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Original research article

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

Manuel Rivera

*Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS), Berliner Str. 130, D-14467 Potsdam, Germany*

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Economic growth  
Degrowth  
Political unconscious  
Parliament  
Redistribution

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

*E-mail address:* [manuel.rivera@iass-potsdam.de](mailto:manuel.rivera@iass-potsdam.de).

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2017.09.002>

Received 18 May 2017; Received in revised form 21 September 2017; Accepted 25 September 2017

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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