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# JUST GREEN TRANSITIONS: BETWEEN TERMINOLOGICAL INEXACTITUDES, CONCEPTUAL FRAGMENTATION, AND THE EXIGENCY FOR A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Abstract.** The European Green Deal is promoting a twinned transition which is expected to be just and green. Various related terminologies have gained ground without being precisely defined or commonly agreed upon. Following an interdisciplinary exploratory approach, this contribution discusses the terminological inexactitudes which could risk a common conceptualisation, operationalisation, and implementation of the so-called Just Green Transitions. Through a critical interpretative literature review, this contribution highlights the conceptual fragmentation of these three dimensions: just as a polylemma of socio-spatial-temporal justice, green as a non-replication of pseudo-fashionable labels, and transitions as meta, multiple, and multilevel paths of institutional and social changes.

**Key words:** Just Green Transitions, European Green Deal, EU governance, territorial governance, socio-spatial justice.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the European Commission set its man-on-the-moon moment (European Commission, 2019b), an ambitious transnational roadmap mobilising the highest global levels of geopolitical assemblies and converging global climate

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governance (Coen *et al.*, 2020) towards a common goal of a carbon-neutral economy, achieving 55% of emissions reduction by 2030, to realise its once in a lifetime opportunity to become the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (European Commission, 2019a). The European Commission has put into action a reform agenda intending to leave no one person or region behind and assuring that its Green Transition will either work for all and be *Just* or will not work at all (European Commission, 2019b).

"Green Transition(s)" and "Just Transition(s)" have been burgeoning in policy domains and academic literature, succeeding the 1950s syndrome (Pfister, 2010) of the European Coal and Steel Community (Marty, 2020), and the 1970s awakening of social transitions[1]. However, what seems new is their conceptual combination: Just Green Transitions (Shaker and Persico, 2024).

Recalling the New Deal[2] and the Green New Deal[3], the European Green Deal (EGD) constitutes institutional reforms, socio-technical changes, transitions, and/or transformations (European Commission, 2019a). These transitions are subject to deep core perceptions inevitably influencing the definitions and the conceptions behind the policies and decision-making (Ripberger *et al*., 2014), affecting their conceptualisation and operationalisation.

Despite the EU's financial investments, political convergence, and reform support, promoting *a transition* which ought to be green, just, fair, and inclusive (European Commission, 2019a), there is still no clear definition of what is considered sustainable or green (Spinaci, 2020), no clear definition of sustainable development (Holden *et al*., 2014), no blueprint (Tavares, 2022) and no consensus within the EU on the understanding of the Just Transition (Crespy and Munta, 2023). Furthermore, there is no commonly accepted taxonomy for the Green Transition (OECD, 2023), no single commonly agreed upon definition for Green Jobs, and, most crucially, there is no guarantee that the jobs lost in a region will be replaced in the same one (Janta *et al*., 2023).

Ergo, when it comes to studying these twinned transitions, the following theoretical polylemma (Sánchez-Pérez *et al*., 2021) arises: (a) how these compound notions and conceptual combinations are conceptualised and operationalised both at the EU level and of the 27 Member States, (b) whether Europe is going through a *transition* or a *transformation*, and (c) are we going through singularity (Transition) or plural paths (Transitions).

This contribution does not neither attempt to redefine what Just Transitions or Green Transitions are, nor does it attempt to reinvent the notions of social

[1] It is nearly 100 years of transitions, see: United Nation, 2019; Coen *et al*., 2020.

[2] Recalling Eisenhower's Deal, see: Shank, 2008; Adler *et al*., 2019.

[3] See French *et al*., 2009; Chohan, 2019; the Italian 'New Green Deal', also mentioned as Green Deal Italiano, and Green and Innovation Deal (Italian Ministry of Economic Development, General Directorate for Business Incentives, 2022).

and spatial justice behind them. Our aim is not to put a spoke in the wheel of advancing the EGD but to provide a critical interpretation exposing the inconsistencies created by the terminological inexactitudes, the theoretical predicaments of the conceptual fragmentation, and attempting to open a discussion towards precision in the conceptualisation of the expected 'Just Green Transition(s)' as meta (Shaker, 2025 forthcoming), multiple (Tarasova, 2024), multi-level institutional changes which is not an attempt to find solutions or introduce new terminologies.

