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Democracy with foresight: the key to a socially sustainable transition in Europe (and beyond)



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The European trade union movement is uniquely well-placed to drive this process of transitioning from the particular to the systematic and systemic dimensions of the social justice agenda, thereby helping to build the powerful solidarities and alliances that we need in order to navigate the four major transitions of our time

Albena Azmanova and Kalypsa Nicolaïdis

Introduction

How can the European Union steer a course towards long-term social and ecological well-being in a context of incessant emergencies? Two decades of perpetual crisis management have greatly eroded Europe's capacity to pursue a sustainable future, as considerations of short-term expediency continue to hamper the four transitions that are necessary – green, digital, geopolitical and socio-economic. At the same time, however, few polities in the world are better suited to the design and promotion of long-term policies. This editorial draws on its authors' respective research into progressive social transformation and sustainable European integration to identify a path for the socially sustainable transition which we now need and which the rest of this issue of *Benchmarking Working Europe* further explores.

We have finally woken up to the fact that the world has changed irrevocably. Caught at the epicentre of a multi-layered transition, we wonder how the many actors involved will deliver on the task of deploying the enormous societal resources necessary to address the major redistributive impacts of this transition and the intense political conflict that they will create. We cannot yet tell how effectively Europeans will manage the four strands of this transition (green, digital, geopolitical and socio-economic), or in other words the public and private actions aimed at channelling the structural changes at play, such as the deleterious effects of our Anthropocene Era, the dystopia conjured up by digital Homo Deus and the geopolitical upheaval caused by rapid shifts in the distribution of global power away from the affluent West. Although many trajectories are still possible against the backdrop of these structural changes, it is becoming increasingly clear that the first three transitions – green, digital and geopolitical – give rise to a fourth imperative: the socio-economic transition to inclusive, solidaristic and fair societies. How then should we envisage the politics of 'Social Europe' as an integral part of a multi-layered transition? If Social Europe is the Cinderella of the political agenda, we believe that the trade union movement is the Fairy Godmother whose job it is to empower the neglected orphan. In turn, however, this vocation depends on a number of conditions of possibility.

In what follows, we assess these conditions by surveying the shifting landscape of societal transformations, ultimately foregrounding the responsibility of EU institutions and civil society actors (including unions) for the task of safeguarding the fourth transition.

Transition challenges



Most importantly, how can we strengthen Social Europe while navigating the other three transitions?

What are the parameters most relevant to the four transitions and their associated challenges? A number of exogenous shocks have served as catalysts, affecting the pace and magnitude of each of them: these shocks range from the environmental trauma that is ever more tangibly felt to sudden refugee inflows, cost-of-living woes, public health emergencies and armed conflicts at Europe's borders and elsewhere. While shocks do not necessarily need to turn into recurrent crises, their amalgamation into a 'polycrisis' magnifies their impact, which in turn affects the margins of manoeuvre available when dealing with the long-term transitions. The resilience strategies that the EU adopts in managing the exogenous shocks and the internal conflicts they trigger will determine the transformative potential of the transitions. So how do we deal with these short-term challenges in line with our long-term goals? Most importantly, how can we strengthen Social Europe while navigating the other three transitions?

A comprehensive strategy for navigating the current transformation would call for consideration of the key conflicts that structure Europe's changing societal cartography and the political tensions generated by these conflicts in the following five realms:

- The *realm of political economy*, where the old capital-labour divide is overlaid by a consumer-producer conflict, including conflict over CO₂ emissions; these conflicts are complicated by the systemic demands for growth that undergird production, employment and consumption. Crucially, the question that comes to the fore here is that of basic needs: which type of consumption is a matter of basic human need, and which is a matter of an unsustainable lifestyle, fostered by conspicuous consumption which creates incentives of accumulation beyond need or even comfort?
- The *realm of political identities* within Europe, where we see a conflict of Europeanised versus nation-bound citizens, with both groups holding contrasting beliefs on the role of the EU and the kind of solidarity it ought to deploy.

In turn, these two structural realms affect the next three:

- The *realm of the politics of space* across Europe, where tensions play out between east and west, north and south, nomads and settlers or insiders and outsiders, with each of these groups reflecting a different political and cultural take on who the most vulnerable individuals are and how the EU should deal with them.
- The *realm of the politics of time*, where transitional challenges lay bare conflicts between the generations that coexist today, or in other words young and old, and between living generations and future generations, as well as – most prosaically – the various degrees of preference for the present held by different social classes.
- The *realm of democratic politics*, where the nature of our transformation will ultimately be decided by our capacity to manage conflict through democratic practices at all levels, from the world of work and industrial democracy through to the world of education or the world of the state. We need to seize our chance to recast our democracy and reshape our democratic geopolitics.

