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Growth in parliament: Some notes on the persistence of a dogma

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ABSTRACT

This article maintains that the failure of critique on – and alternatives to – economic growth to translate from academic and societal into day-to-day political discourse is only to be explained by looking closer at institutions and their discursive practices. Taking Germany and an empirical study about its parliament as an example, current political discourse on growth is shown to be predominantly governmental, ornamental, dogmatic, and – most importantly – ‘inert’ (i.e., unresponsive to individual MP’s convictions). It is made plausible that these features are linked to the suppression of growth’s character as a political option that was historically configured and chosen to mitigate distributional conflicts. Thus, redistribution forms part of the growth discourse’s ‘political unconscious.’ If this were true, a key for greater political impact of growth critique would lie in the combination with issues of inequality and redistribution, rather than only with concerns about the environment or a better quality of life.

1. Introduction

It has been roughly a decade since the degrowth concept was ‘formalized’ by academics and activists, and its origins go back at least to the 1970s (Whitehead, 2013). Related debates in academia and society have come to occupy important, ever-expanding niches (for Germany see e.g. Brand, 2014; Pennekamp, 2011), and while economic development advisors do certainly not advance growth critique nor concepts like degrowth or steady-state, they show occasional tendencies either to subordinate growth under superior goals such as poverty reduction (Saad-Filho, 2007) or to at least set it on equal footing with environmental and social goals (Stiglitz, 2008: 54). The according relativization or conditioning of growth in the shape of either ‘green’ or ‘inclusive’ growth is now playing a part in the supranational discourse of the OECD (Schmelzer, 2015b: 268–269), and since France’s then-president Sarkozy commissioned a group of renowned economists to shed light on the limits of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as an indicator of social progress (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009), at least one important dimension of growth critique – its non-linear relation with more complex ‘quality of life’ assessments – has become a frequently repeated topos in various national policy fora.¹ Sometimes related, sometimes detached from such debates about the desirability of growth, questions about its feasibility continue to claim attention. The nagging awareness of planetary limits to growth – not only in the classical Malthusian sense as employed by the Club of Rome in 1972, i.e., as a crisis of ‘sources,’ but as a crisis of the carrying capacity as well, i.e., as a crisis of ‘sinks’ (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2004; Rockström et al., 2009) – continues to function as a driver of critical discourses. Last not least, since Japan’s long recession in the 1990s and following similar experiences in other industrialized countries, a specter of ‘secular stagnation’ has joined the two aforementioned motives of growth critique (Baldwin & Teulings, 2014).

The ever-increasing doubts over both the desirability and feasibility of economic growth, however, do not seem to have

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¹ Among those, the German Bundestag, during its 17th election period, established a committee of enquiry called ‘Growth, Well-being, Quality of Life – Pathways toward a Sustainable Economy and Social Progress within the Social Market Economy (Deutscher Bundestag, 2013). The function of parliamentary committees in Germany can be understood, at least in part, as a public reenactment of societal learning processes (Hampel, 1991).

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undermined neither the all-over prevalence of growth as a political goal nor its ubiquity in public discourse. Berg and Hukkinen (2011) were puzzled by this same phenomenon, and have attempted to explain it in terms of a self-sustaining narrative system, where growth critique and degrowth as ‘non-stories’ only would lend support to a half-alternative (i.e., eco-efficient growth) and, thereby and ultimately, to the prevailing grand story of (vulnerable) growth. They speculated that this narrative self-sustenance could be broken through an institutional strengthening of the weak link, i.e., by enabling actors to flesh out the hitherto ‘non-story’ of degrowth. While I have sympathy for this proposition and, even more so, for the narrative analysis approach Berg and Hukkinen pursued methodologically, my own shot at an explanation will be different both in its method and in its result. Methodologically, I will also follow an approach of discourse analysis, but will complement it with a (somewhat speculative) historical framing. The result, in contrast to the aforementioned authors, is that in order to overcome the narrative persistence of growth stories (and non-stories) we will need to transcend their domain – but not in the sense of abandoning growth discourse altogether (‘a-growth’; cf. van den Bergh, 2011), but in the sense of connecting it more systematically with the discourses – and discursive coalitions – that deal with justice and redistribution.

By exploring this matter, I move into a terrain of political sociology that – or so it seems – has barely been explored by scholars concerned with growth or degrowth. Not even a handful of contributions I quote in this article look empirically at the contemporary operative interface between growth discourse and real, state-owned politics (or even policies). And when they do, they either reason at a very highly aggregated level of analysis (Luhmann, 2011), exclusively focus on individual political actors (Berg & Hukkinen, 2011), or draw on anecdotic – albeit plausible – evidence only (Zahrnt & Seidl, 2012). When looking at research published in this journal five years ago, more precisely in its Special Issue on ‘Politics, Democracy and Degrowth,’ there is no article to be found that would link up the conceptual level with empirical data on political processes or institutions. Barbara Muraca, for instance, argued from an ethical point of view that a ‘just’ degrowth society was ‘only possible if patterns of recognition and established values are renegotiated,’ but in the same breath had to recognize that – beyond a global reference to grass-root initiatives – ‘reflections [by degrowth promoters] about the negotiation framework are lacking’ (Muraca, 2012: 543f). Others bore testimony to this lack by simply mapping different policy approaches and their conceptual interlinkages (for economic policies, cf. Johannisova & Wolf, 2012) or even taking refuge in explicitly non-political speculations about an ‘anti-identitarian construction of subjectivity’ (Romano, 2012: 588).

