Environmentalism put to work: Ideologies of green recruitment in Toronto

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Abstract
Market-driven green economies are premised upon the exploitation and ongoing commodification of both labour and nature. Yet their concrete incarnations experiment with new strategies to “secure and obscure” such processes. These strategies include the formulation and dissemination of an ideological representation of green labour in which environmentalism is “put to work.” In this paper I focus on worker recruitment in Toronto and analyze its role in constructing green jobs as a venue for environmentalist politics, and therefore as “good” and “meaningful” work. My empirical material consists of green job announcements posted on GoodWork.ca, the main platform for green worker recruitment in Canada. Building on a Gramscian understanding of ideology, I query the concrete and symbolic functions performed by job ads and discuss them in relation to the structural processes that characterize Toronto’s contemporary labour market. I suggest that an ideological representation of green work is used to select motivated and productive workers, justify the offer of non-specialized, precarious, or unpaid positions, and ultimately extend the reach of labour subsumption into spheres traditionally considered outside the employment relation, such as environmentalist activism. In turn, such a representation conceals the extent to which green economies rely on the exploitation of labour while it circumscribes environmentalist critiques within economic growth-centered initiatives.

Keywords
Green jobs, recruitment, ideology, precarious work, wageless work, environmentalism

1. Introduction

On the Canadian recruiting website GoodWork.ca, job seekers encounter green work through ads claiming that as an unpaid eco-blogger one can “change the world,” or that as a minimum wage food delivery courier one will have the “distinct pleasure of delivering baskets of curated organic produce to happy and environmentally-conscious consumers”. In this paper I argue that Toronto’s green employers formulate job ads in a way that disseminates an ideological representation of green work. Such a representation instrumentalizes prospective worker’s engagement in environmental politics to select productive applicants, normalizes the offer of casualized positions, and ultimately serves employers’ interests. I call these emerging strategies of labour subsumption “environmentalism put to work.”

Green labour in Canada is increasingly the object of interest of a heterogeneous group of actors including unions, private think tanks, and political parties (Thirgood et al., 2017; Columbia Institute, 2017). For example, the creation of “green, good, middle class jobs” was used as an electoral promise by the current leading party during the 2015 federal election campaign (Liberal Party of Canada, 2015). Similarly, calls for investment in industries less dependent on fossil fuels feature prominently in gray literature’s recommendations both in Canada (Jackson and Victor, 2013; Clean Economy Alliance, 2017) and internationally (ILO, 2016). Yet in its mainstream expressions, the green economy is characterized by a market-driven approach that does not question the unsustainable elements of capitalism, such as the centrality of profit accumulation or continuous consumption. While reframing the environmental crisis as a profitable economic opportunity, mainstream green economies maintain long-standing processes of nature commodification (Castree, 2003).

Within this context, focusing on the way in which the green economy uses and conceptualizes labour is essential. On the one hand, paying attention to work in the green sector allows me to observe the extent to which green economies intertwine with broader structural processes that characterize contemporary employment, such as its widespread casualization. On the other hand, complementing research on neoliberal forms of environmental governance (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Büscher et al., 2012), I argue that green labour is an additional site where the logics and practices that underpin green capitalism can be investigated. Therefore, I use the observation of recruitment in Toronto’s green economy to address a specific feature of the green labour market: the ideological construction of green work. Building upon Gramscian scholarship (Hall et al., 2007; Eagleton, 1991), I understand ideology as the combination of ideas, practices and representations that constitutes the concrete and symbolic context within which prospective workers access placement in the green economy. The concept of ideology enables me to unpack the discursive, material and cultural frameworks through which employers in Toronto promote precarious employment as a form of “good” and “meaningful” work. To this end, I analyze a set of three hundred green job announcements posted in 2016 and 2017 by GoodWork.ca, the most commonly used online service for green worker recruitment in Canada.

Ad narratives mediate the first encounter between employers and prospective employees. Formulating the texts of the ads, employers rework the desirability of green employment and decide which elements of green work are to be prioritized. For example, by characterizing green jobs as venues for environmentalist action, employers obfuscate the widespread offer of unspecialized, precarious, unpaid green work. Indeed, through the construction of a particular worldview, focused for example on measuring work’s environmental impact, recruiters disseminate job offers that, while implying features such as reduced benefit, low wages and lack of employment stability, appeal to workers’ ethics as well as political commitments. Toronto’s green economy conceals the extent to which labour exploitation remains at the
centre of its paradigm. Putting environmentalism to work contributes to profit generation as it entrenches labour subsumption. Prospective workers’ environmentalist concerns are used to select motivated employees, encourage their active cooperation to production, as well as justify the offer of precarious or unpaid positions. In this paper, I focus primarily on the employers’ side of the recruitment relation and look at job ads as the expression of their interests and strategies. Yet ideology literature provides me with a framework to investigate both the one-sided representation of green labour that job announcements disseminate, and the connection between these texts and the social relations that characterize recruitment in the context of Toronto.

