



ADVANCED REVIEW OPEN ACCESS

Perspectives on Social and Justice Issues in Climate Policy – Comparing the Just Transitions, Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Literatures

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Received: 28 February 2025 | **Revised:** 26 September 2025 | **Accepted:** 19 January 2026

Domain Editor: Lars Otto Naess | **Editor-in-Chief:** Maria Carmen Lemos

Keywords: capitalism | decolonization | economic growth | just transition | sustainable welfare

ABSTRACT

Given that the climate emergency is accelerating, transformative climate action becomes increasingly urgent. Considering social and fairness implications of climate action is critical to avoid widening inequalities and public opposition. The just transitions (JT) and sustainable welfare/eco-social policy (SW/ESP) literatures both address social and fairness issues related to climate action. However, they have developed largely separately from each other and are not well integrated, limiting the capacity to holistically consider social and fairness issues in climate action. To examine differences and synergies between these two bodies of literature, this paper compares their stances on key themes of capitalism and economic growth, work and welfare, and global justice. While both of these literatures are internally diverse, JT publications tend to focus on justice implications for workers in high carbon sectors, and SW/ESP research examines how welfare systems can support wellbeing for all within planetary boundaries. The JT literature would benefit from a more systematic consideration of post-capitalist and post-growth debates, which are more prevalent in the SW/ESP literature, including options for decoupling welfare from work and from economic growth. The JT literature increasingly discusses issues on global justice and decolonization, but the SW/ESP literature has so far largely failed to examine these themes, a gap that it should address. Overall, we argue that each of the literatures can integrate aspects from the other to form a more holistic and transformative approach for addressing social and fairness issues in climate policy.

This article is categorized under:

Climate, History, Society, Culture > Ideas and Knowledge.

1 | Introduction

The accelerating climate and ecological crises call for rapid action. However, policy progress is much slower than needed, among other reasons because some people fear that policies, which address climate change, have negative or unfair impacts on their lives. Social and fairness implications of climate action need to be considered from the outset to avoid widening

inequalities and public opposition. The just transitions (JT) and sustainable welfare (SW)/eco-social policy (ESP) literatures examine how a closer alignment of climate policies with social and labor market policies could generate fairer outcomes and greater public acceptance, and how welfare systems need to adapt given the urgency of tackling the climate and ecological crises. However, the JT literature on the one hand and the SW and ESP literatures on the other have different origins and developed

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largely separately from each other. While these literatures share concerns regarding the social and justice implications of policies addressing climate change, they have developed different perspectives and approaches. So far, no systematic comparison of the JT and SW/ESP literatures is available which would be needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of, and approach to, researching social and fairness issues related to climate policies.

However, it should be noted that there are several reviews of the JT literature (Burke 2020; Heffron and McCauley 2018; Saget et al. 2021; Stark et al. 2023; Wang and Lo 2021), and Bohnenberger (2023) has published a first review of the more recently emerging SW/ESP literature. In addition, Benegiamo et al. (2023) provide a brief overview of JT and SW approaches in their introduction to a special issue on “labor transformations and welfare policies in the context of the ecological crisis”; Gałgóczi and Pochet (2023) highlight that the links between JT and SW have not been sufficiently discussed; and Nenning et al. (2023) cover both JT and SW in an article on climate change and social protection. A more in-depth and systematic comparison is lacking, a gap that this review addresses.

The JT literature first emerged in the 1960s/70s and was led by trade unions in response to the closure of chemical and atomic plants. JT was later taken up by the International Trade Union Confederation, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) demanding the protection of jobs in the fossil fuel industry (Rosemberg 2013). Partly due to their lobbying, “just transition” became part of the preamble of the Paris Agreement in 2015, and was reaffirmed in 2018 at COP24 with the Silesia Declaration emphasizing the need to create decent work and quality jobs to ensure an effective and inclusive net zero transition (Jenkins et al. 2020). However, academic engagement with JT only grew in the late 2010s and early 2020s (Jenkins et al. 2020; Räthzel et al. 2021). A majority of publications deal with the energy transition, and a plethora of case studies analyze workers’ and trade unions’ involvement in transition processes and outcomes for them. As Heffron & Sokołowski (2024, 2) note, “it is simply a mystery [...] why it took so long” for justice to enter the discussion of energy transition.

First publications on the relationship between social and environmental policy emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Cahill 2002, 2007; Fitzpatrick 1998; Fitzpatrick and Cahill 2002; Huby 1998), and from the mid-2000s, several social policy scholars started to become specifically interested in the implications of climate change for their field (e.g., Büchs et al. 2011; Gough et al. 2008; Gough and Meadowcroft 2011; Meadowcroft 2005). From the mid-2010s onwards, social policy scholars also started to use the term “sustainable welfare” in the context of the social-ecological transition, often associated with post-growth positions (Büchs and Koch 2017; Gough 2015; Koch et al. 2016).

To systematically compare the JT and SW/ESP literatures and develop a more comprehensive approach to researching and addressing social and justice issues in climate policy, this review examines positions in these literatures on capitalism and growth, work and welfare, and global justice. Since these themes address core principles according to which economies and

societies are organized, they are highly suitable for comparing the JT and SW/ESP literatures and assessing how transformative their proposals are. We hope that research guided by this more holistic approach can provide insights on how labor markets and welfare systems need to adapt and contribute to creating fairer outcomes and greater public support for climate policies.

Positions on capitalism and economic growth measured by gross domestic product are discussed together because the two are closely coupled: key characteristics of capitalism are profit maximization and accumulation, and capitalism depends on economic growth as entrepreneurs continually need to generate and accumulate profits so that they can invest them in (often labor-saving) technological innovations to survive market competition. Since capitalism depends on growth, crises including unemployment, poverty, and rising inequality are likely to emerge in non-growing capitalist economies.