This lack in detail – or sometimes even denial – regarding contemporary institutional realities might in part be stemming from the breach between disciplinary traditions: Both growth detractors and advocates are often political economists. Philosophers and political scientists have early on joined the field, but even the latter mostly privilege a bird’s eye view of political processes and seldom employ the tools of comparative surveys, field observations, or discourse analysis. Historians have provided more insight on the sociopolitical mechanisms at work, but for obvious reasons do (mostly) not cover the present. Conventional political sociology, on the other hand, has not been interested in the topic of growth – probably because it does not constitute a semantic marker or fundamental issue that would account for meaningful ideological divisions and battles in the political game.² Reciprocally, on the side of degrowth scholars, the hesitance to engage with empirical political analysis might also contain an element of structural distance to the state that often lets them content themselves with references to civil society movements and with the somewhat simplistic and voluntarist statement that, when facing the challenge of degrowth, ‘institutions [...] will have to adapt’ (Victor, 2010). While the call for ‘a closer look at the qualitative changes in [...] politics’ can sometimes be heard (Brand, 2012: 14), it has not often been answered in detail. I will come back to this latter point in Sections 4 and 5.

Being trained as a sociologist myself, in this article I navigate between historical analysis done by others, my own empirical research on parliamentary discourse, and good old-fashioned conceptual speculation about political developments and the right path to pursue. I argue that the persistence of the growth paradigm – i.e., of the idea that economic growth, adequately measured through GDP, constitutes a universal measure for social progress and welfare, and will continue to do so in the future (Schmelzer, 2015b: 264) – has in itself become a discursive effect, i.e., it is hypostasized in a way that is exterior and even alien to the subjects who take part in the discourse (but do not ‘found’ it (Foucault, 1972: 227–229)). Looking at the case of contemporary discourse on growth in a central part of the German political system, the Bundestag, I find that the aforementioned discursive effect does *not* consist in establishing certain fixed strategic positions of a ‘debate’; no field is opened where actors would struggle for hegemony within the discourse (Nonhoff, 2010) or would try to persuade others (Gerhards, 2010: 335). (On scope and methods of the according empirical study, see Section 3.1.) On the contrary, the effect seems to consist mainly in *excluding* any plurality of positions (on constitutive exclusion, see Foucault, 1972: 67, 73). Neither relativization and ‘qualification’ nor critique of growth as a policy goal form part of the day-to-day references made to the topic. Actors who enter the discursive arena are presented with almost no option for growth-related strategic choices. Instead of opening a room for debate, a dogmatic closure is reproduced. Plurality and polarization of attitudes toward the topic are absent or marginal, leaving the growth discourse ‘de-politicized’ (on the meaning of the term, cf. Rivera, 2017: 233).

While the dogmatic closure and ensuing selectivity might serve a ‘structurally inscribed’ strategic function (cf. Jessop, 1999), this function itself appears to be no longer within actors’ reach nor at their disposal. As I will argue in Section 2, this has of course not always been the case; the pro-growth option in industrialized countries was enormously strategic and at least partly conscious in the 1950s. If the analysis provided by the German case study (Section 3) was corroborated for other contemporary national realities, the interesting question would therefore be: How could growth discourse within the political system get ‘pluralized’ again, in order to

² There sure are few exceptions, such as the look on fluctuations of the relative importance German MP’s attributed to economic growth over the years (Best, Edinger, Gerstenhauer, & Vogel, 2010), or the inclusion of (unfortunately often mis-coded) statements pro and contra growth in the comparative analysis of European parties’ electoral manifestos (<http://manifestoproject.wzb.eu>). It is striking, though, that these explorations until now have not been linked up to any analytical framework whatsoever.

make use of political actors' differentiated personal attitudes regarding the issue? And how could communication with the political system become improved? On the matter, I will argue that the key to question the value of growth might consist in remembering a tension that lay at its political foundations, namely that between growth and redistribution (Section 4). Growth critics should pay more attention to it than they currently do (Section 5).

2. Looking back: Growth as a political experience and strategy

Growth, of course, is not a recent, postwar phenomenon. During the 19th and early 20th century in Europe and the United States, it had sped up like never before and led to 'a prosperity of gigantic proportions,' a merit that even critics of capitalism such as Karl Polanyi did not deny, although they lamented the harm it inflicted on competing goals such as intact landscapes, local family relations, and workers' dignity (Polanyi, 2001: 109, 171–200). Closely associated with the ideal of productivity, the desirability of economic growth was partly acknowledged, partly contested – in Germany, for instance, during the pre-World-War-I 'value judgment dispute' (*Werturteilsstreit*) (Glaeser, 2014: 209–239).

