

The Growth Paradigm in Parliamentary Communication: Reproduction of a Dogma

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A Great Transformation? Global Perspectives on Contemporary Capitalisms

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1. The persistence of economic growth in political discourse

Karl Polanyi, in *The Great Transformation*, was rather silent about the question whether permanent economic growth was desirable or even feasible. He obviously described “dislocation” and “pauperism” (exclusion) as imminent dangers of a kind of growth happening “too fast” and unregulated, and he saw governments’ normative task in “altering the rate of change, speeding it up or slowing it down” in order to prevent “unconscious growth” and safeguard welfare (Polanyi 2001: 35, 39). Nowadays, this could be read as a support for “sustained” growth in the sense of an increase in production without excessive cyclical fluctuations and maintained over several decades. The development experts who advocate this, of course, while seeing a need for state intervention as well, do not have a problem with the rate of change per se. They perceive “sustained” (over 20 years) *and high* (over 7 percent) growth rates as both a desirable and feasible option; desirability linked to poverty reduction, feasibility demonstrated by post-war success stories like those of Japan, Brazil, or China (Commission on Growth and Development 2008). Regarding the role of government, some of their policy recommendations for such sustained, high growth come close to what Polanyi envisaged to be (partial) de-commodifications of money and natural resources (although certainly not of labor); most recommendations continue to follow a liberal credo... but on the whole, after so many struggles between neoliberalists and neo-keynesians, the World Bank and its advisors seek middle-ground, quoting Arthur Lewis sentence (written ten years after Polanyi’s book had been published): “Governments may fail either because they do too little, or because they do too much” (ibid: 30).

In this sense, Polanyi’s plea for recognizing the role of power in society, and for harnessing on it but not sacrificing freedom at its altar (Polanyi 2001: 268), seems, at least in principle, become somewhat mainstream in the economic policies that concern the Global South. Crude manifestations of the “stark utopia” of autonomous markets seem to have made a withdrawal since the World Bank revoked the Washington consensus and claimed the renaissance of a more context-sensitive “art of economic policy making” (World Bank 2005: xii). Neither the 2005 report nor its repercussions among economists (e. g., Rodrik 2006), however, were to question, in a single line, the greater goal of economic growth itself – although some did go as far as to subordinate it more explicitly under the ultimate end of poverty reduction (Saad-Filho 2007) or even set it on equal footing with other environmental and social goals, such as income equality (cf. Stiglitz 2008: 54). At least for discussions about and within the developing world, the conviction of the feasibility and desirability of growth (whether as a

means or an end) seems still to form part of a huge majoritarian consensus, both in theory and in policy – it's only that this growth is no longer thought to be achieved through markets and markets alone.

The observation that growth has, around the globe, survived the battles of economico-political schools as a silent constant, is especially remarkable when taking into account that multiple growth-critical debates concerning the so-called *developed countries* have arisen both in science (Pennekamp 2011) and society (Brand 2014) and that they find counterparts in other areas of the world, e.g., in Latin America (Bodemer 2013: 334-350). It is even more remarkable when considering that, in Europe and the US, this is at least the second, if not the third wave of critical debate since the seventies with their oil crisis, rising environmental concern, and the neo-malthusian *Limits to Growth*. One wonders if there is more to this persistence than just the overwhelming experience of the “Great Enrichment” or “Betterment” that apologists of capitalism so eloquently put to the fore (McCloskey 2016). After all, that experience has for some time now been *weaker* in industrialized countries, where GDP increase is no longer coupled with advances in life satisfaction¹ and where its merits are dampened not only by admittedly abstract environmental concerns, but by visceral insights into the unpleasant constraints and dictates of an overall “growth compulsion” as well (Loske 2011).

In this article, 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’ in the sense of something which 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, I find that the aforementioned discursive effect does *not* consist in making growth itself a topic for debate, i.e., in opening a field where actors struggle for hegemony within the discourse (Nonhoff 2010) or try to persuade others (Gerhards 2010: 335). On the contrary, the effect seems to consist mainly in *excluding* relativization and qualification, not to mention critique of growth as a policy goal from the discourse (on constitutive exclusion, see Foucault 1972: 67, 73), thus leaving no option for growth-related strategic choices to actors which enter the discursive arena. Instead

¹ If it was ever; the positive effects even in so-called developing countries seem related more to short-term growth *recovery* than to steady growth per se (Easterlin 2013: 5f.).

of opening a room for debate, a dogmatic closure is reproduced. With plurality and polarization on the topic being absent or marginal, the growth discourse itself appears “de-politicized” (on the meaning of the term cf. Rivera 2015: 7, 11) – at the very heart of the political system, in this case, the German Bundestag.

While the dogmatic closure might still serve a function, this function appears to be no longer within actors’ reach nor at their disposal. As I will argue in the following 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, though, the interesting question would arise: How can growth discourse within the political system get ‘pluralized’ again, in order to make use of political actors’ differentiated personal attitudes regarding the issue? On this matter, I will make an educated guess at the end of this article (Section 4).