Advocates of post-growth, which we use here as an umbrella term for various growth-critical approaches including de-growth, steady-state economics, wellbeing economy, and doughnut economics (Koch 2025), highlight that there is currently no empirical evidence that GDP growth can be decoupled from environmental impacts and material use at the speed and scale required to tackle the climate and ecological crises (Haberl et al. 2020; Hickel and Kallis 2020; Kallis et al. 2025). At the same time, economic growth does not significantly contribute to wellbeing outcomes once high levels of income are achieved (Kallis et al. 2025). Post-growth scholars therefore argue that economies would need to be organized around prioritizing social and ecological outcomes instead of profit maximization and accumulation, but such an economy would no longer be capitalist.

Work and welfare policies are key components of economic systems, and how work and welfare are organized strongly depends on the character of the economic system. Authors’ positions towards work and welfare are therefore closely related to positions on capitalism and growth. Climate policies have direct implications for work and welfare. For instance, the transition to a climate neutral economy has profound impacts on industrial sectors and jobs. Climate policies also have implications for people’s health and wellbeing because they can affect the affordability and quality of food, energy, housing and mobility. Welfare policies can help to prevent or counter-balance some of the negative impacts of climate policies and also address impacts of climate change on health and livelihoods. It is in relation to the theme of work and welfare that the most concrete policy proposals in the JT and SW/ESP literatures are discussed.

Global justice is an important theme because the climate crisis is mainly caused by countries in the Global North, while the Global South is more severely impacted by climate change. Approaches that focus on these global injustices and take historically unequal and exploitative relationships between the Global North and the Global South into account demand greater redistributive and transformative action than positions that only focus on the Global North.

This review systematically compares positions in the JT and SW/ESP literatures on these three themes. Mapping these literatures

will clarify commonalities and differences between and within JT and SW/ESP literatures and support a broadening of the debate in each of these fields to support more transformative analysis.

1.1 | Methods

This review is based on a systematic narrative review (Petticrew and Roberts 2008; Torraco 2005) of the “just transitions”, “sustainable welfare” and “eco-social policy” literatures. The literature search was conducted in Scopus in January 2025, including papers in English and accessible at the University of Leeds. The search for “just transition*” in the title, abstract, and keyword yielded 1550 hits. This was narrowed to 534 results that had “just transition*” in the title to focus the review on papers to which the “just transition” concept is central and which explicitly use the term. In addition, we decided to limit the selection to conceptual papers or papers with relevant conceptual sections because we were particularly interested in positions on capitalism, growth, work, welfare, and global justice, which are more likely discussed in conceptual work. This left 108 JT publications to analyze. We proof-tested our search strategy and found that widening the search to articles that use JT in the abstract or keywords brought up many articles that did not engage with the JT concept in more depth. However, including only articles that have JT in the title will inevitably leave out some relevant papers. It also excludes publications that contribute to a broader JT literature without explicitly using this term. However, the aim of this paper is to examine how literature that directly uses the JT term discusses the key themes along which we structure the review, and how it compares to the SW/ESP literature.

The search for “sustainable welfare” in the title, abstract, and keywords identified 192 papers. We excluded papers that focused on the ‘sustainable welfare index’, used the term ‘sustainable welfare’ as an alternative to more mainstream economics understandings of welfare, and social policy papers that purely focused on the financial sustainability of welfare systems, leaving 34 papers for this review. Searching for “eco-social” in the title, abstract, and keywords yielded 730 records; narrowing the search to the title and the social sciences left 156 records. Here we further excluded papers about eco-social work and education, as well as on broader ‘eco-social transformation’ or ‘eco-social development’ which left 38 papers to review. In addition, we identified 7 papers that have both ‘eco-social’ and ‘sustainable welfare’ in the title, use these two terms interchangeably throughout, or included both topics in a review. In total, 79 papers on SW and ESP were therefore included in this review. Please see the [Supporting Information](#) for a full list of publications included in this review.

2 | Comparing Just Transitions, Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Literatures

2.1 | Capitalism and Economic Growth

2.1.1 | Just Transitions Literature

Out of the 108 articles that deal conceptually with JT, the majority argues that JT could and should be used as a framework for a transformation of the economy (Bouzarovski 2022; Ciptet 2022;

De Ruyter and Bentley 2024; Eder et al. 2023; Krause et al. 2022; Stark et al. 2023). According to this perspective, JT is not restricted to an energy transition where renewables replace fossil fuels while production systems remain the same. Rather, the majority of conceptual JT publications advocate changes in the economy where workers’ rights are improved, and participation, industrial democracy, state ownership (Lethbridge 2024; McIlroy et al. 2022), worker cooperatives (White 2021) and universal public provision (Krause et al. 2022) increase.

As such, many JT publications are critical of the current economic system, but the vast majority (85%) do not explicitly frame this as a criticism of capitalism. Only 16 publications explicitly mention capitalism. Of these, 9 see ‘taming’ capitalism as a main objective, and only 7 explicitly state that capitalism should be overcome (see Table 1). As Stevis et al. (2023, 21) say, JT policies vary from those “that largely affirm what is, to those that aim to change the rules of the political economy”. Some publications claim that JT is seen as a “space for genuine contestation over competing visions of the socio-ecological order that actively includes unions and workers” (Flanagan 2023, 404), while it is acknowledged that most current JT policies do not aim at overcoming capitalism (Newell and Simms 2021, 2). Rather, policies discussed in these papers are oriented at taming capitalism and thus lean towards techno-managerial and market framings of climate change which are aligned with green growth approaches that do not fundamentally alter capitalist relations (Stevis and Felli 2015; White 2020). In policy debates, therefore, “the elephant in the JT room – the never-mentioned

TABLE 1 | Just transition (JT) and sustainable welfare/eco-social policy (SW/ESP) literature positions towards capitalism and economic growth. See the Supplementary File for the full list of publications included in the review.