The *growth paradigm*, however (in the sense of Schmelzer's aforementioned, GDP-related definition), did not acquire its present shape until the 1940s. Before that, even a precise definition of growth was lacking, and absent with it were the statistical means to assess the 'gigantic proportions' of what later was to be called, by eloquent apologists of capitalism, the 'Great Enrichment' or 'Betterment' (McCloskey, 2016a; Mokyr, 2017). Gross National Product was introduced in the U.S. only during the fight against the Great Depression and became crucial for strategic planning during World War II (Lepenies, 2016). Subsequently, Gross National, or later: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) became a global unit for measurement and comparison of economic activity, mainly through active promulgation by the OECD and its predecessor, the OEEC (Schmelzer, 2015a). While GDP was predominantly seen as a tool and frame for expansionist economic policies and overall political communication – the growth discourse –, only at a later point in time and prominently through one of OECD's former chief scientists, Angus Maddison, it was extrapolated backwards. This way, the 'proportions' could be estimated, and through the new historic lens something that earlier economists and politicians had rather guessed from sheer physical evidence was now spelled out in ciphers: that twelve important European countries had on average trebled their GDP per capita between 1820 and 1913, for instance (Maddison, 2007: 382); or that free market pioneer Holland had experienced a per capita growth of almost 100 percent during the 16th century already, presenting an anomaly for that historical period (Bolt and van Zanden, 2014: 637). At the same time, it became customary to express numerous other key economic terms, such as resource productivity or levels of debt, in relation to GDP.

The twofold rhetoric of upholding growth as a policy goal and a synonym for development on one hand, and using it extensively as a technical unit against which other parameters could then be measured, on the other, still persists today.³ Looking at the postwar syndrome of cheap oil and increasingly wasteful consumption patterns (Pfister, 1994) which triggered what we nowadays call the Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene (Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007: 617), it becomes evident that exponential growth, measured through GDP, was linked to a renewed development optimism – to a secular faith in economic 'miracles' (*Wirtschaftswunder*) that would imply an again 'unprecedented' material welfare, but this time, apparently, without the equally 'unprecedented' havoc with the habitation of the common people' (Polanyi, 2001: 41). Although I shall exemplify this, in the following, through the German case, it was certainly not only in this country where the '1950s syndrome' was accompanied by the completely uncritical adoption of the newly introduced GDP standard by important newspapers and the ascension of economists to the top of national policy advice.

It is most interesting to see that this development, in the case of economists' council, had to overcome alternative models of more pluralistic, corporatist consultancy; the latter were rejected because ultimately, politicians wanted to keep unions at bay and strengthen the steering capacity of the Ministry of Economics (Nützenadel, 2002: 293–297). Similarly, the discussion in the political public and the media ended up marginalizing redistribution debates that had been, in the early fifties, still quite present (Knauf, 2016: 42–51). Erich Welter, the head of the business desk of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of Germany's leading newspapers, literally called for investing 'intellectual energy ... in the creation of new wealth' instead of wasting it 'on distribution'; the focus, in his and an emerging majority's opinion, had to lie on 'enlarging the distributable product' (quoted in Knauf, 2016: 45, 47). Not later than by the mid-1960s, the unions and social democrats would have adopted this corollary of growth leading to social peace (tinged by anti-communism), leading to the enactment of the 'Law on the Advancement of Economic Stability and Growth' (*Stabilitätsgesetz*) in 1967, under the new so-called Grand Coalition. When looking at these developments, it seems safe to say that the decision for economic growth was a very political and conscious one at the time, buoyed both by the material persuasiveness of the *Wirtschaftswunder* and by a new discourse properly brought in place.⁴ What was banished was of course not redistribution per se (which continued to operate) but the *unresisted debate* about redistribution, which would lead to social unrest. The formula was (and is): The more economic growth is possible, the less redistribution is needed. This decision would be defended in the face of sinking growth rates at the end of the sixties and of radical ecological critique in the seventies. Since then, we may speak of a 'long now of the growth

³ In our analysis of official Bundestag documents in its 18th election period, 60 percent of all the codings (i.e., units of relevant meaning) we could establish, either subordinate policies under the ultimate end of growth or identify growth with development, well-being, achievement, or national strength. Almost ten percent use GDP as a component of other technical measures.

⁴ As far as this discourse extends beyond language – through regulations, artefacts, and habits – it forms part of a comprehensive 'dispositive' (Jäger, 2011) whose thorough analysis would go far beyond the scope of this article. While it is clear that there is no 'dualism between discourse and reality,' as Foucault sometimes has seemed to suggest (Jäger, 2011: 101), it still holds true that within the dispositive, discursive practice might exhibit a relative autonomy and inertia – which in this case clearly shows in our study.

paradigm' in German politics and media (Knauß, 2016: 99), despite the opposing experiences and discourses mentioned at the beginning of this article.⁵

3. Parliamentary discourse on growth: dogmatic and inert

But how does the 'long now' operate? More specifically: how is it imposing itself upon a political public sphere that not only knows powers of definition and hegemonic repression, but also variation, competition, and even heresy? The main hypothesis of this Section is that the growth paradigm, having constituted a strategic political option in the 1950s, has since evolved or 'degenerated' into a dogma that is effectively *blocking options*. This implies that the reasons that led to the establishment of the option in the first place are either no longer available to the consciousness of political actors, or not within reach of their discursive capacity.

3.1. Affirming growth as an end in itself

The study on the German parliament which serves as a reference here was conducted in 2015/16, with data collection between September and February. Departing from the point that the Bundestag had only recently received the report by the aforementioned committee of enquiry on 'Growth, Well-being, and Quality of Life' (see Note 1) we wanted to know whether the report of this committee had left any traces in parliamentary discourse. As we were particularly interested in possible sources of 'reflexivity' among members of parliament (MPs) and in the role informal connections might play in this regard, we employed a triangulation involving semi-structured interviews with MPs, a representative survey among their staff, and content analysis of 120 Bundestag documents selected according to thematic relevance and structural variety. In the following, I will neglect the shades and types of reflexivity observed in the interviews, as those do not constitute the focus of the present article. Instead, I will foremost deal with some results of the content analysis, which we carried out with the software MAXQDA.