To put it more simply, we could say that these five realms together shape the political space in which the underlying economic policy transition is taking place. Before trying to assess how a renewed vision of Social Europe might be deployed in this space, we need to lay out the relevant parameters found in the three interconnected dimensions of the EU edifice: structural, socio legal and socio-economic.

The structural parameters concern the global embeddedness of European societies and the global power asymmetries of which Europe is a part. The networked global order that emerged from the last wave of globalisation in the 1980s had two significant structuring effects. First, the globally integrated economy was shaped as a web of transnational value chains and production networks, with the attendant fragilities that were highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, over the span of the past 40 years, European societies have been significantly deindustrialised, which has altered the structure of the national economies, resulting in demographic changes (for example, the balance between blue-collar



We need to ask what kind of *politics* and what kind of *policy* actively generates precarity by translating overall risk and uncertainty into pathological fragilities

and white-collar workers has shifted in favour of the latter). Importantly, while the post-war approach to international economic governance veered towards ‘embedded liberalism’ or the idea that domestic social imperatives ought to trump the free flow of capital across borders, we have recently been moving towards ‘disembedded liberalism’. The policy commitment to free trade in globally integrated markets has become progressively disconnected from the societies these policies were meant to serve, with far-reaching structuring effects on both European societies and the global order. This order has also been shaped by the practices of what Naomi Klein (2005) has described as ‘disaster capitalism’: Western governments’ use of the fear and desperation created by catastrophes to engage in radical social and economic engineering, from which the reconstruction industry of private corporations draws profit. The structural dynamics also play out in climate change led by global inequality – with all the attendant issues of global climate justice. In this instance, the fate of the fourth transition will be affected by the balance achieved between the economy-driven dynamics of wealth creation and allocation versus state-based redistribution (including via inflation management).

The legal parameters of the economic policy transition concern European citizenship: which transnational social rights in the areas of social security and welfare should be granted to individuals in order to ensure a degree of protection against social risks relating to work, unemployment, healthcare, pensions and poverty? The common market was endowed with an embryonic social citizenship in the 2000s, but the nascent Social Europe suffered setbacks as social rights, nominally vested in law, were eroded under the pressures of neoliberal ‘structural adjustment’ measures further catalysed by the 2008 crisis. The past five years have admittedly gone pretty well for the ‘neglected orphan’: especially during the pandemic, the EU delivered for the working citizens of Europe. Yet this momentum may be waning, and the Pillar of Social Rights may have exhausted its propulsive potential. Social Europe remains a patchwork of old 20th-century instruments coexisting alongside a limited number of more up-to-date instruments, combined with a lack of vision about how all this fits in with the other transitions. As we argue at the end of this editorial, the European trade union movement is in a position to take the lead in building the broad democratic ecosystem that is needed to connect the dots and nourish a vibrant European social model.

Last but not least, we need to consider the sociopolitical parameters of the economic policy

transition which emerge in reaction to the social impact of neoliberal governance. This impact involves three phenomena: growing inequality, impoverishment and precarity. Rising inequality and the impoverishment of the worst-off in Western democracies has been a central subject of research and policy-making, as reflected in the excellent special issue of *Benchmarking Working Europe* published last year (Countouris et al. 2021). The precarisation associated with in-work poverty, which is rooted in insecure and poorly paid jobs, has also been well researched (e.g. Apostolidis 2019; Standing 2011). However, generalised precarity – the spread of precarity across the social spectrum – is a more recent phenomenon and has so far remained at the margins of academic and policy interest, while its implications for the fourth transition are significant. We will therefore address it here in some detail.

Precarity: an acute social malaise

Unlike sociologists of modernity from Max Weber to Ulrich Beck or Anthony Giddens, who tend to depoliticise precarity when they claim that growing insecurity is endemic to modernity, we need to ask what kind of *politics* and what kind of *policy* actively generates precarity by translating overall risk and uncertainty into pathological fragilities – conjuring up what, for Antonio Gramsci, would have been a generalised pessimism: ‘the greatest danger we face at present, given that its consequences are political passivity, intellectual slumber, scepticism about the future’ (Gramsci 1924). Indeed, precarity is a condition of *politically* generated economic and social vulnerability rooted in the insecurity of livelihoods (Azmanova 2020a, 2021; Apostolidis et al. 2022; Arriola Palomares 2007; Choonara et al. 2021). It harms not only individuals’ material and psychological welfare, but also society’s capacity to cope with adversity and govern itself. Two features of precarity merit particular attention: its political origins and its massive scale.