	JT #	JT %	SW/ ESP #	SW/ ESP %
Capitalism				
‘Overcoming’ capitalism	7	7	16	20
‘Taming’ capitalism or position unclear	9	8	17	22
Capitalism not mentioned	92	85	46	58
<i>Total</i>	<i>108</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>79</i>	<i>100</i>
Growth				
Advocates post-growth	8	7	37	47
Green growth/ status quo	6	6	0	0
Position unclear	3	3	30	38
Growth not mentioned	91	84	12	15
<i>Total</i>	<i>108</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>79</i>	<i>100</i>

presence that determines everything about it – is the capitalist system, which is implicitly accepted as the most advanced, or else the only possible form of social organization” (Velicu and Barca 2020, 266). Scandrett et al. (2022, 172) claim “if an economic theory that is predicated upon continued expansion, extraction, and profit led us into the crisis situation we are in, why would we look to the same approach to lead us out of this?” From this perspective, JT is seen as being able to tackle the inequities of the current political economic system (McCandless and Faus Onbargi 2023), and as truly transformative when it overcomes capitalist forms of exchange (Bouzarovski 2022) and socializes production (Giacomini 2020). Only a few papers discuss the risk of policymakers and trade unions being co-opted by business and fossil fuel interests that aim to delay climate action (Eder et al. 2023).

While much of the JT literature in one way or other criticizes the current economic system (without necessarily naming capitalism), the majority of contributions (87%) do not directly criticize economic growth. One reason for this could be that capitalism-critical positions within the labor movement focus on the conflict between capital and labor and labor exploitation. From this perspective, it is in workers’ interest to increase their share of the profit that the capitalists make and growth is seen as necessary to create value that can then be redistributed to them (Wilgosh et al. 2022). Actors tend to assume that growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation thanks to technological advancements (Tomassetti 2020). Policies proposed in the JT literature therefore focus on promoting green growth and the creation of new jobs as part of the green energy expansion (Bianchi et al. 2024; Krause et al. 2022; Pollin and Callaci 2019; Pope and Wages 2018).

However, a small number of JT contributions are critical of economic growth—8 papers explicitly support post-growth and 3 criticize growth (e.g., Burke 2022; Galgóczi 2020; Harry et al. 2024; McIlroy et al. 2022; Stevis and Felli 2015; Velicu and Barca 2020) and make the case for a transformative JT that moves beyond a growth-based, extractive economy (Burke 2022; Galgóczi 2020). For instance, Gouverneur & Netzer (2014, 232) ask labor and trade unions to recognize that “industrialized countries have a moral duty to discuss options of degrowth, or how the current primacy of consistency and efficiency can be supplemented by a focus on sufficiency”, McIlroy et al. (2022) advocate a focus on work instead of growth within ecological ceilings, and Velicu and Barca (2020) claim that green growth will likely lead to the same socio-ecological stress and labor-based exploitation as conventional growth approaches and highlight that JT could have the potential to significantly improve working class lives. Ding and Hirvilammi (2024) suggest measuring JT success in terms of labor security and not in terms of growth, and Burke (2022) similarly questions whether the growth agenda can ensure well-being in high-energy societies.

It is interesting to note that many of the JT contributions that do not take a clear anti-capitalist or post-growth stance still argue for transformative change. However, transformation is an open notion; it means a notion of passage and a change of shape. Understood in this way, a transformative approach does not see JT as a “passage to a predefined future, but a set of continuously evolving processes that must be responsive to diverse forms of

vulnerabilities and the relational practices that condition them” (Abram et al. 2022, 1038).

2.1.2 | Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Literature

Like the JT literature, many of the SW and ESP publications are critical of the current economic system. While less than half of them directly mention capitalism (33 papers, 42%), this is a higher proportion compared to the JT literature (15%) (see Table 1). Of the papers that mention capitalism, 17 take a critical ‘taming’ position or do not clearly state whether capitalism should be ‘tamed’ or ‘overcome’, and 16 papers explicitly argue that capitalism is dependent on growth and hence not compatible with a post-growth economy, implying or explicitly stating that capitalism needs to be overcome in a post-growth context to create a stable economy that can safeguard wellbeing for all within planetary boundaries (Raworth 2017; Steffen et al. 2015). Most of the ‘overcoming’ capitalism statements come from the SW literature (12 papers), while ‘taming’ or unclear positions are more evenly split between SW (10 papers) and ESP (7 papers) outputs. Publications that align with ‘overcoming capitalism’ positions include Büchs et al. (2024), Koch (2020, 2022), Büchs (2021), Lee and Koch (2023), Langridge (2024), Laruffa (2024), Paulsson et al. (2025), Tobing-David et al. (2024) and Vogel et al. (2024). Much current scholarship in the broader field of post-growth studies (i.e., not specifically dedicated to SW/ESP) is dedicated to the issue of how economies can be steered, and needs and ecological outcomes be met, through alternative provisioning systems (Fanning et al. 2020). It also discusses the prospects of democratic planning in post-growth contexts (Durand et al. 2024; Koch 2024; Steinberger et al. 2024). Other recent research develops corresponding scenarios (Li et al. 2024) and addresses structural barriers to post-capitalism, sustainable welfare, and post-growth such as economic elites and institutionalized power asymmetries (Koch et al. 2024).

While some SW/ESP publications do not discuss economic growth (e.g., Bertho et al. 2021; Bridgen 2023; Graziano 2024; Lindellee et al. 2021; Mandelli 2023), the majority of papers (67, 85%) do. 30 (38%) of those (23 of which are on ESP) discuss different views on growth but do not clearly position themselves towards the issue, and 37 (47%) (24 of which refer to SW and 4 to SW and ESP) explicitly adopt a post-growth position.

We could not identify any SW/ESP paper that supported ‘green growth’ as a priority. However, some scholars adopt a ‘neutral’ position (e.g., Mandelli 2022) or argue that growth should be balanced with ecological and social objectives (e.g., Sabato et al. 2022). Several publications analyze the European Union’s (EU) approach to ESP and conclude that the EU has adopted a green growth approach in this area (e.g., Cotta 2024; Laruffa and Nullmeier 2024; Mandelli et al. 2023; Sabato et al. 2022; Sabato and Mandelli 2024).