In what follows, I start by discussing the neoliberal character of the hegemonic green economy model and suggest that labour is a key site to investigate green capitalism’s underpinnings. In the context of Toronto’s labour market, green recruitment intertwines with processes such as employment casualization and the re-emergence of unwaged labour. Within this picture, I stress the role of green recruitment as an ideal angle to observe new forms of labour subsumption through an ideology lens. To lay the groundwork for an analysis of the ideological character of green job ads, I identify recurrent motives drawn from ideology theory: the mystification of the material features of green work, which tend to obscure certain elements of the employment relation; the personality requests workers encounter in job ads, which construct a profile of the ideal employee in relation to their political and environmental values; and finally the articulation of specific functions and meanings of green jobs. My analysis of the ways in which employers in Toronto portray green work confirms that the green economy is a market-centered model premised upon the exploitation of both nature and labour. Yet the green economy’s drive to put environmentalism to work suggests a novel ability to expand work into spheres, such as environmental activism, that traditionally fell outside of the employment relation. As a consequence, personal interests, values and practices connected to environmentalism are valorized as elements that encourage workers’ productivity and cooperation within the labour process.

Tangled up in processes of employment casualization that characterize contemporary labour regimes in the Global North, Toronto’s green economy not only uncritically accepts precarious labour, but also experiments with innovative ways to justify it. In sum, Toronto’s green economy can be regarded as a laboratory in which political values are captured within a renewed capitalist relation of production that brings about new subtle forms of exploitation. In the conclusion I argue that, paradoxically, the politicization of work obtained through the instrumentalization of workers’ environmentalist concerns may undermine the transformative potential of these expressions of environmentalism, as it subsumes activist practices and aspirations into profit-driven and market-centered green businesses.

2. Labour in the green economy

Political ecology scholarship indicates that the green economy is not an ideologically neutral project (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2017). Instead, green economies endorse a particular view of the role of economic development in the context of the current environmental crisis (Capratti and Bayley, 2014). Such a view uncritically identifies the market as the appropriate mechanism to transition to a more environmentally sustainable future, as well as it accepts the centrality of capitalism’s drive for profit and economic growth. As a result, mainstream green economies are the expression of a green version of capitalism that conceptualises nature as something that can be invested in for profit (Katz, 1998). Moreover, green capitalism brings about neoliberal models of environmental governance (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). These
models are expressions of a simultaneously “social, environmental, and global project” (Castree, 2008:143) that “turn environmental issues into big business” (Harvey, 2014: 567). Political ecologists have documented the unfolding of processes of neoliberalization on a variety of scales. These include for example the creation of markets for environmental resources or services, such as biodiversity or water (Bakker, 2003; Prudham, 2007; MacDonald et al., 2013), as well as the application of finance and market-centered logics to conservation (Brockington et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2013; Loftus and March, 2015). Overall, this scholarship points out that green capitalism perpetuates a remaking of nature that serves capital’s interests (Smith, 2008) and operates through the ongoing enclosure, dispossession and commoditization of environmental resources (Smith, 2007).

Building upon these insights, I argue that investigating the ways in which green economies conceptualize and use labour offers a further important angle to look at green capitalism's underpinnings. Paying attention to labour is strategic not only to expose the assumptions that sustain the green economy paradigm, but also to understand the ways in which green economies intertwine with processes of labour transformation, such as employment casualization. Interventions on the role of green economies in transforming contemporary work are arising within political ecology debates. For example, Neimark recently used the case of environmental service payments to rethink precarious and informal labour in the Global South (Neimark, 2018). My analysis points out that green recruitment mobilizes environmentalist values, beliefs and tropes to articulate an ideological representation of green work. As it constructs green jobs as sites for pursuing environmental politics, such a representation performs an ideological function that advances employers’ interests. First, employers can use an ideological representation of green work to attract and retain motivated and productive applicants, despite the offer of unskilled, precarious or unpaid jobs. Second, such a representation conflates employment and volunteer work. By depicting work as a voluntary and altruistic activity, recruiters normalize the widespread offer of unpaid work and conceal the extent to which the presence of motivated cheap labour contributes to green businesses’ bottom line.

I describe this multifaceted process as environmentalism put to work. I borrow the expression “put to work” from autonomist Marxism, which uses it to describe the extension of work beyond the workplace’s boundaries and into individuals’ lives (Virno, 2003; Negri, 1989). Yet, I put the autonomists’ theoretical intuitions in conversation with strands of labour research that, inspired by Gramsci’s work, have developed empirically grounded studies of the ways in which workers’ interests and identities can be mobilized for production goals (Burawoy, 1979; Salzinger, 2003). Autonomist and labour scholars pursue distinct theoretical and political projects and cannot be conflated. Nonetheless, they share an interest in extending labour process theory to explore the ways in which labour produces value both within and outside the workplace. Combining these lenses supports my investigation of the ways in which green recruitment subsumes workers’ political interests and, as a result, brings about new subtle forms of labour exploitation (Swidler, 2018).