Around the turn of the century, as competition in the global marketplace intensified thanks to the aforementioned spread of disembedded liberalism, achieving and maintaining *competitiveness* became the top policy priority for many governments; the EU’s ‘Lisbon Agenda’ is a good example. This commitment to competitiveness replaced the growth-and-redistribution policy of the Welfare State (a formula that effectively delivered the inclusive affluence of the post-war Welfare State at the cost of environmental trauma), but also overlaid the mantra of unfettered competition that was the dominant trait of the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s.



At the heart of precarity lies not uncertainty, instability or insecurity, but *powerlessness*

For the sake of ensuring national competitiveness in the global race for profits, public authorities not only privatised public assets, slashed social spending and reduced employment security, but also, often in violation of formal EU rules, struck sweetheart deals with global corporations, thus creating social privileges for both capital and labour within these corporations. The pursuit of competitiveness in the global economy eventually allowed economic logic to penetrate into all spheres of decision-making, including public healthcare. The *raison d'économie* became the new *raison d'état*.

This formula of politics, however, is a form of socially irresponsible rule, where governments set policy objectives (i.e. ensuring competitiveness) without taking into consideration the broader and longer-term impact on societal resilience. Although policy elites pledged allegiance to democracy, they engaged in a form of rule that, even when responsive to citizens' immediate anxieties and concerns (as in the case of Brexit), did not assume responsibility for larger and longer-term societal well-being – from the impact on the environment to the effects on individuals and societies in Europe and beyond. As lifeworlds and livelihoods became thus destabilised, our societies became afflicted by an epidemic of precarity, even as they recovered somewhat from the 2008 financial meltdown.

Politically, we note that at the heart of precarity lies not uncertainty, instability or insecurity, but *powerlessness*. This is suggested by the etymological origin of the term in the Latin word '*precarius*' which means 'depending on the will of another' or 'obtained by entreaty (by begging or praying), given as a favour, depending on the pleasure or mercy of others' (from '*prex*', meaning to ask or to entreat).

Such disempowerment arises from a misalignment between responsibility and power, as public authorities increasingly offload responsibilities on individuals and societies – responsibilities these latter are unable to manage. We are familiar with the phenomenon of individual responsabilisation – the tendency to allocate responsibilities to citizens and public institutions without equipping them with the financial and institutional resources they need in order to carry them out (the hospitals that were poorly equipped to cope when the coronavirus pandemic first unfolded are a good example). We are thus given responsibility for making ourselves employable and employed while the political economy is failing to create enough good jobs.

All this has resulted in the generalisation of work-related pressures and the spread of precarity across social classes, professional

occupations and income levels. In short, the combination of automation, globalisation and cuts in public services and social insurance has generated massive economic instability for ordinary citizens – for men and women, young and old, skilled and unskilled, the middle classes and the poor alike. Precarity is both pervasive and strongly stratified. It is much graver for minorities, immigrants and other impoverished or disadvantaged groups, but it is important to acknowledge that it now affects not only those in poorly paid and temporary jobs, referred to by Guy Standing (2011) as 'the precariat' (akin to the proletariat). It also results in psychological strain on what Alissa Quart (2018) has called the 'middle precariat': a professional class encompassing professors, nurses, administrators in middle management, caregivers and lawyers, all struggling to cope with life in the 'always-on' economy. Precarity is now a transversal injustice that cuts across all other forms of social harm, and across classes and employment statuses.

Even though the precarity of the most fragile sections of the population (those in long-term unemployment or in poorly paid, insecure employment) is of most urgent concern, it is important also to acknowledge and address the massive scale and cross-sectional nature of the phenomenon, because this has significant political effects (Azmanova 2020a, 2022). We need to acknowledge the precarity of the 'socially privileged' because their concerns cannot but have political weight in our democracies.