Economic growth can coincide with growing tax takes to finance expanding welfare states as during the postwar economic and welfare state expansion (Lee et al. 2023) and thus contribute to bridging contradictory class and group interests. However, many SW/ESP scholars build on the insight by Fanning

et al. (2021) that there is currently no country in the world that meets critical social thresholds without exceeding planetary limits and have started to identify the exact links between economic development, resource use, social (in-)equality, and environmental goals (Fritz and Koch 2016). Post-growth aligned SW and ESP scholars regard a significant decrease in matter and energy throughputs in the GN as a necessary precondition to meeting global climate and other environmental targets while also reducing structural inequalities and maintaining critical levels of wellbeing (Büchs and Koch 2019; Coote 2022; Corlet Walker et al. 2021; Dukelow 2022; Fritz and Lee 2023; McGann and Murphy 2023; Murphy 2023).

While the SW/ESP literature recognizes that broader de/post-growth transformations must grapple with unprecedented levels of complexity requiring parallel changes in a range of societal fields that are currently linked to the provision of economic growth (Büchs and Koch 2017), the contribution of SW/ESP can also be understood as promoting a reduction of this complexity via its focus on the intersection of the environment and welfare (Hirvilammi and Koch 2020). As a corollary, the scholarly interest in this field has been redirected away from making economic growth compatible with ecological sustainability and social equity towards understanding how welfare can be provided and basic needs satisfied within planetary boundaries and in post-growth contexts.

Some publications, typically those with an interest in critical political economy, regard the focus on economic growth in the SW/ESP literature as somewhat 'superficial' and lacking in analytical depth. They highlight that capitalism is an underlying barrier to transformational change which needs to be addressed to avoid co-optation by technocratic approaches which merely focus on alternative indicator systems (e.g., Büchs and Koch 2017; Fritz et al. 2021; Laruffa 2024).

Looking at the ways in which capitalism and growth are discussed in the SW/ESP literature, we can note that capitalism-critical approaches are here mainly a consequence of growth-criticism, based on the assumption that capitalism depends on growth and that post-growth economies can only be stable in non-capitalist economies (e.g., Büchs and Koch 2017). In that respect, the SW/ESP literature differs from the JT literature, where capitalism-critical approaches arise from the dominant focus on jobs and working conditions while growth criticism is less central.

2.2 | Welfare and Work

2.2.1 | Just Transitions Literature

Given the origin of the JT concept, it is no surprise that the JT literature focuses on work, workers and employment, including labor market policies to buffer the job losses from the transition to climate neutrality, especially from phasing out fossil fuels (Galanis et al. 2025; Pope and Wages 2018). The original policy proposals, developed by unionist Tony Mazzocchi in the 1970s, included wage replacement, healthcare, pension benefits, and funding for training and reskilling for affected workers (Luke 2023). Much of the JT policies follow this path, favoring job and pension guarantees as well as transition programs, including retraining and relocation

for workers in high carbon sectors (Pollin and Callaci 2019; Slatin and Scammell 2011).

In addition, the JT literature focuses on the creation of new jobs in the green economy (Morena 2018; Saget et al. 2021). Some authors see a chance in JT to improve workers' lives (Clarke and Lipsig-Mummé 2020; Velicu and Barca 2020) by fundamentally restructuring production relationships (White 2021) and to support a "genuinely worker-led transition" (Scandrett et al. 2022, 167). They stress that the newly created jobs need to be decent and fair-paid jobs (Gueye 2022; Newell and Mulvaney 2013; Pope and Wages 2018; Stevis 2021), which cannot be taken for granted but need union representation (Gouverneur and Netzer 2014; Kojola and Agyeman 2021; White 2020). Recent contributions highlight the gender injustices within the labor-centered JT literature as white male workers are the main beneficiaries of the JT measures discussed above (Allwood 2020; Kojola and Agyeman 2021; Lahiri-Dutt 2023; Walk et al. 2021; White 2020). Some of these contributions, therefore, argue that investments need to target sectors which are likely to grow in a low-carbon economy and are mainly feminized, like teaching, nursing, care, and service work (Krause et al. 2022; White 2020, 2021).

Some of the JT contributions criticize the wage-worker centrism of the JT discourse (e.g., Smith and Scott 2022; Velicu and Barca 2020). They maintain that the future of work should be seen beyond the capitalist wage economy, with income decoupled from waged labor (Bainton et al. 2021). Some make a connected point that those who are unwaged are still doing important work in a post-fossil economy, for example, women fulfilling the unwaged work of the production and reproduction of labor power (Giacomini 2020). Some publications therefore argue that a narrow understanding of JT could risk reproducing racial, gender, and class differences between those with and without jobs (e.g., Luke 2023). Some of those who advocate broader JT approaches promote the reduction and redistribution of working time (Fernandes 2024; Galgóczi 2021; McIlroy et al. 2022).

Some contributions suggest that JT cannot be achieved by reorganizing the economy and the labor market alone and discuss wider welfare state measures (e.g., Benegiamo et al. 2023). Suggestions include measures that incentivize "participation in unpaid work that is socially meaningful and ecologically beneficial" (Ding and Hirvilammi 2024, 254), rebalancing gendered unpaid care work (Krause et al. 2022), job guarantees, and a universal basic income to aid people in the transition to a green economy (Park and Bishara 2023). Galgóczi (2021) even claims that a successful JT needs a comprehensive overhaul of the concept of the welfare state. He suggests an eco-social/sustainable welfare state that would go beyond redistributing carbon emissions and would also redistribute wealth, time, and income; in his view, such an eco-social state will help to address the challenges that stem from JT and ecological transformation. Sabato and Mandelli (2024) also suggest that public welfare policies must align with JT objectives.

2.2.2 | Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Literature

Proposals for work and welfare policies in the context of addressing climate change differ between the more 'mainstream'

and the more transformational, post-growth-aligned publications on SW/ESP.

The ‘mainstream’ strand of the ESP literature focuses on the integration between social and climate policies that are compatible with a growth-based capitalist economy. The integration between social and climate policies has two elements: designing climate policies that are socially fair, and social policies that support the reduction of emissions and other environmental impacts. More ‘mainstream’ ESP proposals go beyond labor-focused JT proposals in that they not only cover employment-related policies but also those that address issues such as poverty, health, housing, and pensions.

