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Just Transition within the fossil regime. Labour-environment dynamics in the Ravenna energy district¹

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Abstract

This article examines how competing interpretations of *Just Transition* unfold within Ravenna's long-standing *carbonscape*, a socio-material configuration shaped by decades of methane extraction and industrial development. Building on the distinction between transitions *within* and *away from* existing socio-economic and energetic systems, the analysis shows how local actors mobilise the language of justice to legitimise divergent expectations about the depth and direction of change. In a context marked by strong path dependencies rooted in fossil infrastructures, institutional alliances and employment concerns, continuity-oriented visions, centred on technological mitigation and the preservation of existing infrastructures, gain predominance. More transformative imaginaries, grounded in renewable-based and decentralised energy models, remain marginal and struggle to achieve local legitimacy. Ravenna thus illustrates how *Just Transition* operates as a contested political concept whose meaning is shaped, in this context, by asymmetric power relations, ultimately favouring a transition *within* the fossil regime over more systemic reorientations.

Keywords: Just Transition; *carbonscape*; methane; CCS; unions; environmental movements.

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Riassunto

L'articolo analizza come diverse interpretazioni della *Just Transition* si articolino all'interno del *carbonscape* ravennate, una configurazione socio-materiale plasmata da decenni di sviluppo industriale connesso all'estrazione di metano. Riprendendo la distinzione tra transizioni *within* e *away from* rispetto agli assetti socio-economici ed energetici esistenti, si mostra come gli attori locali mobilitino il linguaggio della giustizia per sostenere aspettative divergenti in merito alla profondità e direzione del cambiamento. In un contesto segnato da una forte dipendenza da fonti fossili, alleanze istituzionali e preoccupazioni occupazionali, prevalgono visioni orientate alla continuità, fondate su soluzioni tecnologiche e sulla preservazione delle infrastrutture esistenti. Gli immaginari trasformativi, basati su modelli energetici basati sulle rinnovabili e decentralizzati, restano invece marginali. Ravenna mostra così come la *Just Transition* funzioni come concetto politico conteso, il cui significato è plasmato, in questo contesto, da relazioni di potere asimmetriche che tendono a favorire una transizione *within* rispetto a percorsi più radicali.

Parole chiave: Transizione giusta; *carbonscape*; metano; CCS; sindacati; movimenti ambientalisti.

■ 1. Introduction

Fossil-dependent regions offer a privileged standpoint to observe the tensions and contradictions that emerge as societies confront the imperatives of ecological conversion and energy transition. This perspective becomes even more revealing when viewed through the lens of work. As Stefania Barca notes, «A good vantage point from where the contradictions in social metabolism can be analysed is the perspective of those workers whose livelihoods depend on fossil-driven economic growth» (2017, p. 210). In this sense, what sustains *carbon lock-in* (Seto et. al, 2016) is not only the material presence of infrastructures, but also the existence of a labour force endowed with knowledge, skills and industrial know-how accumulated over time. These socio-material entanglements make transitions particularly complex, a dynamic highlighted by studies on the energy field in the North Sea region (Swennehuis et al., 2020; Normann, Tellmann, 2021; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2024).

Ravenna, one of Italy's most important and enduring energy districts, provides a compelling example of these dynamics. Since the late 1950s, offshore methane extraction, petrochemical production and related services have shaped the region's socio-economic structure, generating a labour market highly specialised in hydrocarbon-related activities and anchoring local prosperity to the national energy system. For decades the city progressively expanded following the spatial and economic logic of the energy industry and