Autonomist Marxism refers to a heterogeneous group of primarily Italian scholars. From the 1960s onwards, this group began theorizing post-fordist production through the concept of the “social factory” (Tronti, 1962). The social factory describes the extension of labour subsumption beyond discrete sites of production and into a variety of social venues. Autonomist Marxist feminists expanded the definition of social factory to capture the role of mundane activities traditionally considered unproductive, such as social reproduction, claiming their recognition as productive labour (Fortunati, 1995, Cox & Federici, 1975). Others, like Lazzarato, Negri and Hardt, built upon Tronti’s initial formulation to argue that
contemporary post-Fordist production is centered upon the subsumption of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996). With this concept, they described the increased relevance of the communicative, creative, relational and affective elements that characterize post-Fordist work (Negri & Hardt, 1999). It is in the context of the social factory debate that Autonomist Marxists began to use the expression “life put to work”. This notion expresses a materialist appropriation of foucault’s biopower (2008) and is used to underscore that processes of value subsumption and profit accumulation are not limited to the exploitation of shop-floor activities and instead encompass a broad set of human faculties (Dyer-Witheford, 2001). For example, Morini and Fumagalli propose a “life theory of value” to account for the valorization of workers’ relations and affect including “feelings, fantasies, imagination” (2010: 243). Studying global call centres, Brophy argues that workers’ linguistic and affective abilities are put to work in these service industries without being fully compensated (2017). Similarly, scholars applying an Autonomist Marxist perspective to the study of digital economies describe how users’ sociability and communicative behaviours are transformed into data by social media platforms and thus subsumed and valorized by digital capitalism (Terranova, 2000; Fuchs, 2010; Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2010; Fortunati, 2011).

While the expression “life put to work” is unique to Autonomist Marxism, other traditions within labour studies have explored the ways in which work and value production extend beyond the formal purchasing of labour time. For example, feminist labour scholars have used the concept of interpellation (Althusser, 1977), to examine the sets of practices and discourses through which different workers are “called to work” (Salzinger, 2003). This literature points out that employers evaluate workers in light of assumptions about the appropriateness of their behaviour and appearance to a particular industry or task (McDowell et al., 2007). Studying subcontracted manufacturing plants in China and Mexico, Wright describes how global companies justify their decisions to hire local, young, unmarried women by articulating a myth about their personal dispositions and aspirations (2006). Such a myth is an ideological medium that, while idealizing women workers’ patience and docility, also normalizes extremely exploitative labour practices. Similarly, aesthetic labour scholarship indicates that in service work the embodied presence and images of workers is “part of what is purchased” (Williams and Connell, 2010: 368). Workers’ bodies, emotions, as well as attributes of their appearance such as look, style, gestures, or pronunciation enter the employment relationship and, from an employer’s perspective, acquire value as a source of competitive advantage (Witz et al., 2003; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). This area of labour literature offers fundamental insights into the ways in which economic advantages are produced from the mobilization of the bodies and identities of workers within processes that are simultaneously material and symbolic (Mitchell et al., 2003; McDowell, 2009). Combining autonomist Marxist and feminist labour scholarship, I look at the ways in which employers in Toronto seek to instrumentalize prospective workers’ political attachments and commitments. The conceptual tools of an ideology critique allow me to establish a common ground in order to put these two bodies of literature in a fruitful conversation. Such a dialogue enables the discussion of employers’ attempts to extend the reach of labour subsumption as well as the connection between this process and essential structural features of contemporary labour markets, such as employment precarization and the re-emergence of wageless work.

The decline of permanent full-time employment and its substitution with precarious jobs are constitutive characteristics of contemporary forms of neoliberalism in the Global North and research on Toronto’s labour market confirms these broader trends (Morrisette, 2018: Worth, 2016). Although precarious labour is integral to the Canadian economy, it is also a variegated phenomenon that encompasses elements of both continuity and change (Vosko, 2006; 2009).
Among the elements of innovation that contemporary precarious labour markets bring about, recent research indicates the re-emergence of wageless working arrangements. Indeed unpaid internships have become a defining feature of a variety of industries operating in Toronto’s labour market, ranging from journalism and digital work (DePeuter et al., 2015) to organic farming (Ekers, 2018). Work that, despite not being compensated through a wage, is exchanged and performed within market relations has been captured by concepts such as “decommodified labour” (La Berge, 2018), “post-wage work” (Alberti et al., 2018; Van Dyk, 2018), “hope labour” (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013) or “aspirational work” (Duffy, 2017). These concepts emphasize the detachment of employment from access to economic benefits. For example, Wright describes the ways in which UK bookstore workers see performing unpaid work as a sign of their high moral principles and anti-materialist devotion to cultural work (2005). In other cases, unwaged work is framed, performed and justified as necessary for accessing potential future gains. Here economic compensation is replaced with immaterial rewards, such as “exposure” in cultural industries (Gandini, 2016; Mirlees, 2016). The notion of exposure conveys the hope of having access to networking activities and connections that will potentially lead to paid employment in the future. Similarly, unwaged work may be justified as an exchange for access to meaningful work-experiences or specialized training, as illustrated by internship programs on organic farms in Ontario (Ekers and Levkoe, 2016).