Mandelli, who is a representative of the more ‘mainstream’ ESP literature, developed an ESP typology that distinguishes policies that target workers from those that target consumers (2022, 344).¹ In this typology, the examples of ESPs that target workers overlap with those discussed in the JT literature, for instance policies that make climate policies fairer such as providing cash benefits to unemployed workers in high carbon sectors or active labor market policies that help workers in high carbon sectors to find new jobs through job search assistance, reskilling, and retraining. Mandelli’s typology also mentions examples of green social policies, such as working time reduction with proportional cuts in income (which would reduce production and consumption), and public investment into green jobs creation and green education. These types of employment-related eco-social policies are discussed by several authors in the wider ESP literature, including Babirye et al. (2022), Bonetti and Villa (2023), Graziano (2024), and Neier et al. (2024).

Examples for ESPs that target consumers in Mandelli’s (2022) typology include policies that make climate policies fairer such as providing support for people in energy poverty through cash benefits or green housing retrofits, as well as green social policies that support low carbon consumption for example, through vouchers for green energy and green social housing. Such wider ESPs, including those that compensate people for regressive distributional impacts of carbon or energy taxes, support people in transport poverty, or facilitate green travel, are discussed by various authors in the ESP literature (e.g., Bonetti and Villa 2023; Bridgen 2023; Galgóczi 2021; Graziano 2024; Otto and Gugushvili 2020).

An important additional dimension of ESPs has been emphasized by Nullmeier (2024): the protection of citizens and workers from the impacts of climate change. Climate change can directly affect employment, for instance through the impact of severe weather events on agriculture, tourism and other weather-dependent sectors, requiring social protection for affected workers. Climate change and environmental pollution also affect people’s health and life expectancy, which need to be factored into health, social care and pension policies (ibid.).

The post-growth-leaning SW/ESP literature has proposed policies that could support people’s wellbeing within planetary boundaries. These proposals go beyond those made in the more ‘mainstream’ ESP literature in that they aim to make welfare systems independent from economic growth and support a transition to a non-capitalist economy.

A fundamental principle that the post-growth-leaning SW/ESP literature highlights is the prioritization of social and ecological objectives over economic growth and profit maximization in policy making and organizational decisions (Büchs et al. 2024; Hirvilammi 2020; Koch 2022). Such a reorientation of decision-making would fundamentally transform the economy, as it would replace capitalist and growth-inducing principles of profit maximization and capital accumulation with priorities of achieving climate targets and providing wellbeing for all in an equitable manner.

Such a reorientation of the economy would also involve a reallocation of available monetary and material resources towards needs satisfaction and sufficiency, in other words the establishment of provisioning systems that generate goods and services for needs satisfaction within planetary boundaries. Policies that the SW/ESP literature discusses in this context include “consumption corridor” approaches which restrict the production and consumption of high carbon goods while guaranteeing everyone’s needs satisfaction (e.g., Gough 2017, 2022). The complementary “production corridors” approach (Bärnthaler and Gough 2023, 12) distinguishes the “requirements for essential production under climate mitigation imperatives, key areas of excess production (luxury, finance, and military), and the in-between economy”. Consumption and production corridors are conceptualized as channels to move economy and society towards what the Stockholm Resilience Center (Steffen et al. 2015) and the doughnut economics framework (Raworth 2017) refer to as the ‘safe and just operational space.’

Since capitalist economies without growth tend to increase inequality, the post-growth-aligned SW/ESP literature has also emphasized that SW systems would need to actively increase social equality, for instance through maximum and minimum levels of income and wealth, a more equal pre-distribution of income and assets, and ‘activation’ measures that aim at broader social inclusion not just through paid employment but also volunteering and other activities that have social and/or environmental benefits (e.g., Benegiamo et al. 2023; Büchs et al. 2024; Büchs and Koch 2017; Dukelow 2022; Gough 2022; Koch 2020, 2022; Koch and Buch-Hansen 2020; Lee et al. 2023).

Alternative property forms such as communal and cooperative property have also been highlighted by some post-growth-leaning SW/ESP authors (Büchs and Koch 2017; Koch 2020). These alternative forms of property could contribute to a more equal distribution of productive assets and facilitate a more democratic organization of production and consumption (ibid., also see Steinberger et al. 2024).

Several policies that are often mentioned in the SW/ESP literature, such as preventative approaches (e.g., Benegiamo et al. 2023; Büchs et al. 2024), universal basic services (UBS), universal basic income (UBI) and working time reduction (Bohnenberger 2020; Büchs 2021; Coote 2022; Galgóczi and Pochet 2023; Gough 2022; Langridge 2024; Lee et al. 2023; Tobing-David et al. 2024; Vogel et al. 2024), are supported by both ‘mainstream’ and transformational approaches, but they would play different roles depending on the context. For instance, some preventative policies such as preventative health and active labor market policies are compatible with welfare

capitalism because they reduce the demand for welfare spending, while a non-capitalist, post-growth economic system would aim to be preventative by ensuring needs satisfaction and greater equality for all, thus creating growth resilience of the economy.

UBS and UBI are, in principle, compatible with capitalist economies as demonstrated by the existence of universal health and education services as well as UBI schemes in several countries. Scholars such as Gough (2017, 2022) also include UBS (combined with a minimum income scheme) in the 'mainstream' ESP scenario together with green new deal policies. However, the post-growth-leaning SW/ESP literature often discusses UBS and UBI as more transformative approaches that can help to decouple welfare from work (Büchs 2021; Koch 2022; Langridge 2024; Lee et al. 2023). Such decoupling would be required if productivity levels keep increasing in a post-growth context and lead to rising unemployment. Decoupling work and welfare would guarantee needs satisfaction for everyone regardless of employment status in this scenario. However, whether or not productivity levels should or would increase in a post-growth scenario remains unclear. Several scholars argue that it would be beneficial to keep productivity levels stable or even curtail them in a post-growth context to maintain employment levels and reduce inequality (e.g., Jackson and Victor 2016; Mair et al. 2020). At the same time, populations are currently 'aging' in many countries, which increases the proportion of older people in the economy. If this trend were to continue in a post-growth or steady-state economy, productivity levels might have to stay stable or even increase to maintain living standards.