Here it is worth noting that the personal and societal aspects of precarisation are closely related; while insecure employment directly generates precarity for those on temporary contracts, cuts to public healthcare budgets indirectly increase precarity for all. The depletion of the commons also increases the importance of personal income as a source of security, thereby enhancing the salience of inequality. The poor suffer not because others have more, but because they do not have enough to ensure for themselves decent lives, especially because collective sources of social safety are vanishing. Yet the emphasis on personal income which tends to be a feature of debates on inequality (since inequality-related concerns deploy the logic of comparisons between me and you, us and them) contains a dangerous fallacy, for no matter how equal as individuals we might be, and even no matter how wealthy, no one can be rich enough to provide for themselves good healthcare, as this depends on enormous public investment in science, education and medical provision. No matter how equal our societies might become, they are bound to remain fragile if precarity erodes our personal and collective

capacities to navigate our existence. That is why the three scourges of the contemporary liberal democracies – poverty, inequality and precarity – need to be addressed as distinct social problems.

Since it is affecting an ever-growing number of demographic groups and our societies in general, precarity should be seen as the social question of our time. We are not attempting here to defend an ‘equality of poverty’ paradigm. Yet, as precarity cuts across the familiar fault lines of conflict and cooperation and corrodes our social bonds, we must explore the emerging new nexuses of the precarity problem (e.g. between the long-term unemployed and those in stable but stressful jobs – both precarious, albeit in different ways), and seek emergent strategies of solidarity across the five political realms discussed at the outset. First, however, this requires an awareness of the political implications of this state of affairs.

The corrosive political offshoots of precarity

The spread of precarity across the social spectrum has important political implications in respect of the four transitions.

1. Since the thirst for security generally dampens any desire for change, public anxieties tend to fuel far-right, xenophobic populism that calls for shortcuts to security (e.g. blocking immigration). This is especially the case when a radical alternative is unavailable or when such an alternative is seen as implausible or incapable of delivering.
2. On a related note, precarity fuels support for autocratic rule. The more vulnerable people feel, the more they are willing to rely on political strongmen who promise instant stability. This is at the root of rule-of-law backsliding in Europe, even in mature democracies such as France, Spain and Austria (Azmanova and Howard 2021; Nicolaidis and Merdzanovic 2021). However, autocratic shortcuts to security are treacherous because they disempower us further by abandoning us to the whim of dictators – thus aggravating the condition of precarity we mean to cure.
3. Precarity is eroding solidarity as anxiety about preserving one’s social status haunts all social groups. The middle classes seem to be abandoning the poor, whose interests they had traditionally championed – for example with the creation of the Welfare State – and the working classes are once again turning against immigrants for fear of job losses.
4. Finally, economic insecurity is politically debilitating: it directs all our efforts towards finding and stabilising sources of income,

leaving neither time nor energy for larger battles about the kind of life we want to live. By radicalising the conservative thirst for stability, precarity drains democracy’s creative energies.

Europe’s time dilemma

Faced with all these challenges, a plurality of European citizens is generally well aware of the need to address what we might call Europe’s time dilemma – a dilemma that pits the EU’s multiplying emergencies on the one hand against its growing capacity to plan for the long term on the other. The EU has admittedly started to design significant policy shifts to address the polycrisis, but the effective implementation of these policies remains in the balance. Objectives are often watered down by interests entrenched in the defence of the status quo, even when political leadership makes a commitment to bold policy objectives informed by well-known public concerns, such as the Next Generation Fund (with its formally ambitious environmental, digital and social components), Fit for 55 (the EU’s plan for the green transition) or REPowerEU (aimed at curbing fossil fuel dependency).

Given that our societies are now (in winter 2022) facing further economic plight with rising inflation and soaring energy prices, the tendency to focus on the troubles at hand at the expense of the long view and broader societal interests is bound to become more acute. We cannot be bothered about the end of the world while we are worried about the end of the month, to paraphrase the quip of a participant in the Yellow Vest protests in France. Yet this is a vicious circle: the more we postpone addressing the concerns of tomorrow, the more crises we have on our hands, thus incessantly shortening and narrowing our political horizon.

The trouble is therefore not that we are in crisis (which can be an impetus for transformation) but that we are unable to exit the crisis because its root causes have been institutionalised into a new normal. Society is stuck in a state of chronic, endless inflammation (Azmanova 2020b).

Two factors combine to foster the tyranny of the present. As discussed above, our political economy generates massive precarity, which makes people fearful of risk and change even as they admit that change is urgently necessary. At the same time, our political systems cannot rise to the challenge, based as they are on short electoral cycles, partisan politics and the anonymous electoral franchise, which institutionally empowers the short and narrow view. How can this double bind be remedied?