This brief introduction is followed by a critical interpretation of transdisciplinary literature, presenting a comprehensive exploration of terminological inaccuracies. Following this, Section 3 scrutinises the conceptual fragmentation of key notions. Section 4 discusses notions towards a possible conceptual and theoretical JGT framework, while Section 5 encapsulates the core issues at hand and outlines potential avenues for further research.

## 2. TERMINOLOGICAL INEXACTITUDES

This section provides an overview of the terminological inexactitudes delineated in different official and scientific publications with a shedload of terms indicating the expected JGT. This includes but is not limited to: 'decarbonisation' (IPCC, 2018), 'low-carbon future' (European Commission, 2018), 'green economy' (European Commission, 2024), 'low carbon investment' (EIB, 2023), 'clean energy transition' (European Commission, 2019a), 'Carbon-neutral Transformations', 'Transition towards net-zero', 'Transformation towards a net-zero' (European Commission, 2018), and 'Sustainability Transition' (EEA, 2020).

Terminologies such as Green Transition (European Commission, 2019a) and Just Transition[4], including their plural forms as Green Transitions (Besley and Persson, 2023) and Just Transitions (Stark *et al.*, 2023), are interchangeably used in the academic literature, official documents, and policies. Similarly, are such metonyms as Green Transformation[5], Just Transformation (Bennett *et al.*, 2019), Fair Transition (Council of the European Union, 2022), Sustainability Transitions (EEA *et al.*, 2019), Fair Green Transition (UNDP, 2023), and Clean, Just, and Competitive Transition (European Commission, 2024). In different cases, it is quite common to find other combinations such as Green and Just Transition (OECD *et al*., 2022), Green and Just Transitions (Langthaler *et al.*, 2021), Just and Green Transition (Huq and Khan, 2023), Green Just Transition (EIB, 2021), and

[4] On the origins of the Just Transition, see: Trade Union Congress, 2012.

[5] Between Green Transitions and Transformations, see: Scoones *et al*., 2015; Bąk and Cheba, 2023.

Just Green Transition (Tavares, 2022). These terminological ambiguities reflect different conceptions (Gerrard and Westoby, 2022), the EU has been promoting 'A Green Transition' terminologically singular, separated but connected – at least at a policy level – to 'A Just Transition', rendering a notion of singularity not only in the terminological and philosophical senses but also in the ideological and political ones (Shaker and Persico, 2024).

In various publications, two umbrella terms and near-synonyms are indifferently used to express almost the same expected "Transition(s)" and "Transformation(s)", both in their singular and plural forms. This triggers the question whether the roadmap to climate neutrality is set as a singular phase of transition or as a series of parallel or simultaneous phases of transition(s) to reach a state of a sea change which is expected to happen at a continental scale in the quarter of a century. Both terminologies are synonymously and supplementary used to denote institutional change; nonetheless, they are contradictorily used by various scholars (Child and Breyer, 2017) simply because they hold different interpretations across various disciplines and scholarships (European Parliament *et al*., 2023). This issue becomes even more pronounced when examining the conceptualisation of the JGT, as there remains a lack of coherence in the theoretical and practical application of both terms (Hölscher *et al.*, 2018), especially within the framework of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019a; Heyen *et al*., 2020). Additionally, the combination of the three terms 'Just,' 'Green,' and 'Transitions' into a compound concept has also created some research noise (Shaker and Persico, 2024), for that reason, it has been found relevant to investigate the semantic interpretations of different conceptual compositions as structured in table (1):

