term (e.g., the shift from combustion engines to electric vehicles in the EU). The lobbying resistance of these sectors will be increasingly stronger. The Green Transition also requires changes to a middle-class lifestyle and likely short-term sacrifices in well-being. Suppose the aim is to address the entire green transition process. In that case, a broader question remains: not only who will pay the full cost of the Green Transition, but also how it will shape the entire socioeconomic distribution in the future (hopefully) green society?

Emission limitarianism is welcome and indispensable, but I doubt that it can escape the problem of plutocratic tendencies. The risk of plutocracy undermines not only democratic processes but also climate mitigation policies, as the wealthiest individuals leverage their financial resources to obstruct decarbonization efforts through lobbying, litigation, and climate change denialism. But most importantly, I doubt that the super-rich, even if they could be "convinced" to drastically reduce their emissions through appropriate emission-limitarian policies, would refrain from using their economic countervailing power against the comprehensive redistributive policies necessary for the Green Transition. Some might argue that my concern is legitimate but pertains to how the overall burden of the Green Transition should be distributed, and that this can be treated as a separate issue from emissions reduction. Unfortunately, I do not believe this isolationist approach will be practical. Climate policies impose significant burdens on citizens and require overcoming both lobbying resistance and opposition to compensatory and redistributive measures. This requires a mass mobilisation in favour of the green transition (Moellendorf 2024). If climate policies are perceived as exacerbating economic disparities and plutocratic and technocratic tendencies, they risk resistance and delegitimisation from a large part of the population in liberal democracies (a phenomenon already evident). For this reason, I argue that, at least at the domestic level and in developed societies, a sufficientarian framework that guarantees adequate levels of subsistence or anti-poverty measures is insufficient to garner and mobilise public democratic support.

Put in these terms, and all things considered, even from "purely climatic

grounds", we need a conception of justice that can guide our climate policies towards a Green Transition beyond a merely isolationist framework.

II. A Non-monist Integrationist Approach: The Proportional Justice for the Green Transition

In light of Simon Caney's (2012) well-known analytical distinction, an integrationist approach to climate justice fundamentally differs from an isolationist approach by aiming to "integrate" climate justice into a broader account of global distributive justice. Although I agree that climate justice should be addressed within a broader account of social justice, my integrationist view differs in a fundamental aspect from the position of Global Egalitarians, who have primarily advanced the integrationist approach into the climate justice debate (Caney 2012); namely, I defend a non-monist integrationist approach.

Global Egalitarianism often assumes that: a) the scope of justice is global; b) inequalities are objectionable *per se*; and c) it does not make sense to refer to the fair distribution of a single (natural or not) resource, but we should care about inequality of well-being or a relevant total package of resources (McLaughlin 2024). By contrast, my non-monist integrationist approach disagrees with all three of these assumptions. Following Rawls (1971), I argue that, first, social justice should reflect a more complex picture, being sensitive to the own characteristics of each good as well as the social context. For example, as we know, the distributive pattern that applies to fundamental liberties and rights is quite different from that of income and wealth. Similarly, the Difference Principle applied to income and wealth distribution in the domestic domain is not extended to global and intergenerational justice, for which Rawls opts for a sufficientarian distributive pattern (respectively, the duty of assistance and the just savings principle). Second, inequalities are not objectionable *per se*, but rather because they undermine some basic moral or political value (for example, social status or political autonomy). [5] Thus, while Rawls's theory of global and intergenerational justice is not without criticism, I believe that a non-monist approach should characterise social justice. [6]

[5] In the literature, this point is highly contested, and I cannot fully engage with the debate here. For present purposes, it is important to clarify that, although I reject the claim that inequalities are intrinsically unjust, my account is not therefore merely instrumental. Rather, inequalities may be understood as "constitutively unjust"; see Gosepath 2021, 15; Alì 2022, 117-118.

[6] Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who to helped me clarify this point.