In sum, green recruitment in Toronto unfolds within a labour market that is characterized by the widespread presence of both precarious and wageless job offers across a variety of industries (Workers Action Centre, 2015; Canadian Intern Association, 2016). By pointing out that Toronto’s green economies put environmentalism to work, I suggest that a representation of work that blurs the boundaries between employment and environmentalist activism extends the reach of labour subsumption into workers’ personal interests and commitments, and overall justifies the emerging combination of precarious jobs and unpaid work arrangements. To investigate such a phenomenon, first I identify job ads as the scale at which the first encounter between employers and job seekers can be observed. Subsequently, I illustrate the way in which the concept of ideology guides me in unpacking the worldviews disseminated by green job ads, their relation to material interests, and their situated character.

3. Job Ads on GoodWork.ca

Before becoming face-to-face interactive encounters, such as job interviews or probationary periods, worker selection processes materialize in recruiters’ communication. Job ads can thus be considered the first interaction between employers and prospective employees. Job postings are by nature one-sided as they express the logics, aspirations and intentions of employers. Indeed, the analysis of recruitment texts cannot be used as a substitute for a more comprehensive observation of employment relations. Yet recruitment texts have been frequently used by labour scholars to investigate the context in which employment relations begin (Cremin, 2003; Duffy and Schwartz, 2017). In order to discuss the role of ads in advancing the interests of green employers in the context of contemporary Toronto’s green labour market, I chose the website GoodWork.ca as my data source.

Established in 2001, GoodWork is currently the largest website connecting prospective workers and employers operating in the green economy in Canada. The website offers a digital space where employers can autonomously post green job offers. GoodWork is not the only venue for green workers recruitment in Canada. Nevertheless, the site stands out for the rhetorical tone of its communication, as well as the significant heterogeneity of positions it advertises. GoodWork presents itself as an organization whose main goal is “to connect those [individuals] who genuinely care about the environment, with the many opportunities—the important work—that needs to be done.” The language and images used by the website promote
GoodWork as a hub where job seekers can access “good” and meaningful work opportunities. These positions are labelled “good work” not as a result of the evaluation of employment conditions, but in light of the employer’s commitment to environmental protection goals. Job offers on GoodWork tend to provide minimal information about the employment relation and are characterized by an overall promotional tone. The latter is evident for example in job titles that characterize positions as “adventure blogger,” “mindful cleaner,” “super-driver,” “efficiency superstar” or “ethical detective.” GoodWork uses a nebulous definition of what counts as green employment and promotes “any job or self-employment that contributes to a more sustainable world.” The use of such an extensive interpretation distinguishes the website from other Canadian recruitment services. For example, similar websites like WorkCabin or EcoCanada uniquely serve sectors such as environmental conservation or natural resource management. Instead, positions on GoodWork are extremely differentiated. Offers include jobs in alternative energy consulting, environmentally-friendly construction, environmental education, as well as green retail. Such a heterogeneity offers an effective representation of Canada’s green labour market and includes often overlooked areas of green employment such as service and sale jobs.

In the last four years, Ontario has seen employment gains across multiple green industries (Eco Canada, 2018), and thus represents an important site for observing the green economy as it unfolds in Canada. Assuming Toronto as the scale for my observation, I identified two distinct two-month periods (October-November 2016, and April-May 2017) during which I gathered all publicly available job ads published on GoodWork.ca. Repeating the observation in fall and spring allowed me to capture seasonal variations of job offers, such as the impact of summer jobs. The collection of posts continued until data saturation was reached. The sample this paper builds upon is composed of 300 announcements. The information collected has been analyzed in two steps. First, I indexed the ads using descriptive categories such as type of employer, sector, title of the position, as well as details about contract or employment conditions. This stage aimed at providing a general overview of Toronto’s green employment offers as it emerged from GoodWork. I then conducted a qualitative analysis of announcement texts. In this second stage I focused on the content of the job postings in order to investigate their representation of green work. My goal was to observe the presence of ideological elements in my sample. The analysis allowed me to identify three major recurring motives. First, I considered instances of mystification. I used the concept of mystification to refer to job postings that employed a particular rhetorical language, or emphasized specific information, to normalize unfair and unattractive details of the employment offer, for example the lack of wage. The second theme centered on personality requests green employers directed at applicants. These requests conveyed the profile of the ideal employee and included references to political values, alongside expected behaviour and personality traits. The third and final theme consisted of instances in which job ads articulated the function and meaning of green work. In these examples green jobs were described as “aspirational” career options, “labour of love and commitment,” and “passion-driven” forms of employment. Together these three themes summarize the ways in which ideological content manifests within the ads’ texts.