Table 1. Terminological Inexactitudes of various Conceptual Combinations related to the Just, Green, Transition

| Composition | Denotation | Connotation |
|---|---|---|
| Green and Just Transition | The 'Green' is added to the concept of the 'Just Transition;' the Green and the Just as two separate but related aspects of a singular transition. | Prioritise the Just Transition but also ensure that it is addressed environmentally. |
| Green and Just Transitions | The 'Green' is added to the concept of the 'Just Transition;' the Green and the Just as two separate but related aspects of plural transitions. | Plural: prioritising the Just Transition but also ensure that it is addressed environmentally. |
| Just and Green Transition | The 'Just' is added to the concept of the 'Green Transition;' the Just and the Green as two separate but related aspects of a singular transition. | Prioritising the Green Transition but also ensuring that it is addressed justly. |

| Composition | Denotation | Connotation |
|---|---|---|
| Green Just Transition | The Green and the Just are two non-separated aspects of a singular transition; with more emphasis on the Green one. | Addressing the Green and Just dimensions in a mutually reinforced and integrated manner but through a singular transition path prioritizing the environmental dimension. |
| Just Green Transition | The Just and the Green are two non-separated aspects of a singular transition; with more emphasis on the Just one. | Addressing the Just and Green dimensions in a mutually reinforced and integrated manner but through a singular transition path prioritizing the Just dimension. |
| Just Green Transitions | The Just and the Green are two non-separated aspects of plural transitions; with more emphasis on the Just one. | Plural: both the Just and the Green dimensions are mutually and equally reinforced and integrated. |

Source: own work.

Far from an exhaustive literature review, this table underscores the critical role of semantics in shaping the tendency to use terms and terminologies interchangeably, often under the assumption that their meanings are universally understood and self-evident. However, the inconsistent usage or continuous (re)invention of terminology without first establishing precise conceptual definitions paradoxically leads to unavoidable ambiguities affecting both theoretical frameworks (Moroni and De Franko, 2024) and policy implementation.

Policy formulation often relies on terminology that is semantically similar or inherently ambiguous. A single term can encompass multiple interpretations (Eddington and Tokowicz, 2015) and carry layers of ideology (Žižek, 2014). While transparency, accuracy, and linguistic simplicity (Moroni *et al*., 2020) are essential, interpretation must remain open, flexible, and adaptable to ensure broad societal comprehension and engagement. This necessitates a shared understanding of definitions and concepts, particularly given that notions of justice are inherently relatively shaped by diverse ideological, institutional, and geographical contexts (Webber, 2012). Consequently, achieving terminological convergence in the discourse on the JGT is not merely a matter of nomenclature, onomastics, or philosophical debate. Rather, it underscores the political imperative of aligning expectations with tangible outcomes (Campbell, 1971). However, persistent ambiguities and inconsistencies pose risks, potentially hindering effective communication, conceptual clarity, and the practical implementation of policies (Benson, 1971; Riggs, 1979).

In conclusion, while this section has revealed not only inexactitudes in the use of terminology but also some theoretical gaps, the following section probes the conceptual fragmentation caused by these inexactitudes to establish a common ground for various conceptions.

## 3. WHAT IS BEHIND: CONCEPTUAL FRAGMENTATION

This section critically examines the conceptual fragmentation surrounding the JGT. It not only engages with discourses on social, spatial, and environmental justice but also sheds light upon the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and etymological interpretations of 'Just' and 'Transitions' across various transdisciplinary scholarships.

To establish a shared conceptual foundation for the diverse interpretations outlined in the previous section, this study adopts an ontological stance of Bounded Relativism (Moon and Blackman, 2014). This perspective acknowledges the multiplicity of realities shaped by temporal and spatial contexts (Dọmingues, 1995), implying that notions such as Just, Green, and Transitions may be understood differently across time and space. Furthermore, the perception of a single reality varies across cultural, political, and ethical institutions, evolving in response to geographic, economic, and climatic conditions (Moon *et al*., 2016).

Examining the notion of justice, despite the vogue of social justice as a seemingly universal term (Huyser and Smit, 2015), it is a relatively recent construct compared to the broader concept of justice itself (Kraynak, 2018). The evolution of justice as a philosophical concept spans over two millennia, from its classical foundations in Plato and Aristotle to its theological and political refinement by Aquinas, Luigi d'Azeglio, and Serbati. Beyond Marx and Engels' accounts on justice (McBride, 1975; Gilbert, 1982), it took another century before the theorisations of Rawls (1971). Notably, another six centuries elapsed before the discourse on justice expanded beyond its social dimension to incorporate spatial considerations. This shift introduced new terminologies and conceptual frameworks, including territorial justice (Davies, 1968), territorial social justice (Smith, 2000), and spatial justice (Harvey, 1973a, 1973b), all of which remain active subjects of scholarly debate.