Our first finding is as trivial as it is striking. While the committee of enquiry, despite its enormous tensions and ultimate inability to produce substantial consensus, had agreed on economic growth never being an end itself, but only a means toward other political ends (Deutscher Bundestag, 2013: 24, 589), the analyzed documents state the opposite: Out of 1095 phrases that establish a growth-related purpose or hierarchical purpose-agency ratio (cf. Burke, 1968), 92% do so by evoking growth as an end in itself. This is mostly done by superordinating it over related means. The means that appear in our corpus most frequently⁶ are investments (19%), market flexibility, domestic consumption/demand (eight percent each), and innovations (seven percent), followed by numerous others which often address specific policy fields, like the Energy Transition toward renewables (five percent). While these ramifications are interesting when looking at the different policy debates the particular codings stem from, they do not alter the main grammatical structure which, in this case, consolidates the status of economic growth as an end in itself. The appropriateness of this end remains not only undiscussed; by force of grammatical structure, it is *taken out of the debate*. This effect is by far more powerful than where growth appears as a means; in the latter case, the adequateness or sufficiency of growth in relation to the corresponding ends (e.g., a more stable budget) is more likely to become an issue of debate (e.g., regarding the financial assistance to Greece).

Another version of affirming growth as is evoking it in the same breath with other policy goals. Most prominent among these goals is employment; 'growth and jobs' is a formula that appears 118 times in our corpus. While this somehow reminds the so-called magic rectangle (*Magisches Viereck*) laid down in the – still valid – *Stabilitätsgesetz* (see Section 2), it is also striking that the rectangle's other two pillars, namely price stability and trade balance (Deutscher Bundestag, 1967), are missing in this context. It is almost as if the intimate historic relationship between growth and jobs overshadowed every other discursive figure. What is remarkable in our context is the fact that growth, in these cases, is not addressed as a means to employment (this happens only 13 times under the main category 'growth as a means'), but that the two appear as equiprimordial.

3.2. Relativizing growth?

If we add to aforementioned findings the frequent usage of imbuing speech with growth as a technical expression (see Note 3), it becomes clear only a small minority of growth related passages contains proper arguments. Growth critique *strictu sensu* – i.e., the questioning of feasibility or desirability of growth – is extremely seldom and almost exclusively employed by the opposition (mostly the Green Party); if it appears in the governing coalition's statements at all, it does so in reply to oppositional queries or requests. A stronger presence is achieved by a group of codings which we subsumed under the main category 'growth isn't everything,' but even these codings add up to little more than one quarter compared to the 'growth as a goal' category.⁷ Under the former category, there are two equally frequent ways of relativizing growth. One consists in *juxtaposing* it with other goals, but not by treating them as equals but by making them appear as categorically separate and therefore potentially rival. The line between these strategies is sometimes hard to draw, but we tried to assign the 'separate category' codes in cases where the emphasis was more on distinction than fusion. Not surprisingly, the competing goals which stand out here are neither jobs nor fiscal stability, but well-being, inclusiveness, and quality

⁵ Eva Friman, in her analysis of Sweden's political discourse, confirms the overall acceleration of the growth paradigm's spread after World War II, but states that the respective political discussion about redistribution vs growth among Swedish social liberals and social democrats, while it had exactly the same 'solution' as in Germany (namely, growth), took place before World War II: in the 1920s (Friman, 2002: 90–93).

⁶ As we were dealing with a strategically selected qualitative sample here, the numbers do not imply any representativeness, but show important trends.

⁷ For a visual comparison of the four main categories 'growth as an end in itself,' 'growth as a means toward other goals,' 'growth critique' and 'growth isn't everything,' see Fig. 1.

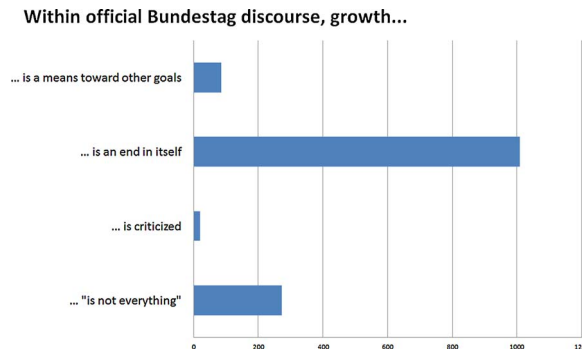


Fig. 1. The main categories of growth thematization in Bundestag documents (n = 1387 codings).

of life. These categories, as mentioned in the Introduction, have been central to several discussions of the last decade, including those of the aforementioned committee of enquiry. Although the related codings permeate several documents, the ones where they appear prominently are only a few: namely the Annual Report on the Economy 2016, written by Germany's chief economic advisors and issued by the Federal Government, which discusses the adequateness of GDP as a measure of well-being, and, again, two requests by the Green Party, one of them demanding a more continuous and prominent treatment of that exact topic in the form of an alternative 'Annual Report on Well-Being.' This request, of course, was rejected by the parliamentary majority.