Remedies: democracy's renewal

The Covid-19 crisis has led to a paradox whereby governments, civil society and corporations have all seen their respective power grow in different realms, leading to ever more competition between them. Ideally, wide-ranging governance partnerships would be established to push back against widespread frustration in order to move to a politics of militant hope and mobilisation.

How can this happen? How can we think big again? How can we recover our individual and collective agency to navigate the four transitions? What should progressive movements seek to achieve? How can we respond to 'end of the month' concerns in the light of 'end of the world' concerns and vice versa? Since Tocqueville pinned much of his hope for democracy on socio-economic convergence between people, answering these questions will create what we call a Tocquevillian Virtuous Cycle: by fighting precarity (in the broad sense advocated for in this editorial), we create the conditions for political solidaristic thinking and action. At the same time, by building democracy, we generate the political will to enact the reforms needed to overcome and transcend precarity.

We therefore need to identify the *enabling conditions* under which democracies not only survive but are able to absorb both endogenous and exogenous disruption(s) while maintaining enough flexibility to generate new spaces for political legitimacy and citizens' empowerment. There is no invisible hand of democracy that will bring about these conditions – democracy happens through specific and continuous public engagement. Democracy is what democrats make of it. As a case in point, the beneficial effect of industrial democracy and increased worker participation in firms' decision-making is well-documented: it decreases exploitation and reduces inequality in the firm and in society, and, more broadly, there is a strong nexus between workplace democracy and social and environmental sustainability (Deakin 2021; Battilana et al. 2022; De Spiegelare et al. 2019). However, these effects cannot be fully realised in the context of ever-increasing global competition – workers themselves are constrained by the hegemony of the profit motive. Unless the democratisation of production is embedded into a truly transformative democratic and economic agenda, it also runs the risk of increasing

workers' personal investment in unreflective competitiveness with all the familiar negative impacts on human beings and nature: from self-exploitation, poor work-life balance and mental health disorders through to extractive economic practices that destroy the ecosystem.

It is therefore important to resist the neoliberal penchant for burdening democracy with responsibilities it is structurally hampered to discharge. If we consider democracy as the set of institutions and practices which ensure that public power serves the public interest, then it is not enough to focus only on procedures that delegate power. We further need to consider how these procedures or structures protect the State (and other forms of the collective) from capture at the hands of particular private and factional interests (Bagg 2021).

Most broadly, this implies asking how democratic renewal can address the political economy and the political order together. The political economy of democratic empowerment calls for insulating European societies from the nefarious pressures of an exclusive focus on global competition for profit. It thus calls for altering our economic philosophy to rethink the meaning of 'growth' and inclusive prosperity to emphasise solidarity in well-being, of which economic stability is a cornerstone (Azmanova and Galbraith 2020; Azmanova 2021b). A focus on stability, rather than simply prosperity, will allow us better to reconcile ecological justice and social justice. It is not enough to build resilience, or in other words to strengthen our societies and communities to withstand adversity. Above all, we need to address the sociopolitical drivers of vulnerability and demand that public authority, at all levels of governance, assumes responsibility for systematic long-term appraisals of crisis management.

This will not happen without, in turn, adapting our political order to make room for the kind of citizen-led countervailing power best guaranteed by a pluralistic civil society featuring a diverse range of voluntary organisations, media outlets, academic institutions, social groupings or religious denominations, engaged in coalitions guarding the public interest in pushing back against both state and corporate capture. The current mechanisms of electoral accountability



Unions can also support novel mechanisms of democratic accountability involving citizens and organised civil society

are too weak to tie decision-making to the longer view and to the broader public interest. On the one hand, cast privately, the democratic vote increasingly expresses personal and short-term cost-benefit calculations – a concern that Thomas Jefferson sounded at the very inception of American democracy. On the other hand, the fear of losing elections is proving too weak a mechanism for tying governments to the public interest. Instead, we need radical and innovative combinations of representative democracy through elections, deliberative democracy through citizens’ assemblies, and direct democracy through referenda or preferenda over a range of options. If this model is to work, intermediary social bodies like trade unions need to play a key role in each of the legs of this tripod and to help structure new forms of empowerment open to the great range of new actors and practices that are emerging to deal with the transition challenge – from informal IOs to informal civil society (Youngs et al. 2022), and from global policy network to local digital activism.