Similarly, working time reduction can be designed as a 'mainstream' or transformational policy. In a capitalist context in which productivity and GDP are increasing, working time reduction can contribute to reducing unemployment and a more equal distribution of employment. Its function would be similar in a post-growth economy, but here working time reduction would additionally be designed to contribute to a reduction of production and consumption.

2.3 | Global Justice

2.3.1 | Just Transitions Literature

While the JT literature has a strong bias towards studying the energy sector and the global north (GN) (Garvey et al. 2022), it has increasingly shed light on the global injustices implied in some decarbonization strategies. It stresses the injustice of the GS bearing the consequences and costs of global warming while having contributed little to its causes (e.g., Galgóczi 2020; Olmos Giupponi 2023), and it underlines processes which generated the wealth of the GN based on the exploitation of natural resources and labor of the global south (GS) (Fitz-Henry and Klein 2024; Kojola and Agyeman 2021; Krause et al. 2022; Newell and Mulvaney 2013; Slatin and Scammell 2011).

Some JT publications also highlight that many of the materials needed for the green economy are resourced in the GS, like lithium for batteries, including from Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. This green extractivism is perceived as entrenching historical injustices (White 2021; Zografos and Robbins 2020). Mining

minerals often has negative impacts on local livelihoods, land and natural habitats, exacerbating vulnerabilities (Bainton et al. 2021; Benegiamo et al. 2023; Fernandes 2024). Many labor actors, in particular from the GS, therefore criticize the working conditions in GS resource extraction (De Ruyter and Bentley 2024; Kojola and Agyeman 2021; Smith and Scott 2022) and question JT as a neocolonial exploitative structure (Azzi 2021; Fitz-Henry and Klein 2024) that prioritizes national sovereignty over energy supplies (White 2020). This strand of the JT debate also strongly critiques JT strategies that reduce decarbonization to technological innovation.

In order for JT to unfold its potential as a justice mechanism, some authors argue it must address colonial relations (Smith and Scott 2022), overcome its Eurocentrism (Jones 2022), develop more pluriverse perspectives (Escobar 2015), and include reparative principles to restore contemporary and historical injustices of racialized exploitation of the GS (Fitz-Henry and Klein 2024).

Some JT publications highlight the need to recognize actors other than waged labor in the struggle for a JT, including indigenous people (Gueye 2022; Jayasuriya and Watene 2024) and women (Cha and Pastor 2022; Ciplet 2022; Walk 2024), especially in the informal economy (Giacomini 2020), and adjust the timeline for decarbonization for countries in the GS (Pope and Wages 2018). This would call for broader justice approaches that not only emphasize "distributive" justice, but also "procedural", "recognitional" and "restorative" justice (Abram et al. 2022).

2.3.2 | Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Literature

The SW/ESP literature generally focuses on the GN based on the view that welfare states are more developed in the GN and that post-growth approaches primarily apply to the GN while living standards should be allowed to increase in the GS (e.g., Büchs 2021; Büchs and Koch 2017; Corlet Walker et al. 2021; Gough 2017, 2022). This position needs to be discussed more critically, and we will expand on this in the Conclusion.

Due to the GN focus, only a small number of SW/ESP publications discuss implications of global justice principles for SW or the application of SW/ESP in the GS. Tobing-David et al. (2024) explicitly apply a post-growth-oriented SW approach to Indonesia to examine under which institutional and policy conditions SW outcomes can be achieved. The authors find that the presence of "[a] substantial level of subsidiarity, self-governance, and meaningful community participation, and a policy mix covering basic needs, services for vulnerable groups, a functioning local economy, and innovative ecological practices" supports the achievement of SW in the decentralized welfare setting in Indonesia.

Murphy (2023, 1) acknowledges the "global north bias" of her book and highlights that while the same SW principles can apply to the GS, policies would likely have to be different. She calls for a global redistribution of resources and greater focus on topics such as "debt and reparation". Nanning et al. (2023) present "adaptive social policy" as a growth-focused eco-social

policy approach which promotes financial support for climate change adaptation and job programs to people in the GS.

Numerous other SW/ESP publications do mention global justice issues but do not spell out implications for SW or ESP.

Other topics that the SW/ESP literature mentions in relation to global justice are similar to those discussed in the JT literature and include climate injustices, human needs, and economic exploitation of the GS (e.g., Galgóczi 2021; Gough 2022; Snell et al. 2023).

The post-growth-oriented SW/ESP literature highlights that the notion of human needs is meant to apply globally and across generations, for example, Koch et al. (2016, 704) state that SW “is oriented towards satisfying human needs within ecological limits, from an intergenerational and global perspective” (also see: Gough 2015; Laruffa 2022; Lee et al. 2023). Realizing global needs satisfaction globally in an equitable way would have immense implications for the organization of the global economy and SW, but the implications for SW are not yet clearly spelled out in the literature.

Similar to the JT literature, several SW/ESP publications highlight the economic exploitation of the GS by the GN (with indirect implications for the dependency of welfare systems in the GN on this exploitation) (Büchs et al. 2024; Paulsson et al. 2025). Laruffa (2024) states that the SW/ESP literature should take decolonization into account (also see Raphael et al. 2024), and Schulze Waltrup (2023) mentions that de-growth links to decolonization but without discussing implications for the SW/ESP literature.

Many authors highlight that further research is needed on the implications of global justice on SW and ESP (Babirye et al. 2022; Bohnenberger 2020; Fritz and Koch 2019; Sabato and Mandelli 2024).

The lack of deeper engagement with issues of global justice and decolonization in the SW and ESP literature is a clear oversight. We will discuss in which ways the SW/ESP literature can broaden its approach in this regard, including by learning from the JT literature.

3 | Conclusion

This review of the JT and SW/ESP literatures shows that even though these two fields tend to have a different focus which goes back to their respective origins, they cannot be easily divided into two ‘camps’. Rather, the literature is complex with overlaps between and much diversity within each of these fields.