4. Ideologies of green recruitment

To investigate the ways in which job ads seek to fuse green employment with individuals’ engagement in environmentalist practices or activism, I build upon the conceptual tools of an ideology critique derived from Gramsci. Ideology scholarship advances my work in four fundamental directions. First, I conceptualize ad narratives as the concrete instruments through which employers pursue their specific interests. In the context of Toronto’s labour
market, these interests centre upon the generation the normalization of precarious and wageless job offers insofar as these contribute to profitability. Second, I understand the representation of green labour that emerges from job ads as the expression of a hegemonic attempt to establish and disseminate a particular “worldview.” This view indicates the functions and meanings of green labour, but also the dispositions expected from workers. Third, Gramscian scholarship provides my analysis with an epistemological direction, as it underscores the importance of observing ideological representations as they incarnate in practices, as well as the need to connect these practices with the social relations among which they unfold. In light of this, I consider ad texts as the first communicative encounter between employers and job seekers, focus on employers’ strategies, and connect these strategies with emerging features of Toronto’s labour market. Finally, through its conceptualization of consent, Gramscian scholarship highlights individual agency: individuals are affected by ideological processes yet can also resist and challenge them. As a consequence, I cannot infer the outcomes of ideological representations on workers’ behaviour and subjectivities, but rather hold space for future research on work cultures and practices.

Gramscian scholarship points out that ideological processes materialize in action-oriented systems of representations (Hall, 1985). Such systems are composed of concepts, ideas, myths, and practices that promote the interests of the social group occupying a position of power within specific social relations (Hall et al., 2007). In this view, the dissemination of one-sided representations can be used to obscure the presence of hierarchies and uneven power relations. In the context of green employment, these strategies manifest in a representation of work as a conflict-free arena in which workers and employers pursue the same shared goals. This image conceals the uneven distribution of gains, responsibilities, and decisional power among employers and employees, as well as the extent to which motivated workers are essential to productivity goals. In sum, ideological representations have a fundamental double character. By emphasizing the ideas, values and practices that are beneficial to a specific social group, ideological projects also obscure those elements of social reality that may spur conflict or put existing power relations into question.

Moreover, Gramsci describes hegemony as a process that aims at creating and consolidating a worldview. Ideologies are therefore vehicles for the elaboration of a particular perspective, a “conception of the world” through which individuals make sense of social reality and their respective positions within it (Wainwright, 2010). Thus, ideologies operate as organizing principles and are systems of meaning that establish a common sense. This hegemonic common sense is formulated by rearticulating pre-existing elements, such as values, meanings, images and representations, in a new coherent framework. Green job ads perform a similar function, as they subsume environmentalist values and practices into their narratives and draw on them to formulate a view of employment as a venue for compassionate political action. From this perspective, environmentalist values are rearticulated and become instrumental in the advancement of a new hegemonic interpretation of green work. This worldview redefines the meaning and function of green employment and by doing so acts as an instrument for interpellating workers who are called to work as activists.

Although the relation between ideologies and the interpellation of individual subjectivities constitutes a theme in Gramscian scholarship (Althusser, 1977), in this paper I do not delve into ads’ ability to penetrate individual lives and shape worker subjectivities. Instead, I conceptualize job ads as concrete (albeit mediated) encounters between differently positioned subjects. Discussing the role of representations, Hall stresses that “images, ideas and worldviews are not uniquely mental events” and instead have a material existence and need to be understood in relation to the complex networks of functions that they perform (1985:99).
Building upon a Foucauldian poststructuralist framework (2008), ads could be regarded as instruments for “the making green workers”. In such a view, job ads could be seen as a technology of governance and discussed in light of specific forms of governmentality (Fletcher, 2017). Nonetheless, analyzing job ads as technologies of governance is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, my observation focuses on observing the concrete strategies and messages through which employers seek to attract motivated workers and increase the profitability of their labour.