Only with this enlarged vision of empowerment can we hope both to widen and further democracy’s sight – the widening of the horizon of political mobilisation beyond narrow personal concerns, and the furthering of the political horizon beyond the immediate exigencies of the present. In other words, we need to think about how policy can be made both democratically responsive to citizens’ immediate concerns and socially responsible for the wider and broader interests of societies beyond the interests of the politically active demos – that is, taking into account the interests of future generations, those of non-EU nations, and those of the planet.

Taking the EU as a whole, this agenda fits in with the path of sustainable integration, defined as the ‘durable ability to sustain cooperation within the Union in spite of the heterogeneity of its population and of their national political arrangements’ (Nicolaidis 2010). Arguably, the EU is constitutively endowed with a capacity to serve such an agenda as the guardian of the long term, because its decisional bodies are relatively insulated from public pressure in the short term while opening themselves up to long-term democratic design (Nicolaidis 2019). This is, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the silver lining of the EU’s perceived democratic deficit: the EU is able to deliver democracy with foresight (hence the title of this editorial), and capable of assessing and reconciling short-term actions against long-term goals (Begg et al. 2015). If, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, EU institutions have gained significantly more agency, they can all the better put such agency to work through

a systemic commitment to pursuing sustainable integration in a grand alliance with progressive actors across the continent.

Among other things, sustainable integration to serve the four transitions discussed in this special issue requires novel mechanisms of responsabilisation that enhance powerful actors’ accountability for long-term policy commitments across borders, based on the example of the trade union movement, where coordination helps foster other-regardingness and solidarity. Trade unions can also play a role in helping to enforce the new generation of social responsibility clauses introduced in international agreements, based on the example of the (draft) Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence, which obliges businesses to address the adverse impacts of their actions, including in their value chains inside and outside Europe, and where trade unions can play a crucial enforcing role (Garcia Berceiro and Nicolaidis 2023).

Unions can also support novel mechanisms of democratic accountability involving citizens and organised civil society, who could call on all those elites structuring Europe’s political economy perpetually to account for the way they safeguard the broader and longer-term policy goals. If a ‘democratic panopticon’ (Nicolaidis 2021) leveraging the internet were to create an institutionalised environment of transparency (regarding the spending of funds) where the actions of decision-makers could be scrutinised at any time by any actor who wished to and was able to do so, coalitions of organised social forces would be needed to transform information into actual economic power. In the same vein, we have advanced the idea of a digital ‘Citizens’ Platform for the Rule of Law’, on which citizens record their grievances regarding the rule of law. This is a dynamic that can be facilitated by union expertise, which can, in turn, be facilitated by various actors (Azmanova and Howard 2021; Nicolaidis and Merdzanovic 2021).

We are not starting from scratch. Indeed, we can build on emerging transnational social rights and social equity measures at EU level such as the recent Adequate Minimum Wage Directive adopted in October 2022, which promotes collective bargaining on wage determination at sector and even cross-industry level. Similarly, we note the EU’s experimental unemployment reinsurance scheme introduced in 2020 (e.g. the SURE (temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency) facility) involving state-financed income-support programmes for workers. Moreover, some EU labour rights are granted on the basis of ‘industrial citizenship’, merely on the basis of

worker status and regardless of nationality (even if one is a TCN). We see these as potential collective bulwarks against disembodied global liberalism, especially if they are granted on the basis of European citizenship and not only of national citizenship.

We put forth these embryonic suggestions to suggest a much broader agenda which the various transitions could combine to accomplish, with a special focus on the social transition. Trade unions will be key actors in this process, starting with industrial and economic democracy if they are to insist that the democratisation of corporations cannot simply happen behind an opaque curtain of privacy rules dictated by capital. Such innovative forms of democratic accountability that centre on transparency and active citizen

engagement carry a significant transformative potential. When horizontal processes of mutual accountability between citizens are at work, and when citizens demand accountability from public authority vertically, previously atomised citizens are likely to rediscover the 'power of organised power' as they become aware of the common roots of their diverse, often conflicting grievances – for example the systemic roots of systematic injustice (Azmanova 2012). The European trade union movement is uniquely well-placed to drive this process of transitioning from the particular to the systematic and systemic dimensions of the social justice agenda, thereby helping to build the powerful solidarities and alliances that we need in order to navigate the four major transitions of our time.

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