Therefore, according to my non-monist integrationism, there is nothing problematic, but rather appropriate, to distribute the remaining budget of emissions between countries according to specific distributive criteria, nor to adopt different ones at the domestic level among citizens. However, my approach is not isolationist, as it considers that such distribution (of emissions, as well as other resources) must respect a background moral-political conception that applies to the "basic structures" (Rawls 1971), or the "primary rules of society" (Alì 2022). In my view, background social injustices occur when a person or group lacks adequate power resources (both material and non-material) to be a co-author of the primary rules (political, legal, socioeconomic, etc.) that govern the social relations in which they are involved (Alì 2022). This is the heart of the so-called conception of "Proportional Justice" (Alì and Caranti 2021; Alì 2022). Although it is correct to argue about basic structures or primary rules in a global context – and climate change is one of the most prominent global concerns—this paper focuses on the domestic domain, particularly in developed liberal democracies.

I am firmly convinced that the success of the Green Transition can only occur by finding additional political and moral motivations to complement and fuel the fight against climate change. On this, I follow the intuition of Darrel Moellendorf (2022) regarding his Promethean Anthropocene as a "realistic utopia", but I believe that its emancipatory potential can only be realistically addressed by pursuing a more ambitious socioeconomic (re)distribution than Moellendorf's "anti-poverty principle" suggests. The current scenario, in which the most sceptical parties and governments on climate change and the urgency of the Green Transition are rewarded in elections driven by citizens' fears about social costs and cultural changes, suggests to us that a more radical strategy in terms of redistribution and citizens' democratic empowerment is needed.

These considerations lead me to argue in favour of applying the "principle of proportionality" to the case of the Green Transition (Alì 2022). In doing so, climate policies turn out to be explicitly oriented by a normative commitment to containing wealth and income inequalities within well-defined limits. Precisely, the principle of proportionality commands that:

> […] no one should have an income (post-tax and transfer benefits) that exceeds the limit of being No. Times higher than the average income of the bottom X% of the national population, and no one should possess a wealth (post-tax and transfer benefits) that is N°. times higher than the average wealth of the bottom X% of the national population (Alì 2022, 15). [7]

[7] For an attempt to define these limits, see Alì and Caranti 2021 and Alì 2022.

By doing so, it aims to ensure that no one suffers from the condition of material domination. [8]

I believe that this principle offers a more effective framework for the Green Transition than the most common distributive principles, including sufficientarianism, the Difference Principle, prioritarianism, and moderate egalitarianism. Here, although I do not have sufficient space to discuss all the implications of the principle of proportionality, I can highlight some specific advantages over other competitive distributive principles in the context of the Green Transition. Let me explain briefly.

Against the position usually defended by sufficientarianism (Frankfurt 2015), in which average citizens would be reassured and thus less resistant to climate actions if it were guaranteed that they would not fall *below a threshold of sufficiency* in a context of socioeconomic uncertainty, such as the green transition. Put simply, while the sufficientarian argument has a certain plausibility, it leaves unresolved the question of how to distribute those costs between individuals who are at or near the sufficiency threshold and those who are well above it. As evidenced by widespread protests against green policies, this distributive concern is particularly salient for the middle-class citizens—at least in developed countries—who are, not accidentally, those expected to bear most of the burden of emission reductions and the costs of the Green Transition (Toygür and Sojka 2025).

To address this problem, sufficientarians could supplement their view with an additional distributive principle, such as the ability-to-pay principle. However, this solution faces three significant limitations. First, it assumes that we can accurately calculate the total costs of the Green Transition to allocate them fairly. Yet this implies a narrowly allocative understanding of the transition—one that neglects the fact that such a shift entails deep structural transformations in production and consumption systems. Second, the ability-to-pay principle takes the current, highly unequal distribution of wealth as its baseline. Third—and most importantly—it is, like sufficientarianism, insensitive to the size of economic inequality, to the distance between the richest and the least advantaged. As such, it disregards the plutocratic tendencies that extreme disparities inevitably generate.