Although the identification of materialist-driven interests is essential to ideology literature (Burawoy, 2003), ideological representations are not simply expressions of underlying economic phenomena or given positions of power (Eagleton, 1991; Hall, 1996). Ideologies are multifaceted phenomena within which subjects maintain a degree of agency. This literature’s conceptualization of individual agency finds expression in the relation between hegemony and consent: ideological processes are not imposed on people against their will by means of unilateral acts, but rather promoted through hegemonic processes that disseminate consensually as they incorporate recipients’ interests and aspirations (Mouffe, 1979). In the context of green recruitment, the construction of green jobs as aspirational careers may resonate with job seekers, since green ads intercept applicants’ aspiration for environmentally meaningful employment. But individuals are not merely passive recipients of ideological representation. Conversely, individuals can react, resist and challenge ideological processes engaging in a struggle over meanings. Yet, the forms and outcomes of such a struggle in the context of Toronto’s green economy are open to further investigation. In fact, in this paper I focus uniquely on the employers’ side of the struggle over the meanings and functions of green work. I am interested in the ways in which employers attempt to intercept and instrumentalize workers’ aspirations to join socially relevant employment to attract motivated applicants to jobs that distribute limited economic gains. I believe that individuals’ practices can only partially be investigated without bringing them into the conversation. Therefore, further research would be needed to query the extent to which both workers and employers genuinely buy into a political representation of green work—or a working version of environmentalism—and co-construct their subjectivities around it. In the next section I dig into the analysis of ad texts, illustrate the representation of green labour that they convey and discuss its potential consequences.

5. Calling environmentalists to work

GoodWork advertises positions across a variety of areas of Toronto’s green economy. Nonetheless, the selection of ads gathered in my sample shows that employment opportunities tend to be concentrated in service industries such as in green commercial services or retail. More than one in four positions consist of jobs in the alternative food industry, from organic restaurants and food retailers, to food packaging and delivering. These openings are closely followed by jobs in the field of environmental communication and education, such as journalist, online editor, fundraiser, but also sustainability educator. Finally, the website advertises a variety of not particularly skilled jobs in green services. These include the eco-friendly version of traditional services, such as hospitality or care, as well as emerging “green gigs” such as green lifestyle consulting, sustainable urban tourism, or “animal freedom inspired” dog walking. In general, the abundance of positions that do not require specialized environmental knowledge or competencies is remarkable. Further, more than one in three job ads do not provide sufficient information about working conditions such as hours, kind of contract, or salary. Nonetheless, when employment conditions are mentioned these are characterized by non-standard, often temporary, contracts with reduced benefits and limited
pay. While my sample does include a few specialized and well-paid jobs, such as managerial and consultant positions, particularly in the field of alternative energy, these offers are exceptional. From the standpoint of GoodWork, the overall landscape of Toronto’s green employment consists of non-specialized, frequently precarious jobs.

In this context, ad narratives play an essential ideological function, that is rearticulating the appeal of green labour, in order to justify the offer of precarious jobs. Ads repurpose unskilled activities as actions that are part of broader transformative endeavours and that, as a result, consist of interesting and rewarding work. In this view, a night shift in a warehouse becomes an opportunity for “championing the cause for real good food.” Likewise, washing bins, restocking cleaning products and counting food items in a kitchen is framed as a “mission is to enable and inspire a lifetime of healthy eating while having a great time!” Combining mystification with references to a job’s joyful, social and political character, ads turn relatively uninspiring green employment into meaningful desirable careers. At the same time, such an ideological representation is used to define the profile that ideal candidates should possess. Job ads detail the skills and personal qualities that green employers appreciate and are thus willing to reward with hiring decisions. Consequently, paying attention to these qualities sheds light on which elements of labour green businesses valorize. Ads on GoodWork indicate that employers value candidates who are able to cope with an insecure and flexible working environment: “You love the thought of joining an early-stage startup, and you thrive in that environment of ambiguity, multiple hats, limited resources, and ever-changing circumstances” (graphic design, internship). Since uncertainty and rapid change are typically presented as given characteristics of the market in which Toronto’s green businesses operate, ideal applicants must show the ability to react positively to flexibility-driven labour regimes. This ability is framed as eagerness, personal drive to take on new challenges, enthusiasm for innovation, but also capacity to adapt, resilience, modesty, and ability to make do in unclear conditions.

Addressing workers with personality requests is certainly not a new phenomenon. Labour geographers have extensively documented the ways in which personality requests, as well as gender, sexualities, race, and class-derived behaviour, matter in shaping hiring decisions (Crang, 1994; Witz et al., 2003; Wright, 2006). Green recruitment reproduces these trends, yet it also complements them in a unique way. In addition to summoning job seekers’ affective attachments and personality traits, green ads seek to appeal to applicants’ environmental values and beliefs. Therefore, job seekers are often asked to demonstrate “a deep interest in politics and sustainability” and to be motivated by intentions such as “making Canada a better place for everyone.” Ads tend to obfuscate the distinction between entering employment and joining political campaigns, and use language that imitates environmentalist tropes: “We’re gearing up to lead a movement in Canada, and you will help us” (visual design internship, unpaid). Consequently, applicants are called to work as activists. Ads summon prospective workers’ political interests and concern for the degradation of the environment and use them as resources for the ideological rearticulation of the relevance of green work. Political rhetoric is used profusely regardless of a job’s tasks and transformative impact. In one case, for example, selling crackers at a farmers’ market over the summer is advertised as having an impact on conservation initiatives: “with more cookies, granola, new cracker flavours we can help ensure agricultural diversity by keeping these ancient grains alive” (farmers’ market salesperson, temporary contract job).