Overall, the JT literature has historically focused more on the implications of decarbonization for jobs and working conditions with criticism of capitalism in the foreground while economic growth is discussed less frequently. The opposite is true for the SW/ESP literature which is more concerned with the implications of ecological limits (including climate change) to growth for social outcomes and welfare states. While several SW/ESP publications have started to explicitly discuss the role of

capitalism for the transition to climate neutrality and SW/ESP, authors like Laruffa (2024) have recently criticized the SW/ESP literature for sidelining debates about capitalism. While some of the JT literature engages with capitalism, it tends to advocate ‘taming’ capitalism, green growth, and welfare and work policies that tie support to current or previous paid employment (e.g., Bianchi et al. 2024; Ghaleigh 2020; Park and Bishara 2023; Pollin and Callaci 2019; Pope and Wages 2018). Many JT policy proposals focus on protecting jobs and improving working conditions in the context of climate policy, for instance through training and re-skilling, employment protection, decent pay and working conditions, and participatory JT processes (e.g., Bianchi et al. 2024; Ghaleigh 2020; Gueye 2022; Luke 2023; Morena 2018; Park and Bishara 2023; Pollin and Callaci 2019; Pope and Wages 2018; Saget et al. 2021).

This orientation relates back to the origins of the JT literature which arose from concerns of the trade union and workers movements. Interestingly, this is despite the fact that most of the contributions to the JT literature reviewed here come from scholars in geography, environmental studies, sustainable development, policy and urban planning, rather than from employment relations scholars. This is surprising as the latter have plenty of disciplinary expertise from studying earlier waves of restructuring and economic crises, analyzing labor market policies and companies’ responses to change.

While positions towards capitalism and growth are often not spelled out in the JT literature of our sample, a small number of contributions more explicitly advocate post-growth and overcoming capitalism (e.g., Burke 2022; Ding and Hirvilammi 2024; Fernandes 2024; Fitz-Henry and Klein 2024; Giacomini 2020; Gouverneur and Netzer 2014; McIlroy et al. 2022; Velicu and Barca 2020). However, as noted in the methods section, there is a broader, JT-related literature more critical of capitalism (Escobar 2015) and colonialism (Harris and McCarthy 2023; Roysen et al. 2025; Vela Almeida et al. 2023), which was not included in our sample as it did not use “just transition” in the title. In future research, it would be interesting to conduct a more detailed mapping of the broader JT literature and its discussion of capitalism, growth, and decolonization.

The SW/ESP literature is also diverse when it comes to positions on capitalism, growth and welfare and work policies. Some contributions to the SW/ESP literature take a more ‘mainstream’ position which does not explicitly advocate post-growth or overcoming capitalism (e.g., Bertho et al. 2021; Bridgen 2023; Cotta and Domorenok 2024; Graziano 2024; Mandelli 2022, 2023). But compared to the JT literature, a larger proportion of publications, especially those which use the term ‘sustainable welfare’, explicitly advocate post-growth approaches. Some of those also explicitly argue that capitalism needs to be overcome as it is not compatible with post-growth (Büchs et al. 2024; e.g., Büchs and Koch 2017; Langridge 2024; Laruffa 2022, 2024; Paulsson et al. 2025). Authors who support post-growth and overcoming capitalism also discuss policies that have the potential to decouple welfare support from paid work, for instance universal basic services or income schemes, and broader ‘activation’ approaches that support not only paid employment but also unpaid activities that are beneficial for society and the environment (Dukelow 2022). But a wide range of other policies are

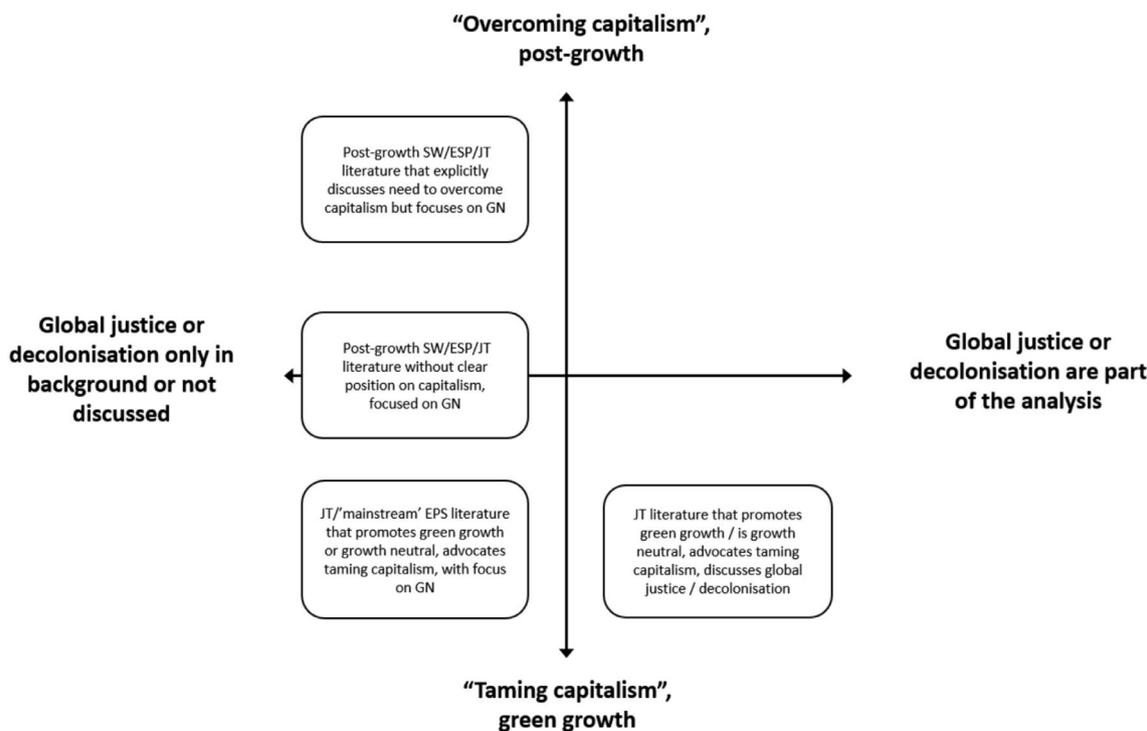


FIGURE 1 | Mapping the just transitions, sustainable welfare and eco-social policy literatures.

also proposed, with some overlaps to the JT literature, including working time reduction and a greater redistribution of income and wealth.