The second way of relativizing growth is *conditioning* it: only certain types of growth are good for society. The according frames, generated through OECD and other supranational documents over the last decade, can be identified within the Bundestag discourse as well. In order of incidence, they are: Smart Growth (digitalization favors human capital expansion and/or dematerialized production); Green Growth (certain technologies, like renewable energies, allow for an environmentally compatible growth); and Inclusive Growth (economic strengthening of socially vulnerable sectors of society). In our study, the frequency of these notions is even surpassed by that of the multi-faceted formula 'sustainable growth,' whose analysis would deserve a level of detail I cannot provide in this article.⁸ It is important to note, though, that most of these growth 'qualifications,' while at least indirectly responding to growth critique, do not articulate concrete limits to 'good' economic growth. An exception would be, for instance, growth within ecological or planetary boundaries (which figures only six times in the entire corpus).

3.3. Essential characteristics of the official discourse

Growth discourse in official documents of the German Bundestag appears peculiarly obtuse. Its presence, far from being ubiquitous, and concentrated mostly in statements by government officials, agencies, and the governing parliamentary parties,⁹ is effected through utterances that reaffirm the policy goal in a formulaic way, hardly put it in systematic relation to other political concerns, and make its discussion highly unlikely. This way, both the desirability and the feasibility of growth are 'sealed off from empirical and terminological examination,' a discursive reality that meets the definition of *dogma* (Elze, 1972: 277).

Apart from being 'ornamental' and 'governmental' (see Note 9), two additional facts about the *modus operandi* of this paradigm turned dogma are noteworthy. First, it sharply contrasts with the attitudes of individual parliamentary actors. In our guided interviews with MPs, we discovered a broad typology of growth-related attitudes, which ranged from a highly reflexive growth critique to an equally detailed growth defense, also encompassing different 'qualifications' (Rivera, Saalbach, Zucher, Mues, & Rivera, 2016: 20–23). Regarding the staff in MP offices, we found a range of attitudes that, while being strongly determined by political affiliation, was nevertheless much more varied than the documents would let us assume. Moreover, 83 percent of staff members in our representative survey agreed that 'a debate on alternative concepts of growth is necessary.'¹⁰ As an empirical finding, this supports the discursive effect of which I spoke in Section 1 and which remits to Foucault's exteriority principle: The regulations of a discourse cannot be 'defined... by recourse to a psychological subjectivity' (Foucault, 1972: 55). What is interesting about our study is that this principle came not into play as an absolute theoretical presupposition – as which I consider it problematic –, but as an empirical, contingent finding through the research design's triangulation. While it is consistent with the finding in Berg and Hukkinen's (2011) study on Finnish politicians, the interpretation I will give of this exteriority (in Section 4) is somewhat different.

A second feature is remarkable and supports the observation of 'ornamentality,' although with a different emphasis (i.e., lack of function instead of lack of weight). The group of documents which makes the least use of any growth related arguments and rhetoric figures, is the one that stems from the heart of legislative activity, i.e., the reports and recommendations from parliamentary

⁸ It is plausible to assume that this formula is yet another vehicle of blocking growth critique: by pre-establishing the compatibility of growth with ecological policies. As such, it has appeared in Bundestag discussions since 1998, when the Red-Green coalition came into power (Krohn, 2007).

⁹ In the analyzed period (October 2013 till February 2016), less than ten percent of *all* Bundestag documents contained the word 'growth.' In the analyzed sample, the codings subsumed under 'growth as a goal' were highly concentrated in government declarations, requests by the coalition parties, and governmental briefings. On this, see Rivera et al. (2016), p. 14.

¹⁰ There was, of course, a significant moderation of this agreement through party affiliation: staff members of MPs pertaining to the governing coalition were less likely to wish for a debate on growth (see Fig. 2).

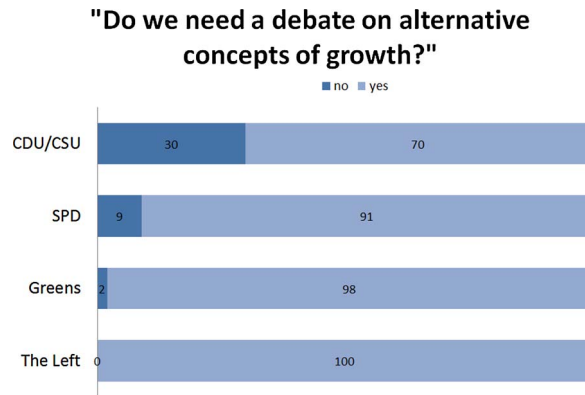


Fig. 2. Percentage of staff members that felt a debate on growth was necessary (n = 217).

committees. The drastic wording chosen by one of our MP interviewees – a budget committee member – comes to mind: ‘One simply won’t argue: “We need to pass law x in order to improve growth.” Rather, these are elements from the *Phrasenschwein*.’ ‘Phrasenschwein,’ in German, denotes something similar to a swear box, except that it doesn’t refer to the use of foul language but to the use of common places. Growth, as seen by this particular MP, is a common place everyone has to pay his tribute to once in a while, but which has no functionality for actual policy debates and decision making. While it is not necessary to share this actor’s self-interpretation fully, it nicely paraphrases an important aspect of our study on growth discourse in the Bundestag. This discourse, to sum up,

- a) permeates different policy arenas, without quantitatively achieving preponderance in any of them;
- b) bypasses legislative documents;
- c) has a stronger presence in documents edited or driven by governmental parties or officials;
- d) is indifferent to the multiplicity of individual attitudes held by actors who engage with the discourse, and
- e) reaffirms growth as a policy goal in various ways, but almost never makes growth itself a topic.