Nonetheless, the kind of politics these ads reference is primarily derived from mainstream environmentalism. In its mainstream version, environmental activism tends to be characterized by an individualized and politically reformist approach that softens the radical
potential of environmentalist critique (Cronon, 1996; Luke, 1997). This approach materializes for example in green consumerism. Instead of addressing the sustainability contradictions of economic models centered on constant growth, green consumerism relies on the ability of individual purchasing choices to bring about desirable change (Szasz, 2007). Consequently, green consumption practices cooperate with the fundamental institutions of capitalism, as they distribute responsibility for environmental damage equally among different actors, including single individuals, and do not address transformative demands to institutions in positions of power (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Princen, 2010; Jaffe and Barendregt, 2014). Ad narratives reproduce such an interpretation of environmentalism and prioritize the environmental dimension of sustainability to the detriment of social and environmental justice.

Further, ads combine references to mainstream environmentalism with overtones derived from commercial versions of mindfulness, self-improvement and new-age spiritualities. As a result, ad narratives access a repertoire of motives composed for example of sense of urgency, guilt, individual discipline, and sacrifice. These tropes are used to foster an interpretation of green jobs as voluntary choices driven by individuals’ ethical aspirations and beliefs. Through this reframing, work becomes an act of responsibility and care directed to both the greater good of society and one’s self-enhancement. Yet, when applied to employment relations, references to discipline and devotion have the potential to become a tool of labour control. Calls for humility and generosity for example can downplay instrumental motivations for joining employment, such as in this case: “If you’re not interested in ‘punching the clock’ and truly care about making a difference in those who are affected by your work, submit your application” (janitor, employment conditions not specified). Similarly, mentioning self-sacrifice and personal growth can turn into requests to perform deferential behaviour. A few sentences later, the aforementioned announcement underscores that “We hire happy people who want to be part of a team with a vision to take the road less travelled. We see cleaning as a vehicle for personal growth.” In sum, ad narratives transform working into an activity pursued for pleasure, something one should be honoured to be part of. This implies that genuinely committed employees should also be willing to identify with their employer’s goals without prioritizing their own interests. Despite being ultimately beneficial to employers, I cannot infer that the overlapping between work and environmentalism is not completely extraneous to job seekers. On the contrary, Ads’ narratives capture aspirations that are arguably shared among the individuals targeted by recruitment. Although these trends should be investigated further through a closer analysis of workers’ perspectives, the characterization of the decision to join employment as an individual choice, a decision that should be in tune with one’s ethical views and commitments, appeals and makes sense to many applicants.

Finally, the ideological weaving of environmentalist references into recruitment texts establishes a representation of green work as a de-commodified voluntary activity one performs motivated by passion and goodwill and stripped of economic demands. The language of the announcements obfuscates the fact that individuals seek employment also, and in many cases primarily, to earn a living. Shifting the attention away from the concrete characteristics of the job and mystifying the economic quality of working conditions, ads praise jobs as unique opportunities to “take action.” Consequently, ad narratives seek to advance a de-instrumentalized and de-commodified representation of green work. De-commodified labour detaches employment tasks and duties from compensation and justifies this with the presence of broader overarching goals (La Berge, 2018). Rather than being presented as a source of income, green employment is primarily portrayed as a chance to protect and care for the non-human world. As a result, work should be performed for free since “at the end of the day, you will go home knowing you were part of a creative process that advanced a sustainable,
community-supporting economy” (sales representative, unpaid). In some cases, the emphasis on anti-materialist rationales is so exaggerated that compensation is replaced by immaterial exchanges: “In return, you get two days a week to pursue your own work out of our beautiful, green, open-concept office space, rent-free!” or forms of in-kind payment: “You get to taste real food every day in our kitchen.” Nonetheless, it is important to underscore that this instrumentalization is a one-sided process that does not affect the employer’s economic motives, as this passage clearly conveys: “We give you the freedom to do what you love and on your own terms [...] However, it is your responsibility to perform at a high level” (journalist, unpaid).