I believe that egalitarian distributive principles perform better than sufficientarianism. Certainly, Rawls's Difference Principle can avoid the problem of ignoring distributive conflicts above a given threshold, since it permits only those

[8] For other accounts that link material inequalities to domination, see Shapiro 2016; Schemmel 2021; and Vrousalis 2022.

economic inequalities that work to maximise the share of income and wealth enjoyed by the least advantaged. In the case of the extraordinary burdens necessary for the Green Transition, the Difference Principle could serve as an essential safeguard for the worse-off. Nevertheless, the maximin logic is often seen as excessively demanding, to the extent that any marginal benefit to the worst-off could, in principle, justify any level of potential sacrifice from the better-off. Even if this may not be a compelling objection within the realm of ideal theory, it may pose a severe limitation in the context of our current developed liberal societies, which are not particularly receptive to strong egalitarian commitments.

Unsurprisingly, proponents of prioritarianism (Parfit 2012) and moderate egalitarianism (Nagel 1979; Scanlon 2018) attempt to temper Rawls's abovementioned Egalitarianism. They argue that the Difference Principle fails to take the concerns of the non-worst-off seriously, as it allows no room for trade-offs between the interests of the worse-off and those of others. [9] In the context of the Green Transition, this equal regard for the interests and burdens of all citizens (the worst-off, the better-off, and the best-off) may be particularly appealing in our current liberal-democratic societies, which, again, are not exactly inclined toward strong egalitarianism.

Nonetheless, whether we consider Rawls's Difference Principle, prioritarianism, or moderate egalitarianism, all of these approaches are concerned only with people's *absolute levels* of well-being. Therefore, they remain insensitive to the sheer magnitude of inequality between the most and least advantaged. For each, the degree of economic inequality is not in itself a problem. In principle, they allow potentially unlimited economic disparities—and, by extension, potentially unlimited political inequalities—thereby failing to account for the risks of civil oligarchy or plutocracy. By contrast, I believe that the principle of proportionality is a more promising conception of justice for the Green Transition because it places this concern at its very core. As I said, it suggests that in a just society, economic inequality should be kept within a reasonable, defined *range*. But, if the focus on distributive justice should also turn to the top of the distribution, why not economic limitarianism proposed by Robeyns? The final section is dedicated to this point.

[9] Prioritarianism and moderate egalitarianism differ in several respects, the most significant being that the former—unlike the latter—endorses a non-relational conception of justice.

III. A Family Quarrel: The Advantages of Proportional Justice over Economic Limitarianism for the Green Transition

Economic limitarianism entails a threshold that focuses on the people situated at the top of the distributive ladder. Robeyns (2017, 2024) provides two main justifications for her position: the *argument from unmet urgent needs* and the *democratic argument*.

Unfortunately, extreme wealth and inequality, although closely linked, are two distinct phenomena that require different moral and political evaluations. Indeed, if being rich or super-rich is morally wrong only as long as there are people who cannot meet their urgent needs, how distant the rich and poor remain no longer matters once this problem is overcome. But the same is not true for the democratic argument. Given the competitive nature of the political and economic spheres, the ability to translate economic power into political power does not necessarily—and perhaps not even primarily—depend on the absolute level of wealth enjoyed by the best-off, but rather on the magnitude of the economic gap between the worst-off. Indeed, if the distance between those on the threshold of the rich line and those below is small, the former group will not have the resources necessary to significantly influence politics more than the latter. However, if the distance is sufficiently large, political equality remains in jeopardy. Thus, Robeyns' limitarianism surprisingly misses the target (Caranti and Alì 2021; Alì 2022). [10] In this way, economic limitarianism prescribes severe limits on individual wealth, which are ineffective at achieving the goal of the democratic argument.

