The reshaping of political representation in post-growth capitalism: A paradigmatic analysis of green and right-wing populist parties

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Abstract
This article aims to provide an analysis of the reconfiguration of political orientations in the face of weakening economic growth. We address a widely observed new polarization in the party systems of Western democracies, with radically universalist and ecological orientations, often represented by green parties, versus industrialist and authoritarian values, mainly represented by right-wing populism. In our effort to explain this constellation, we offer an alternative to accounts that merely focus on an underlying change of class structures or that, conversely, declare socio-economic factors obsolete in their relevance for voting behaviour. While the one side focuses on the ‘losers of modernization’ or deindustrialization, the other side emphasizes a cultural conflict between new cosmopolitan values and a defence of male, white, heterosexual, non-migrant privileges. In contrast to such accounts, we analyse how the general trend towards decelerated economic growth provoked new orientations on the (liberal) left and on the (populist) right. In a first step, we provide an overview of diagnoses of...
‘secular stagnation’ and of the rise of radically universalist and right-wing parties in Western Europe, focusing in particular on the last decade and looking to the US by way of comparison. We then focus on the attitudes which the political actors in question entertain towards economic growth and offer an interpretation of their ‘cultural’ motives as struggles over economic distribution. The third and last step presents a Gramscian extension of socio-economic analysis beyond the study of voter groups and their attitudes. Here, we take into account the interests of the ruling classes along with the quest for legitimacy and projected changes in the regime of accumulation—if indeed the term accumulation is still adequate in a post-growth context.

**Keywords**
Right-wing populism, political representation, secular stagnation, postgrowth capitalism, hegemony, green new deal

**Introduction**
Since the 1990s, political scientists have noticed a shift in the party systems of Western democracies, which only now, in the long aftermath of the financial and sovereign debt crises, seems to be reaching its full potential. Left-wing as well as right-wing parties are undergoing a reconfiguration along ‘cultural’ lines, with the new axis of radically universalist and ecological orientations versus industrialist and authoritarian values. While the first important innovators were left-wing green parties, today the rise of right-wing populism continues to stir up emotions. In this paper we argue that these new divisions are connected to an economic trend that culminated in the multi-faceted crisis of 2008 and the following years—the trend towards declining growth rates, a ‘secular stagnation’ (Summers, 2014), or ‘post-growth capitalism’ (Nachtwey, 2018).

Responses to this trend on behalf of new left- or right-wing parties are both direct and indirect. Direct responses include demands for alternatives to the growth imperative (Schmelzer and Muraca, 2017: 186–187) or for a return to industrial growth-regimes (Eversberg, 2017). More indirectly, the new constellation of political forces might signal an awareness that there is less to redistribute—either because capitalist growth potentials as such or recent growth strategies have been exhausted. We aim to explain the logic of distributional conflicts under these conditions. In the case of the green and radically universalist left, symptoms of privilege become visible. Undecided about the adequate (de)growth strategy, their economic policies nevertheless seem to rest on clear intuitions: (a) extensive redistribution from top to bottom has become impossible, (b) the educated citizens of technologically advanced countries are on the safe side of a post-growth distribution, so that (c) even a generous attitude towards the weak and excluded comes at a low cost. In contrast, the populist right seems to be more sincere in its albeit
cynical vision of selective growth: gains promised to the middle and lower strata of the electorate must be ring-fenced or taken away from others—either from ‘the elite’ or from migrants and other countries. The coronavirus crisis will not necessarily change this picture; it might simply deepen the divisions in question.

In the following, we provide a detailed analysis of the reconfiguration of political orientations we identify in the face of weakening economic growth. Such efforts might provide an alternative to accounts that merely focus on changes in class structures or that, conversely, declare socio-economic factors obsolete in their relevance for voting behaviour. Both kinds of analysis have proliferated in the last years, especially in debates about right-wing populism. While one side focuses on the economic ‘losers of modernization’ or deindustrialization (Fraser, 2017; Hochschild, 2017; Dörre, 2018), the other side emphasizes the cultural dimensions of protests by those who see their male, white, heterosexual, non-migrant way of life (and privileges) threatened by the rise of liberal cosmopolitan values (e.g. Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Some accounts combine both approaches (e.g. Fukuyama, 2018), but then the question remains to what extent the socio-economic dimension has to be taken into account. What changes in class structure have contributed to the observable political effects? Are the politically relevant economic factors reducible to characteristics of occupational groups? How to account for change in the general economic situation to which all classes or occupational groups might react? To date, such reflections have rarely moved beyond a vague notion of a connection between economic crisis and political polarization. Even recent efforts to explain the link between the ‘great recession’ and ‘European populism’ argue that the ‘long-term tide of populism was […] not driven in the first place by economic, but by cultural motives’ (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015: 3). In contrast to such claims, we aim to understand how economic change provoked a move towards specific ‘cultural motives’ on the liberal left and on the populist right. We integrate both sides with Gramscian political theory, which connects the conflicts and compromises between group interests to the ‘intellectual, moral and political’ appeal (Gramsci, 1971: 59) of hegemonic projects.