From a social standpoint, we are social as well as spatial and temporal beings (Soja, 2009); continuously constructing and reinforcing intricate networks of social relations (Velicu and Barca, 2020) within a space-time framework that is itself a socially produced construct (Harvey, 1990). From a spatial perspective, the notion of justice extends beyond mere spatial configurations, distributive mechanisms, and procedural fairness[6]. Neither societies nor spaces can be inherently just or unjust (Moroni and De Franko, 2024); rather, they emerge as dynamic arenas shaped by social interactions, power structures (Di Campli, 2018), and physical forms[7]. All these notions of justice or justness are more about how public institu-

[6] In the perspective of conceptualising the JGT, we think that the dimension of spatial justice ought to go beyond the theorisations on distributive and procedural justice. See: Soja, 2009; OECD and UNDP, 2020.

[7] Here, 'Space' is intended beyond its physicality, see: Lefebvre, 1974; Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith, 2009.

tions define what is considered to be just (Rawls, 1971; Moroni, 2020, 2023a) and, accordingly, how to govern and to be governed; in other words, this is where the dimension of the governance[8] enters the equation.

Transitions in this context are institutional space-time changes; crucially fundamentally entailing ideological transformations within societies (Homer-Dixon *et al*., 2013). They encompass the paradox of 'unknown knowns' (Žižek, 2006), reflecting contested notions of justice (Tavares, 2022), and power dynamics. The complexity of defining these transitions – given their interwoven social, spatial, political, economic, and environmental dimensions – stems from their inherent non-linearity and uncertainties (European Parliament *et al*., 2023).

Transitions themselves cannot be judged as inherently just or unjust (Moroni and De Franko, 2024), nor can they be inherently green or *ungreen*. Rather, their operationalisation and implementation could be subject to relatively contextual monitoring and evaluation. From a Marxian perspective, transitions are expected to have socio-spatial-temporal products that might change over time (Holton, 1981; Acaroglu, 2020).

Transitions are socially produced in a specific time in a certain space and, therefore, are subject to social changes in space-time (Fuchs, 2019). Another crucial issue about transitions is that several approaches to the JGT have leaned towards rendering the dimension of justice as an institutionalised singular-pathed solution, leaving minor space to put into consideration the plural and multi-scalar nature of transitions (Kortetmäki *et al*., 2025).

Transitions could create or exacerbate existing socio-spatial inequalities (Velicu and Barca, 2020; Pesch, 2021), externalising the benefits from one context to another (Kanger and Schot, 2019) when considering that different individuals, communities, and regions could experience unequal access to essential services (OECD, 2018), amenities and opportunities[9]. This raises concerns about the notion of "leaving no one nor region behind," which is the 'polar star' of the JGT.

Socio-spatial and temporal disparities, including marginalisation (Bullard, 1990) and deprivation (Sen, 1999, 2009), persist across urban (Carmon and Fainstein, 2013) and rural (Nordberg, 2020) contexts due to differences in institutional capacity, infrastructure, public services, and resource distribution. Axiologically, the way JGT might be perceived today varies significantly depending on the context. What could be considered as *just*, and what could be operationalised and implemented in a capital city in Northern Europe differs markedly from a rural area on an island in the middle of the Mediterranean. In other words, this variation

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[8] The most tackling issue with advancing and achieving the JGT and the EGD is mainly about how these transitions are governed both at the EU level and that of the Member States. It is thus crucial to recall: Frantzeskaki *et al*., 2012; Morgan, 2006; Jones *et al*., 2020; Madanipour, *et al*., 2022.

[9] One risk in advancing JGT is creating or reinforcing social and territorial disproportions; see: Agyeman, 2008.

underscores the necessity of returning to foundational principles of justice and justness and critically assessing their relevance (Barry, 2005).