Perhaps someone might argue that, despite these limitations, Robeyns' limitarianism remains capable of adequately guiding our political actions and distributing the socio-economic costs of the Green Transition. Not surprisingly, Robeyns (2019) also focuses on climate change as a particular case of the argument of urgent unmet needs. According to her, economic limitarianism helps us identify where we should find economic resources for climate actions, namely, above the rich line. Indeed, given that "[…] the surplus money of the superrich cannot be used to enhance their well-being, it could be more beneficial if it were invested wisely in climate action strategies" (Robeyns 2019, 259). Furthermore, she adds, "[…] if the size of the total surplus money turns out to be insufficient, then the middle-classes can also be called upon for contributions" (Robeyns 2019, 259).

From this perspective, economic limitarianism would ensure that the burdens of the Green Transition are borne by the rich. However, as in the case of

[10] For a similar critique, see Halldenius 2022 and Ben Shahar 2024.

the ability-to-pay principle (which Robeyns indeed refers to), economic limitarianism risks being a *strictly allocative principle* and has the same limitation of assuming that the costs of the Green Transition can be separated from those that derive from the structural change that our system of production and consumption requires. For sure, Robeyns sees this more modest and partial aim of economic limitarianism as a virtue. Indeed, she explicitly refers to his approach not only as a partial account of distributive justice but as a sort of problem-solving principle, focusing on addressing practical problems in the world.

However, I believe that not only normative but also practical reasons compel us to adopt a more comprehensive distributive principle—one that can assess the entire distribution and frame the Green Transition as a structural question of how we aim to reshape society in line with reasonable and feasible ideals of justice.

Many will argue that, under the non-ideal conditions imposed by climate change, pursuing ambitious and complex principles of justice risks becoming an obstacle to the implementation of climate action. In other words, given the urgency of the climate crisis, *first things first*. Although this argument of prudence and priority has intuitive force, it is precisely the importance of the Green Transition that leads me to think that lowering our demands for justice is not the right path. I believe that the climate transition will increasingly lie at the core of public policy and will shape our social life in profound ways. In this sense, it would be disastrous—particularly in motivational terms—to allow the idea to take hold that the green transition must be achieved at the expense of social justice.

I am aware that much more should be said to develop further both my proposal and my approach to the Green Transition. Some may remain unconvinced that a comprehensive distributive principle—such as the principle of proportionality—is at once too politically demanding and insufficiently focused on reducing carbon emissions. One of the main objections might be that, since proportional justice concerns the distribution of income and wealth rather than their total amount, it does not require cutting carbon emissions by reducing total consumption. Here, I can only offer a short—though I hope compelling—reply.

The principle of proportionality does not, in itself, require any reduction in carbon emissions. However, as I have emphasized, I defend a *non-monistic* account of social justice. Different spheres of justice may require distinct distributive principles and distinct moral and political duties. Proportional justice governs duties among individuals living under the same basic institutional framework, but we also have duties toward non-overlapping future generations. Following a Rawlsian line, I defend a view of *institutional intergenerational sufficientarianism*, according to which the political institutions in which present generations participate have a duty of justice to secure the background

conditions necessary to sustain a just basic structure over time and across generations (see Piroli and Alì 2026). Since climate change threatens the objective circumstances of justice and the stability of future sociopolitical institutions, it imposes specific burdens on the present generation to avert what Mittiga (2024) has called a future *political catastrophe*. Accordingly, even though the principle of proportionality does not include an absolute limit on total income and wealth, and therefore consumption, it is nonetheless constrained by the duty to preserve a just institutional order across generations. *Mutatis mutandis*, the principle of proportionality is subordinated – much like Rawls's difference principle – to a sort of principle of just savings, which prioritizes the preservation of just institutions across generations over intragenerational distributive claims.

The fundamental contribution of the principle of proportionality to climate justice is that it requires the costs of the Green Transition to be borne in a way that keeps the economic resource gap between the best-off and the worst-off within a justifiable range. More precisely, recognizing that it is not feasible to identify a fixed total cost for the Green Transition – because the transition involves a profound restructuring of contemporary societies – the Green Transition should be carried out through proportional justice. In concrete terms, climate actions must be designed—through fiscal incentives, regulatory restrictions, and, where necessary, prohibitions—so that the economic distance between the best-off and the worst-off does not exceed a certain threshold. In this respect, proportional justice is fully compatible with Emissions Limitarianism (though I consider it insufficient), while it diverges from economic limitarianism.