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

In Karl Polanyi’s retrospective assessment, growth during the 19th and early 20th century had already been too fast, and although he recognized the fact that it implied “a prosperity of gigantic proportions” (Polanyi 2001: 109), he made clear that it was at least competing with – if not subordinated to – other goals, such as intact landscapes, local family relations, and workers’ dignity (ibid.: 171-200). In other words: he hardly thought of growth in terms of an end in itself, thereby echoing the enormous doubts that German thinkers had cast upon the ideal of productivity during pre-World-War-I “value judgment dispute” (*Werturteilsstreit*; see Glaeser 2014: 209-239) .

Curiously, the statistical means to assess those “gigantic proportions” had only recently been developed when Polanyi wrote *The Great Transformation*. The Gross National Product was introduced in the U.S. during the fight against the Great Depression, and became crucial for strategic planning during World War II (Lepenies 2013: 96-111). Only *after* this war and the book’s publication, Gross National, or later: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) became a global unit for measurement and comparison of economic activity, mainly through efforts of the OECD and its predecessor, the OEEC (Schmelzer 2015a). Serving predominantly as a tool and frame for expansionist economic policies and overall political communication, only at a later point and prominently through one of OECD’s former chief scientists, Angus Maddison,

GDP was extrapolated backwards. This way, the “proportions” could be estimated, and through the new historic lens something that Polanyi and others had rather ‘guessed’ through sheer physical evidence was now spelled out in ciphers: Twelve important European countries had on average trebled their GDP per capita between 1820 and 1913 (Maddison 2007: 382); free market pioneer Holland had experienced a per capita growth of almost 100 percent during the 16th century, presenting an anomaly for that historical period (Bolt und van Zanden 2014: 637); and so on. In parallel, it became common to express numerous other contemporary economic terms, such as resource productivity or levels of debt, in relation to GDP.

The twofold rhetoric of upholding growth as an end in itself and a synonym for development on one hand, and using it extensively as a technical unit against which other parameters can then be measured, on the other, still persists today.² Looking at the postwar syndrome of cheap oil and increasingly wasteful consumption patterns (Pfister 1994) which in themselves triggered what we nowadays call the Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2007: 617), it becomes clear that exponential growth, measured through GDP, was linked to a renewed development optimism and a secular faith, at least in the case of Germany, in economic “miracles” (*Wirtschaftswunder*) that equaled an again “unprecedented” material welfare, but this time, apparently, without the equally “unprecedented havoc with the habitation of the common people” (Polanyi 2001: 41). This 1950s syndrome was accompanied by the completely uncritical adoption of the newly introduced GDP standard by the important German 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, had to overcome alternative models of more pluralistic, corporatist consultancy (Nützenadel 2002: 293-297), and that the discussion in politics and the media had to *marginalize redistribution debates* that were, in the early fifties, still quite present (Knauß 2016: 42-51).³ The head of one of the leading newspapers’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*’s business desk, Erich Welter, literally called for investing “intellectual energy ... in the creation of new wealth” instead of wasting it

² In our analysis of official Bundestag documents in its 18th election period, 60 percent of all codings we could assign (i.e., relevant meaningful passages we could identify), 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.

³ It is of course noticeable, in a Polanyi context, that this marginalization of *redistribution* concerns one of the two mechanisms he considered conceptual alternatives to trading (Polanyi 2001:49f.), although it would be more correct to say that what was banished in the fifties in Germany was not redistribution per se (which continued to operate) but the *unresisted debate* about redistribution. The formula was and is: the more economic growth is possible, the less redistribution is needed.

“on distribution”; the focus, in his and an emerging majority’s opinion, had to lie on “enlarging the distributable product” (quoted *ibid.*: 45, 47). At latest in 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 This decision would be defended in the face of sinking growth rates at the end of the sixties (*Stabilitätsgesetz*) and of radical ecological critique in the seventies. Since then, we may speak of a “long present of the growth paradigm” in German politics and media (*ibid.*: 99), despite the recent opposing experiences and discourses mentioned in Section 1.

3. Parliamentary discourse in Germany: dogmatic and inert

The main hypothesis of this third 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.

The study which serves as a reference here was conducted in 2015/16, with data collection between September and February. Departing from the point that the German Bundestag, in its 17th election period, had tried to reenact the aforementioned societal debates in growth via a committee of enquiry, we⁵ 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,⁶ we employed a triangulation involving semi-structured interviews with

⁴ As far as this discourse extends beyond language – through regulations, artefacts, and habits – it forms part of a comprehensive “dispositive” (Jäger 2011: 118f.) 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 (*ibid.*: 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.

⁵ Acknowledgments go to my colleagues Claudia Saalbach, Franziska Zucher, Moritz Mues, and Mirjam Neebe, for conceptualizing and conducting this study together with me. We have published some early results in October 2016 (Rivera et al. 2016) and will continue to do so, in various formats and with various foci, over the coming months.

⁶ This is not the focus of the present paper.

MPs, a representative survey among their staff, and an analysis of 120 Bundestag documents selected according to thematic relevance and structural variety.