When not everything in the Green Transition is green (Osório, 2023), and not everything in the Just Transition is just (Schuster *et al*., 2023), conceptualising becomes an intricate process. From this perspective, we could assume that if everything is labelled as 'Just' and 'Green,' nothing is 'Just' or 'Green.' Drawing on Nietzschean determinate negation (1859), as interpreted by Žižek (2012), the very negation of a notion forms part of its identity – what is absent defines what is present. In this sense, JGT is not a universally accepted concept but rather a meta-concept. While the notions within JGT may serve as guiding principles and values[10], they do not fully encapsulate the substantive content of the concept itself (Pirie, 1983). Approaching JGT from a political philosophy (Moroni, 2025) perspective offers a critical lens through which one can examine the axiological and epistemological foundations of justice (Moroni and Weberman, 2016), good and bad governance, and the effects of the decisions we "decide to decide" (Miller, 2013) or those we "decide not to decide at all" (Dente, 2014).

Going beyond what is just and what is not – according to the revaluation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*) – values and principles ought to be first critically interpreted and questioned while considering the conditions and circumstances from which they have grown and under which they have developed and shifted[11]. Thus, conceptualising JGT requires interrogating values not as fixed truths but as historically and contextually contingent constructs shaped by the conditions under which they emerged and evolved (Phillips, 2023). In this respect, JGT can be set as the meta-narratives (Patterson *et al*., 2017) governing the operationalisation of the EGD through encompassing commonly accepted values of justice, ideally leading to operationalising green processes and hopefully just outcomes (Ansaloni and Tedeschi, 2016), in a utopic world, a just process steering a just product.

Under this light, JGT, could be seen at the same time as an objective, a process and a product of governance and decision-making processes. They pivot on multi-level transition governance (Crespy and Munta, 2023) and, more intriguingly, on a multi-level meta-governance framing (Jessop, 2004) where actors, interests (Taylor, 2009), and levels of decision-making within a specific geographic area or territory[12] are governed in a manner that aspires to be just. In conclusion, critically reflecting on their conceptual fragmentation is essential, particularly when shifting from conceptualisation to operationalisation. This applies not only to defining

[10] We advocate that JGT are ought to be a vessel of guiding principles rather than a set of indicators; see Abbott, 2014; Moroni, 2020.

[11] On "Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted" (*Nichts ist wahr, Alles ist erlaubt*), see Nietzsche, 1859.

[12] Connecting the notion of justice to both the territorial and governance dimensions; see Harvey, 1973a; Pirie, 1983; Bullard, 1990; Dikeç, 2001.

the term 'Just Green Transition' but also to recognising that multiple transitions are occurring simultaneously – none of which are entirely just, and all of which aspire to become genuinely green.

## 4. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE JUST GREEN TRANSITIONS

After introducing the terminological inexactitudes and conceptual fragmentation, this section opens the discussion for some dimensions relevant to a possible theoretical framework for conceptualising the JGT and, accordingly, operationalising them.

As noted above, the term JTG is still undefined and needs to be explored transdisciplinary. Far from providing new definitions, we would prefer not to[13] use JGT as a synonym for existing concepts; we advocate reflecting on the different meanings and perspectives this possible meta-concept might have and the risks that its misuse might bring. The exigency to base the conceptualisation of JGT on a theoretical framework offers room to set the foundations before viewing the social, spatial, and governance dimensions of the JGT. It also helps to address the ontological and epistemological positionalities shaping and advancing the JGT.

A theoretical and conceptual framework of JGT ought to encompass the poly perspectivity and plurality associated with the broad spectrum of social and spatial contexts (Cedergren *et al*., 2022), we consider JGT as socio-spatial-temporal[14] that goes way beyond the frames of the Green Transition and the Just Transition. As mentioned, the growing attention on advancing the JGT by 2030 and achieving the EGD goals by 2050 in the absence of a unified operational framework is mainly caused by the variety of terminologies that have been introduced in the last years without clarifying the essential meaning of their notions, but rather it added to the existing complexities.

It is foundational to assert terminological distinctions reflecting the multiple realities of individuals, societies, communities, and regions, and precisely define what we intend by JGT: Just: according to whom it is Just, for who it is Just, and how far it is Just; Green: what truly is environmentally and ecologically friendly, and not just a replication of pseudo-fashionable labels; Transitions: considering the multiplicity and plurality (Davidoff, 2007) and the various paths to achieve the same goal, most importantly, defining whether JGT is a process or product, is it

[13] As from Melville, 1853, and according to Žižek (1992), "is not that the predicate is denied, it is that a non-predicate is asserted". See also: Desmarais, 2001; Whyte, 2009.