We might therefore call this parliamentary discourse *ornamental* (a-b), *governmental* (c), *inert* (d), and *dogmatic* (e). All of those features are worrisome if one is interested in democratic debate on alternative concepts of growth, but it is the result [e] which ought to be altered, and probably its most puzzling immediate cause [d] which is to be targeted. This desideratum can lead, given the special case we have looked at, to look at questions of democratic responsiveness, e.g. parliamentary party hierarchies and the role they play in enabling or blocking opinion formation, or the difficult status that questions of principle have vis-à-vis a daily praxis of hyperspecialized deliberations. While I consider these aspects important for the explanation of the dogma (and even more so for a political sociology of democratic institutions), I would like to make plausible that, as far as the overarching discursive reality of growth is concerned, actor-centric explanations do not suffice. Instead, I speculate that a key to reanimating or invigorating a political growth debate lies with accessing a ‘repressed’ structural tension that, as I have argued in Section 2, had been rather explicit during the historical moment of the growth paradigm’s birth.

4. Growth, not redistribution: The dogma as a ‘political unconscious’

4.1. Discourse structure results from a repressed historical constellation

Current parliamentary discourse in Germany is reproducing the growth paradigm in a way that is no longer overtly strategic. The growth discourse of the Bundestag is not nurtured by the competition of actors who try to appropriate and reframe it; societal and scientific debates on growth clearly reach the ‘backstage’ of public sphere production, but not the center of the arena. Thus, the phenomenon defies a straightforward actor-centered approach on discourse, as expressed in the termini of the previous sentence (Gerhards, 2010), and requires to think harder about the dogmatic inertia and ‘exteriority’ inherent to discursive formations. My approach on ‘strategic selectivity,’ in this sense, would follow Bob Jessop’s Poulantzasian call for ‘combining structural and discursive concerns in a more inclusive strategic-relational analysis’ (Jessop, 1999: 32). Following the work of Colin Hay and with a more conscious emphasis on the discursive part of the analysis, Brand and Vadrot (2013) have used this approach to analyze the ways in which an institution (in their case, the Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, IPBES) promotes a certain logic (here: ‘pay to conserve’) by presupposing and reproducing beliefs which is no longer consciously articulated (e.g., that commons cannot be provided without strong reliance on the market). They prefer to call the according selectivity at work ‘epistemic,’ as it constrains ‘the set of alternatives from which actors choose their strategies’ by ‘discerning all potential statements from the ones acceptable’ (Brand and Vadrot, 2013: 208, 220). While I do not pretend to say that the German Bundestag or, more generally, the modern welfare state as institutions are constituted by the epistemic selectivity toward growth in the same sense that

IPBES might be constituted by the selectivity toward certain beliefs about ecosystem services,¹¹ I certainly do believe that the according choices ‘run deep’ in the matrix that frames politicians’ socialization and professionalization. The unresponsiveness of the discourse, in this analysis, might lead to a key element of this matrix.

Of course, a number of functional and strategic factors seem at hand to explain the dogma’s persistence. Among the functional elements, the various growth dependencies built into social insurance systems or the dynamics of the health sector, for instance, stand out (Zahrnt & Seidl, 2012). On the strategic side, we might suppose that political actors who are aware of these dependencies will not be inclined to embark on an objectively difficult and politically risky search for alternatives; they also might fear to resuscitate ‘distribution conflicts.’ When further taking into account the strong limitations imposed by party hierarchies and thematic (over-)specialization on the Bundestag’s ‘responsiveness chain’ and the limited capacity of individual parliamentarians to reframe or ‘renew’ parliamentary will formation (von Oertzen, 2006: 283–285), a both functionalist and actor-centric explanation would almost seem complete.

Yet *conscious choices did rarely show* in our interviews, and on even rarer occasions they did in the document corpus. Regarding the strategic motive for choosing growth pointed out in Section 2 – mitigation of distribution conflicts –, there were, *strictu sensu*, only two utterances in the entire study where it clearly emerged.¹² Here, the ‘structural inscription’ of discourse comes into play. Overall, the picture is one of self-reference: a discourse which simply maintains, in a self-sufficient way, the overall need for growth (and jobs), beyond the intentions of the subjects who take part in it. Individual MP’s and their staff seem oblivious with regard to the historical roots of the growth consensus. As a discursive effect of something that has been repressed, this consensus rather forms part of the discourse’s ‘political unconscious.’ Borrowing this term from literary critic Fredric Jameson, I denote by it the fact real historical constellation effected and structured a ‘text’ but is no longer readable at its surface – which is not to say that it is the text’s ‘true meaning,’ but rather that it does determine how it ‘works’ (Jameson, 1981: 20–23). History, as the ‘absent cause’ of a discourse, is textualized as its political unconscious (Jameson, 1981: 35). This unconscious, in itself, might also be understood as a productive force which *limits and enables* the day-to-day ‘prehension’ of societal futures; in this sense, it forms a discursive equivalent to the material, ‘technological unconscious’ that supports people’s imaginaries (Groves, 2017)

With regard to such a pre-established discursive reality, actors tend to simply chose the available positions (see the term ‘strategic’ or ‘epistemic selectivity’ introduced above) – and if there are any positions available for reconsidering growth, it is the quality of life/well-being topic, on one hand, and the ecologically motivated ‘limits to growth’ complex, on the other. Both positions are assumed, from time to time, by the Green Party (and sometimes the Left), but they are far too marginal to function in day-to-day politics. ‘Distribution,’ in contrast, while it is an extremely popular term in parliamentary discourse – in our strategic sample alone, it showed over 200 times – is almost never linked to growth.