Still, one may insist that proportionality has some potentially counterproductive implications. On the one hand, some can sustain that economic redistribution driven by proportional justice could increase carbon-intensive consumption if the purchasing power of the worst-off rises. While it is true that some forms of consumption may contract during the green transition, it cannot be pursued at the expense of consumption reductions for a large part of the population. An effective green transition should avoid a trajectory of *degrowth* (Moellendorf 2022). The central objective must be energy conversion and decarbonization, processes that are themselves costly and complex. Economic redistribution during the green transition phase serves to compensate for the additional burdens borne by the least advantaged and the middle classes, to maintain, or, in the case of the worst-off, improve their standard of living. [11]

On the other hand, others can say that it cannot be ruled out, at least in principle, that the green transition could become so costly as to entail an overall

[11] Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pushed me to clarify this point.

decline in living standards, insufficiently compensated by redistribution. Such a scenario would create a severe moral dilemma: the present sacrifice would be disproportionate to the future benefits. This outcome must be avoided. Nonetheless, if this is the case, a second objection is that the principle of proportionality does not specify a minimum guaranteed level of resources for the least advantaged. Nonetheless, I argue that proportional justice guides our social justice intuitions even under these severe conditions.

The principle of proportionality focuses on relational inequality in economic resources; it does not define a minimum (sufficientarian) or maximum (limitarian) threshold. In this sense, it is not an allocative principle. The point is always how people treat each other, rather than how much they have. Of course, goods are constitutive of social relations, and for this reason, proportionality matters. As Rawls (2001) argued, a society can be just (or nearly just) regardless of its overall level of affluence. In this respect, proportionality gives priority to justice over efficiency (even more decisively than Rawls). It can even justify cases in which the efficiency costs of proportionality leave the worst-off worse off than they would be under an unconstrained system – something Rawls's difference principle would not allow if it maximized the worst-off position. The crucial point is obviously that less wealth for the less advantaged is a price that liberal democracies should be ready to pay to avoid domination. Given current levels of extreme inequality, proportionality would almost certainly have pro-growth distributive effects. Yet even in the hypothetical scenario of a costly green transition involving unavoidable leveling down, proportionality would remain a normative guide. In any case, a leveling-down scenario must be avoided, as it would render climate policies deeply unpopular and practically inapplicable.

To sum up, I think that the principle of proportionality can provide normative and practical orientations that are more comprehensive and appealing than Robeyns' limitarianism (and other alternative distributive principles). Although the conception of proportional justice is directly concerned with the size of inequality in economic resources between the richest and the worst-off, it expresses the moral-political intuition that should not need to pursue equality to the furthest extent possible (as with the principle of equality of outcome), nor to give up the excess wealth above the line of a supposed fully flourishing life (like with economic limitarianism). This normative orientation can make a significant difference in the public debate and deliberation of our liberal democracies.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that pursuing emission reduction without seriously addressing current levels of economic inequality is neither fair nor feasible, at least in the context of developed liberal democratic societies. The Green Transition is not merely a technical challenge; it is a profoundly political and distributive one. Reducing emissions without addressing the scale of economic inequality risks reinforcing plutocratic tendencies and undermining democratic legitimacy.

While approaches like emission limitarianism and economic limitarianism offer critical insights, they remain too partial to tackle the structural transformations required. For this reason, I have argued that the principle of proportionality can provide a more comprehensive normative framework, one that links climate policies to a broader vision of a fairer society, both for those alive now and for those in the future. In the current scenario, only by explicitly addressing economic inequality, as the principle of proportionality does, can we have a reasonable yet realistic hope of securing citizens' necessary support for a fair Green Transition.

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