[14] Here the transitions are ought to be considered through their space-time circumstances as well: where they are taking place and when they are happening; see: Soja, 1980.

just a transitional phase – but towards what exactly – and/or is it a whole transformation. As an umbrella of multiple existing concepts, JGT is more than the sum of their parts. Yet, developing a theoretical framework for a notion that remains insufficiently conceptualised highlights the ongoing confusion, both in the conceptualisation of JGT and in its translation into policy frameworks.

One risk we see is related to the priorities these notions might imply. Indeed, sometimes the priority accent goes to the just dimension, sometimes to the green, and sometimes to transition(s), depending on the nature of the policies to be designed. Although these varieties, from a semantic perspective, can be understood as a way of enriching the concept, from an operative one, this could be counter-productive when addressing decision-making processes. In this respect, we advocate the importance of identifying a common combination, we suggest "Just Green Transitions" reflecting plurality, relativity, and inclusivity in policymaking. We propose the term JGT as a meta-concept, a concept of concepts (Marradi, 2012) crucial for rational abduction (Brogaard, 1999) that implies complex but possible transitional processes.

JGT embodies a rich tapestry of interconnected and concurrent concepts. From our perspective, it is characterised by a multi-faceted, simultaneous, multi-level, multi-sectoral, and multi-scale nature. The term 'multiple' encapsulates the coexistence of both 'just', 'green', and 'transitions' concepts. This implies that policies addressing these notions should collectively tackle the interconnected challenges, carefully considering potential hidden effects. The adjective 'simultaneous' reflects the reality that society confronts diverse challenges concurrently. Consequently, actions cannot be taken in isolation; instead, a tailored approach in both space and time is imperative. Furthermore, the terms 'multi-level,' 'multi-sectoral,' 'multi-actoral,' and 'multi-scale' emphasise the absence of a singular, universally applicable solution. Ultimately, tackling these challenges requires a multi-level meta-governance framework (Jessop, 2004) ensuring a multiplicity perspective while maintaining conceptual and operational coherence.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through an exploratory approach, this contribution aimed at probing the terminological uses that might result in risking the conceptualisation and theorisation of the so-called JGT. A critical interpretive review cross-cutting academic and policy domains highlighted some terminological inconsistencies that have caused some 'research noise,' for which the operationalisation of the transitions might face difficulties both at a theoretical level and a practical one. The contribution explored the heterogeneity of the terms and concepts related to JGT, highlighting the importance

of a commonly agreed-upon definition of a JGT meta-concept. The notions contained under the umbrella of the JGT have been explored throughout their socio-spatial justice, and transitioning dimensions. Additionally, it analysed the importance of considering spatial and social justice in space and time while considering the JGT as an issue of governance and a matter of political philosophy. It reflected, as well, on the consequences of the relativity, multiplicity, and simultaneity of the transitions. Consequently, conceptualising JGT ought to consider the following dimensions:

– Just: socio-spatial-temporal justice matters; policies, programmes, plans, and relative actions should seriously "leave no one or region behind" through understanding the relativity and plurality of territorial and social circumstances.

– Green: there is no credible alternative in safeguarding all species, thus considering what is truly environmentally friendly and not replicating pseudo-fashionable terms.

– Transitions: there are multiple and simultaneous phenomena that ought not to be viewed from a singularity point of view but a holistic and multi-perspective approach is better considered.

In this contribution, our primary focus has been to critically examine the inaccuracies and fragmentation surrounding the conceptualisation of JGT. However, there remains a wealth of avenues for further exploration. At this point, it has become intriguing to (i) understand how to operationalise the JGT from a Pan-European perspective while considering the various Member States' levels of preparedness, institutional capacities, and socio-political and environmental challenges, and (ii) encompassing a multi-level meta-governance approach (Jessop, 2004) offering an inclusive governance perspective across scales, sectors, actors, and levels, of decision-making.

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