I dare to speculate that it is this link – and maybe this link alone – which could re-open possibilities for a truly positional, competitive discourse on growth. Establishing this connection would allow to reconsider growth’s glorious beginnings and ask how to get away from path-dependencies that were cemented more than half a century ago. This approach differs from constructing a counter-narrative, the latter being suggested not only by Berg and Hukkinen (2011), but by several advocates of degrowth. It would, instead, form a necessary precondition for such constructive endeavors becoming able to resonate within the political system. The exclusion of the distribution issue from growth discourse lies at the bottom of its weird dogmatism and inertia. Discussing growth predominantly in terms of limits to its (ecological) feasibility and (social) desirability has succeeded in bringing the issue closer to the heart of some political actors. For reaching the heart of daily political discourse, though, the debate will probably have to be reframed in sociopolitical terms.

While the renaissance of inequality discourse during the last decade certainly seems to present an additional argument for the validity of my suggestion, this discourse, up to now, overlaps with growth discussions only insofar as inequality can be considered a potential hindrance to further growth (Aghion, Caroli, & García-Peñalosa, 1999). The respective stagnation concerns are then either accepted, rejected, or relativized – within the very grammatical structure that reaffirms growth as an end in itself.¹³ Beyond this structural reaffirmation, the merely instrumental linkage between equality and growth not only reduces the former to a means or a necessary condition, bereaving it of its otherwise clearly audible ethical resonance that one could imagine becoming productive for the growth debate. By being so indifferent toward intrinsic normative concerns, it also leaves the ethical component of the old counterargument – namely, that growth would make inequality reduction gratuitous by providing universal wealth – untouched.

4.2. Restoring consciousness on redistribution: a desideratum for degrowth advocacy

Interestingly, it is in the writing of growth *defenders* that the ethical component persists or re-emerges more clearly, namely, in the form of an explicit defense of income inequality. ‘Rightist’ economists, in this particular sense, would meritocratically argue that managers’ wages reflect their actual contribution to growth, or that financing common goods is not to be imposed in a higher-than-

¹¹ This more fundamental hypothesis was implied, in the early 1980s, by Niklas Luhmann when he spoke of a basic ‘unity of self-reference and the idea of welfare’ in the political system (Luhmann, 2011: 34).

¹² One case was an interview with a long-time MP from the coalition, who admitted that growth made it ‘easier to shape distribution conflicts in a positive way’ and that without this possibility, it could ‘become hard to politically keep on track.’ The other is a policy address by the minister for the economy, Sigmar Gabriel, on occasion of the Annual Report on the Economy in January 2016, where he proudly points out that the ‘successes were achieved without distribution struggles’ and emphasizes the ‘need for avoiding them in the future as well.’

¹³ In the study, we also found the respective discussions in the Annual Report of the Economic Council to the Federal Government (for details, cf. Deutscher Bundestag, 2015).

average degree on those who gain more (Mankiw, 2013). Or they would, based on an idea of needs-based justice, dispute the very notion that income inequality is an ethical problem at all, and call for an exclusive focus on poverty reduction or, as they say, greater ‘consumption equality’ instead: ‘lifting up the poor ... by the dramatic increase in the size of the pie’ (McCloskey, 2014: 104). The more bluntly these arguments are put, the stronger the growth discourse is reinforced, by maintaining that growth, ‘as against the socialist equality of enforced redistribution, [...] will enrich all of us’ (McCloskey, 2016b).

While the rage against ‘enforced redistribution’ pertains to the core of economic liberalism, we know that even liberalists had their doubts, occasionally, if growth were the viable antidote against such redistribution. The founding fathers of economic liberalism were either agnostic or skeptic or even – in the case of Malthus – negative about the possibilities of universal, limitless growth in the future (Friman, 2002: 54–59). John Stuart Mill, most prominently, envisaged a stationary state economy with limited capital accumulation, which would then reduce excessive affluence formerly obtained through capital utility, and thus contribute to greater equality – e.g., in the form of cooperative, ‘associational’ production (Levy, 1981: 284). This kind of economic democratization would not require, according to Mill’s liberal reasoning, a strong state intervention, but it would emerge out of an endogenous crisis of capitalistic growth itself. But this is of course something very different from the main ‘bridge’ that one would construct between liberalism and growth critique, namely, that growth consequences ultimately end up undermining individual liberties (Ferguson, 2016). This latter reasoning would probably – and paradoxically – lead to a call for stronger public resource control and redistribution.