Our first finding is as trivial as it is striking. While the aforementioned committee of enquiry, despite its enormous tensions and ultimate inability to produce substantial consensus, had agreed that economic growth was never 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 percent 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 frequently⁷ are investments (19 percent), market flexibility, domestic consumption/demand (each of those, eight percent), 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, consolidate the status of economic growth as an end in itself. The appropriateness of this end is not discussed; even more: by force of grammatical structure, it is *withdrawn from discussion*. This effect is by far more powerful than where growth appears as a means; in the latter case, the adequateness or sufficiency 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 a policy goal is evoking it in the same breath with other goals that are, grammatically, treated as equal. 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*, it is also striking that other two pillars, namely currency 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, marking – as jobs themselves – a crucial interface between system integration and social integration (on employment, cf. Lockwood 1964), 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 these two

⁷ As we talk about a strategically selected qualitative sample here, the numbers do not imply any representativity, but show important trends.

appear as equiprimordial. One could guess that even when only “growth” is said, “jobs” are ‘thought about’ as well, but this is purely speculative. The discursive surface presents growth as something autonomous, often but not mostly allied with, and very seldom subordinated to employment.

Taking these observations together with the usage of imbuing speech with growth as a technical expression (see fn. 2), it becomes clear that the feasibility and desirability of economic growth are rarely addressed by parliamentary discourse. 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 (currently Grand) 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 of the “growth as a goal” section. Here, 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 different. The line between these strategies is sometimes hard to draw, but we tried to apply the “separate category” codings in cases where the emphasis was more on distinction than fusion, and not surprisingly, the competing goals which stand out here are not jobs or fiscal stability, but well-being, inclusiveness, and quality of life. Those categories had 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 really appear *prominently* are only a few: namely the Annual Report on the Economy 2016 issued by the government, which addresses concerns about GDP not being an adequate 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.

The second way of relativizing growth is *conditioning* it: only certain types of growth are good for society. The according frames had been generated in OECD and other international discourse over the last decade as well, and they can be identified in 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, they are even

surpassed by 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 these ‘qualifications’ of growth, while certainly reactive to growth critique, do very seldom address concrete limitations for ‘good’ economic growth. An exception would be, for instance, a growth within ecological or planetary boundaries (which figures only six times in the entire corpus).

Thus, 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. In such a 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 fn. 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 critique or defense to very differentiated ‘qualifications’ of growth (Rivera et al. 2016: 20f.). Regarding the staff of 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.” (Ibd.: 28-30). As an empirical finding, this is 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 a theoretical presupposition, but as an empirical finding through the research design’s triangulation.

⁸ It is plausible to assume that this formula is yet another vehicle of blocking growth critique: by postulating 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: 71f.).

⁹ During the analyzed period (October 2013 till February 2016), less than ten percent of all 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), pp. 14-17, and upcoming publications.

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 *less* 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 committees. I am talking relative weight of codings here (cf. Rivera et al. 2016: 14) which means that this is not to be adequately explained by the well-known succinctness of the recommendations. Rather, the drastic wording chosen by one of our MP interviewees – a budget expert – 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, means something similar to a swear box, only 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 is not functional for actual policies. While I do not share this actor’s self-interpretation fully, I think 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) reaffirms growth as a policy goal in various ways, but almost never makes growth itself a topic, and
- e) is indifferent to the multiplicity of individual attitudes held by actors who engage with the discourse.

We might therefore call this parliamentary discourse *ornamental* (1-2), *governmental* (3), *dogmatic* (d), and *inert* (e).

4. Revitalizing political growth communication?

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-centred 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.

For the case in question – economic growth – there are of course a number of both functional and strategic factors that do come to mind when trying to explain its 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 und Seidl 2012). On the strategic side, we could suppose that political actors might be aware of these dependencies and not inclined to embark on a difficult and politically risky search for alternatives; they also might fear to resuscitate the “distribution conflicts.” When further taking into account the strong limitations imposed by party hierarchies and thematic (over-)specialization on the Bundestag’s “responsivity chain” and with it on the capacity of individual parliamentarians of reframe or ‘renew’ parliamentary will formation (von Oertzen 2006: 283-285), some actor-centred explanations for this kind of non-diffusion seem at hand, after all.

Yet such *conscious choices did rarely show* in our interviews, and on even rarer occasions 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 whole study where it clearly emerges.¹⁰ Therefore, the picture rather remains that of a self-referential 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. They simply chose the available positions within the established discourse – and if there is any position available for reconsidering growth, it is the quality of life/well-being topic, on one hand, and the “growth has limits” 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, is a word extremely popular in parliamentary discourse (in our strategic sample alone, it showed over 200 times) – but it is never (re-)linked to growth.

¹⁰ 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.”

I dare to say 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 reconsidering growth's glorious beginnings and asking how to get away from path-dependencies that were cemented more than half a century ago. The exclusion of the distribution issue from growth discourse might lie at the bottom of its weird ornamentality, governmentality, 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 political *actors*. For reaching the heart of daily political *discourse*, though, the debate will probably have to be reframed in sociopolitical terms.

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