The ideal de-commodified green worker is therefore an individual whose decision to join employment is not primarily driven by economic reasons, but rather supported by noble motivations, high moral principles, and a devotion to the environmental cause that ad narratives present as opposed to compensation. As a whole, a de-commodified representation of work reinforces an unevenly distributed access to green employment opportunities according intersecting dimensions of class, race and gender. On the one hand, I suggest that Toronto’s green economy may be pursuing recruitment practices similar to the ones described by research on luxury retail (Williams and Connell, 2010). This literature underscores that employers in high-end retail, such as fashion, tend to hire employees who share interests and socio-economic status with customers. These employees not only embody the brand imaginaries connected to the products they sell, but also constitute a pool of flexible workers not interested in stable employment. Further, calls for prioritizing a job’s contribution to environmental sustainability rather than its economic rewards, are more likely to appeal to job applicants that have high educational and socio-economic backgrounds. For example, research in retail and hospitality industries has pointed out the “student effect”, a concept that conveys the availability of a good quality, well-educated and flexible labour force which tend to be privileged and already socialized to middle-classness (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). On the other hand, a de-commodified understanding of green employment builds upon the ways in which social reproduction activities, such as care and domestic labour, have been traditionally described as labour women performed out of love and commitment. The unrecognition of “life’s work” as actual work, and its normalization as an unpaid and altruistic activity has been essential to obfuscate its uneven distribution and exploitation (Mitchell et al., 2003; Fraser, 2014; Vogel and Bhattacharya, 2017). Reproducing and extending these trends, ideologies of green recruitment bring about new opportunities for labour exploitation. In sum, the reframing of wageless employment as de-commodified work may conceal the extent to which green businesses economic viability rely on the exploitation of cheap yet motivated labour.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that investigating green economy’s labour practices offers an important standpoint to observe the foundations upon which green capitalism is premised. The analysis of the job offers published on GoodWork illustrates how recruiters in Toronto formulate job ads that disseminate an ideological representation of green labour centered upon its political potential. Emphasizing green work’s contribution to environmental sustainability goals, ad narratives describe green work as an opportunity to pursue environmental protection goals. In light of this political potential, green jobs are constructed and advertised as good, desirable, aspirational careers. Nevertheless, green recruitment in Toronto unfolds within a labour regime characterized by entrenched employment casualization (Vosko, 2006; Pupo and Thomas, 2010), and job offers often consist of low-paid unskilled positions in industries such as green services or retail. In this context, recruitment narratives perform a fundamental
ideological function. Rearticulating the appeal of green work and establishing a common understanding of green jobs as venues for environmentalist politics, employers justify the offer of precarious and wageless work. In order to do so, environmentalism is put to work: the ideological representation of green work intercepts job seekers’ environmental concerns and aspirations, and instrumentalizes them to select appropriate workers and foster their active cooperation to production goals. At the same time, I point out that Toronto’s green businesses express a corporate approach to sustainability that frames it as a market niche, maintains consumption at the centre of its paradigm and does not question the social implications of relying on cheap labour practices.

Green economies express a green version of capitalism centered on the ongoing commoditization and exploitation of both nature and labour. Not only do they maintain labour exploitation at the centre of their paradigm, but they also experiment with peculiar strategies to “secure and obscure” such exploitation (Burawoy, 1979). Putting environmentalism to work is the ideological strategy through which green capitalism conceals its social and environmental contradictions and seeks to disseminate an uncritical understanding of the role of green labour within a neoliberal economic model. Paradoxically, while politicizing green employment, recruiters may be actively de-politicizing both work and environmentalist activism. On the one hand, conflating work and activism may undermine the workplace as a site of labour politics and conflict. Describing work as an act of care and commitment obfuscates the uneven interests and power relations that characterize employment. Workers are asked to perform productively and overlook economic benefits, while employers benefit from workers’ resourcefulness, motivation and acquiescence. On the other hand, subsuming workers’ environmentalist critiques into market-driven organizations may dilute demands for radical change. Environmentalist concerns and aspirations are drawn into market-centered organizations that indicate consumption activities as the sole venues for pursuing transformative change. This may limit the expression of radically transformative demands and contribute to a further de-politicization of environmentalism.

To conclude, I would argue that the significance of this case extends beyond concerns about the transformation of environmental activism. The green economy’s attempts at putting environmentalism to work contribute to blurring the boundaries of the employment relation. In doing so green economies extend the reach of subsumption into spheres formerly outside labour relations, such as political activism. A comprehensive study of labour in the green economy requires us to rethink the ways in which we conceptualize processes of labour exploitation and to consider how value may be derived from a variety of locations and mechanisms (Swidler, 2018a). The case of green recruitment in Toronto illuminates that, alongside the ongoing exploitation of flexible, temporary, disposable precarious or unpaid work, the reach of contemporary capitalism keeps on extending beyond the labour process and into workers’ personal spheres. As political values and practices are increasingly drawn into and valorized within the employment relation, the meaning of “good” work needs to be further interrogated in green economies and beyond.
Reference List