Now, it is worth noting that within important parts of the ‘degrowth’ community, neither equality concerns nor redistribution considerations seem to constitute a semantic marker that would allow for identifying ideological nuclei, let alone linking them to actor coalitions. In their survey among 814 participants of the 2014 International Degrowth Conference in Leipzig, Eversberg and Schmelzer found that while one type (out of five) of degrowth supporters they identified through cluster analysis – the so-called ‘sufficiency-oriented critics of civilization’ – showed a tendency to place climate change over inequality concerns, only one other – called the ‘alternative practical left’ – distinguished themselves by preferring the opposite opinion (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2017). More importantly, the average score of all respondents to the related question – asking to trade off inequality against climate change – was settled in the almost perfect middle between complete rejection and affirmation, and more than 300 respondents had chosen the ‘indifference’ position on a 1 to 5 agreement scale (i.e., 3). While this result allows for various interpretations – for instance that respondents felt that this was too hard a choice, or that it didn’t make much sense, or that the two notions were strongly co-dependent –, what is perhaps even more significant is that out of 29 questions posed in the survey (in two different item batteries, cf. Eversberg, 2015), only two broached the issue of equality at all. The very survey design seemed to mirror the disconnection between growth and distribution that we observed in the growth-dogmatic parliamentary discourse. This is relevant because the survey design was developed by authors who intimately know the degrowth debates, and therefore can be considered a ‘discourse map’ of growth critique.

5. Conclusions

If the Leipzig study scope and results are any valid, and if they are seen together with our Bundestag study results, one could deduce that important segments of the *entire* growth discourse – comprising both its dogmatic, affirmative center in politics and the media, and the rather dynamic, critical attempts at the margins of politics and within civil society and academia – are missing the intrinsic connection between growth and redistribution issues that I hinted at in Section 2, and that utilitarian or libertarian growth defenders are so acutely aware of.¹⁴ This is regrettable for a systematic reason as well. As Karl Polanyi has pointed out, redistribution, together with reciprocity, is an ideal-typical alternative to market economies – not primarily in the sense of restoring equality, but in the broader sense of ‘enmeshing the economic system proper in social relationships,’ being these relationships stratified or egalitarian (Polanyi, 2001: 55). In a situation where the disembedding of markets and its protectionist countermovements had led to ‘havoc,’ Polanyi would therefore put his hopes on redistributive activities, which could restore to the economic system the character of a ‘mere function of social organization’ (Polanyi, 2001: 52). What was even more important to him than the notion of ‘systematic transfer of resource from rich to poor,’ though, was the systematicity of transfer itself: an ‘administered economy’ with institutions and sanctions prevailing over free markets, but also over community control and customs. This mechanism, in many of the societies Polanyi referred to, could even work in the opposite direction, redistributing resources toward the already wealthy (Dale, 2010: 116–117).

It is easy to see why many degrowth supporters, with their strong grassroots affiliations and convictions, would shy away from redistribution in this procedural sense. For them, the alternative of ‘reciprocity,’ of small-scale, cooperative economic models, might seem far more attractive than the call for a redistributing, socialist state. Nevertheless, as Polanyi has showed, an essential condition for such reciprocal models to work is ‘symmetry’ of social relations – hardly given in extremely unequal societies. Therefore, one might reason that inequality reduction by ‘centric’ intervention might be a necessary first step, if reciprocity is ever to spread beyond niches – and especially if it is to be based on more equally distributed *capital* (cf. Johannisova and Wolf, 2012: 568). Whether this would amend the societal consequences that might result from combining redistribution with the deflationary tendencies of a shrinking economy (adversaries call these consequences ‘very grim’ (Ott, 2012: 576) – this is not a matter for this article to determine.

¹⁴ When asked directly whether shrinking would ‘lead to harsher conflicts of wealth in society,’ respondents in Leipzig split in three almost equal groups between agreement, disagreement, and indecision. The only type of respondents which showed a substantially higher agreement, was coined ‘the modernist-rationalist left’ by the authors – and described with a noticeable distance.

But it would certainly require thinking harder political realities and policy options – beyond global conjectures. When degrowth scholars more interested in the state and democracy say, for instance, that a basic income or salary caps could act as ‘entry points toward a degrowth transition,’ and that a state that implements them ‘will need some muscle’ (Kallis, 2011: 874, 879), we should proceed to think about which of these two options does offer which kind of first-step alliances (e.g., certain enterprises vs. unions) and how far this will then get us vis-à-vis the structure of hearings and other lobbying in parliament and ministries. If others think that, e.g. in France, founding a Degrowth Party was in principle a good idea in order to ‘engage’ the press and ‘mainstream politicians,’ we should also ask harder what it would have needed to make at least some of them also ‘embrace’ the concept (cf. Fournier, 2008: 539). An analysis of epistemic selectivities will certainly contribute to this kind of strategy finding.

What I was trying to make plausible in this article is that the issue of distribution conflicts and their avoidance through growth forms part of the growth discourse’s political unconscious. In the political arena, it re-appears only sometimes, through a conditioning of growth: *Only* if inequality is reduced, growth is legitimate (the ‘inclusive growth’ option mentioned in Section 1).¹⁵ In view of planetary limits, this particular narrative hardly seems inadequate. But it contains an element that genuine growth critique should embrace: In order to question the simulacrum of an ever-growing pie, it will need to elaborate the alternatives for distributing it better. Not only will unequal societies most likely collapse faster (Motesharrei, Rivas, & Kalnay, 2014), thus stating an objective need for resource redistribution. Also pragmatically and as suggested by our study: If the political mainstream discourse is to be awakened from its dogmatic slumber, it would seem indispensable to forge alliances with actors who have the redistribution and inequality reduction issues high on their agenda.

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¹⁵ In our study on the Bundestag, nearly 80% of its staff members identified with that option (with lower agreement values among Christian Democrats and higher values in all other parties).

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