Both the JT and SW/ESP literatures acknowledge the vast global injustices in relation to historical and current responsibility for emissions, climate change impacts and capacity to mitigate and adapt. However, since the JT literature focuses on working conditions not only in the GN but also along supply chains which include the GS, it devotes more direct analysis to unjust implications of decarbonization for countries and people in the GS, although far from enough.

In contrast, the SW/ESP literature tends to focus on implications of decarbonization on welfare states in the GN as welfare states are more consolidated and living standards higher there than in the GS. Figure 1, which maps the JT and SW/ESP literature along the axes of capitalism/growth approaches and global justice, demonstrates that there is a large gap in research at the intersection of overcoming-capitalism/post-growth approaches and global justice/decolonization analysis which needs to be addressed.

We can conclude that both the JT and the SW/ESP literatures can benefit from greater integration of perspectives featured in the sister field. Since the JT and more 'mainstream' SW/ESP literatures tend to focus on real-world transition processes and eco-social policy making, it is more attuned to political realities, which can be beneficial for achieving greater policy impacts. However, these parts of the literature could benefit from engaging more with ongoing conceptual debates about the limits to growth and the implications for capitalism, which would also require a fundamental rethinking of the roles of work and welfare and GN-GS economic relationships.

The SW/ESP and JT literature that advocates deeper systemic change calls for a shift away from growth-based capitalism and has started to discuss possible ways forward for work and welfare. However, this literature is often sidelined by policymaking communities, as its proposals appear too remote from current political realities. These contributions also concentrate on highlighting the problems with current economic systems and policies, but more research is required on outlining the potential characteristics of democratic, non-growing, non-capitalist economies more concretely. There is a growing literature on possible transformative strategies and processes that could promote alternative economic systems and policies (e.g., Barlow et al. 2022; Buch-Hansen 2018; Buch-Hansen and Nesterova 2023; Wright 2010, 2019), but much further research is required on these questions.

The SW/ESP literature also urgently needs to engage more with GS perspectives to examine implications of post-growth and beyond-capitalism approaches for fair climate and eco-social policy in the GS, and implications of unequal GN-GS relationships for the future of GN welfare states. A first important step would be to build on and expand emerging research on the legacies of colonialism for welfare states in the GN (Bhambra 2022; Bhambra and Holmwood 2018; Midgley and Piachaud 2011; Plange and Alam 2023). Decolonizing current welfare states and policies that contribute to acknowledging and making good past exploitation of the GS by the GN would be important measures with major implications. For instance, demand reduction policies that are compatible with globally fair 1.5° lifestyles, taking historical contributions to climate change and appropriation of social and environmental values from the GS into account, would require considerable resources and even faster and larger emission reductions in countries of the GN than currently anticipated (e.g., Akenji et al. 2019; Büchs et al. 2023;

Fanning and Hickel 2023). Second, more research is needed on implications of transformative climate and economic policies on welfare systems in the GS and on the innovative potential of GS welfare initiatives for the GN. For instance, work by Lawhon and McCreary (2023) on welfare policies in the GS highlights benefits of systems in which the state plays a more “modest” role while still ensuring redistribution and needs satisfaction for all and acknowledging the risks associated with too much decentralization or outsourcing to communities (also see van Dyk 2018). In both the JT and SW/ESP literatures, only a small minority of authors is based in the GS (9 out of 108 (8.3%) in the JT literature and 2 out of 79 (0.03%) in the SW/ESP literature). This clearly indicates that great efforts are required to promote and integrate voices from the GS to strengthen GS perspectives in this field.

Social and justice issues need far greater consideration in climate policy to make policies more acceptable to the public and to scale and speed up decarbonization. The JT and SW/ESP literatures have made important and diverse contributions to the analysis of social and justice issues in climate policy, but they can learn from each other to develop a more holistic and transformative approach. The JT literature can engage more with perspectives from the SW/ESP literature on post-growth and ‘overcoming’-capitalism, and the SW/ESP needs to expand research on feasible transition pathways for promoting transformational approaches and address the large gap on global justice.

Author Contributions

Milena Büchs: conceptualization (lead), investigation (equal), project administration (lead), visualization (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review and editing (lead). **Vera Trappmann:** conceptualization (equal), investigation (equal), writing – original draft (equal), writing – review and editing (equal). **Gina Moran:** conceptualization (equal), investigation (equal), writing – review and editing (equal). **Max Koch:** conceptualization (equal), investigation (equal), writing – original draft (equal), writing – review and editing (equal).

Acknowledgments

Milena, Max, and Vera dedicate this work to their fathers/parents who passed away while we started collaborating on this paper.

Funding

Milena Büchs’ contribution has been funded by Horizon Europe project “MAPS – Models, Assessment and Policies for Sustainability”, grant agreement 101137914.

Max Koch’s contribution has benefited from funding from Lund University’s Excellence Programme for Sustainable Development (project “Post-growth Welfare Systems”) and FORMAS, a Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development (project “Economic Elites in the Climate Change Transformation: Practices, Justifications, and Regulations of Unsustainable Lifestyles in Sweden”, grant number 2023-01771).

Vera Trappmann’s contribution has benefitted from funding from Hans-Böckler Foundation, project “Just Transition: action, concepts, debates and strategies – an international comparison across 14 countries”, grant number 2021-582-2.

Gina Moran’s contribution has been supported by a PhD studentship from the White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership (2024–2028), ESRC Grant Reference No ES/Y001621/1.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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Endnotes

¹ Mandelli (2022, 344) also distinguishes “protective” versus “investment” functions of policies and “reactive” versus “preventative” policy functions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Supporting Information.