Our argument is as follows. First, we provide an overview of diagnoses of a long-term economic slowdown and of the rise of radically universalist and right-wing parties in Western Europe and the US, focusing in particular on the last decade. In the following section we discuss the widespread interpretation which sees the new party structure as a constellation of post-class politics. Second, we analyse the attitudes towards economic growth among the political actors in question. Explicit debates—on the ecological limits to growth, de-growth or green growth—will be contrasted with the implicit reactions to problems with weakening economic growth and appeals to voters in different socio-economic situations. First, we deal with the rise of radically universalist political orientations, looking in particular at the development of the German Greens, supplemented by a brief account of En Marche in France and changes within the Democratic Party in the US (see ‘The Green’s critique of growth society’). Then we turn to the decidedly anti-universalist parties of the populist or neo-nationalist right in Europe.
(‘The populists’ defence of growth society’). In the last part of this section, we address the consequences of the rise of these two new orientations and party families for the functioning of representative democracy, including the question of why parties left of social democracy fail to win over significant numbers of their former voters (‘The transformation of political representation and the dilemmas of the political left’). In the third section of the article we provide a Gramscian analysis that traces hegemonic projects in the quest for legitimacy and efforts to restore the conditions for capitalist accumulation—if indeed the term accumulation is still adequate in a post-growth context (‘In search of new conditions for accumulation’). This qualification will lead to our final point: both the radically universalist and national populist orientations may be analysed as hegemonic projects, but in the absence of a growth model which would integrate international affiliations and domestic populations, they remain locked in an unresolved conflict (‘Two versions of a new basic consensus’).

New party options within the horizon of weakening economic growth

Similar to the Great Depression, the crisis of 2008—with its aftermath of slow recovery at best—has provoked the view that advanced capitalism has entered a period of ‘secular stagnation’. Without much elaboration, Larry Summers introduced the term in the US (cf. Summers, 2014). More refined theoretical models with broadly Keynesian features have followed, and the Eurozone came into purview as a main field of application. Marxist accounts situate the events of 2008 either within a terminal crisis of the neoliberal model of growth (McNally, 2011), a ‘long downturn’ starting in the 1970s (Brenner, 2009), or even a general inability of capitalism to realize its systemic tendency towards ‘endless compound growth’ (Harvey, 2015: 222–245). Of interest to us here are: a) long-term trends which can be assembled rather descriptively in order to account for structural political change in Western Europe and the US, and b) economic explanations which might be important for the specific strategies of political parties.

The financial crisis is embedded in a more long-term trend. In the decades between the 1950s and the 2000s, GDP growth rates in all advanced capitalist economies (European countries, the US and Japan) continually flattened, from an average value of well above 4.5% to one below 1% (Reuters, 2016: 120f.). Other indicators such as the rate of investment (Nachtwey, 2018: 45–46), the growth of productivity (Gordon, 2016: 475) and the ratio of household income to household debt (Shaik, 2011: 53) confirm this picture: ‘Between 1973 and the present, economic performance in the US, Western Europe, and Japan has, by every standard macroeconomic indicator, deteriorated, business cycle by business cycle, decade by decade (with the exception of the second half of the 1990s)’ (Brenner, 2009: 6). In spite of some signs of post-crisis re-acceleration and the growth effects of Trump’s politics of renationalization in the US, no general reversal has been in sight even
before the coronavirus crisis hit. The economic interpretation of these trends is a complex task. Slowly declining growth rates can still mean steady growth in absolute terms, and the centre of capitalist dynamism may have simply moved to China and other Asian countries. However, it is hard to imagine a continual deceleration of growth in Europe and the US without political consequences. After all, the very orientation towards increases in GDP can be seen as the foundation for political compromise in social democracies, where ‘growth promised to turn [...] conflicts over distribution into technical, non-political management questions of how to collectively increase GDP. By thus transforming class and other social antagonisms into apparent win-win situations, it [...] played a key role in producing the stable post-war consensus around embedded liberalism’ (Schmelzer, 2015: 266).

That the economic erosion of this paradigm is politically unsettling seems even more plausible when the possible causes for the economic growth crisis are examined. This is certainly the case for weakening and increasingly debt-financed consumer demand, with its obvious connections to heightened inequality. While the high-time of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s was characterized by a widening gap between profits and managerial salaries on the one hand and declining real wages or cheap offshore labour in the lower ranks on the other (McNally, 2011: 42–49; Streeck, 2014), the crash and slow recovery result from a breakdown of this model of accumulation. From a Keynesian perspective, the main cause is the lower spending propensity of the richer parts of the population in relative terms. What follows is a downward spiral of rising unemployment and decreasing consumer demand, unless measures for public deficit spending are taken. Such measures, however, have been effectively ruled out by market ideologies, regressive taxation and strained fiscal budgets (Streeck, 2014: 42–43), while the ‘privatized Keynesianism’ of consumer debt (Crouch, 2009) has offered no sustainable alternative. Especially for Marxist authors, the reverse side of this underconsumption trend is an overaccumulation of capital, which floods into speculative markets and triggers rent-seeking strategies. Such markets and strategies, however, only contributed to intensifying the looming debt crisis, and to effecting processes of social precarization and polarization, from a dominant shareholder attitude towards firms and employees (Williams, 2000) over the harms of speculative urban housing markets (Harvey, 2013: 27–66) to the highly paid ‘bullshit jobs’ in finance, insurance and real estate business (Graeber, 2018). The economic downturn thus has been strongly connected to a widespread sense of social injustice.

A more specific trend related to sluggish growth as well as to changing political orientations is a ‘culturalization’ of the economy. The rise of cognitive and cultural work not only seems to endanger decelerate increases in productivity and profitability (Cowen, 2011; Gordon, 2016), or to insulate centres of technological innovation and cultural reputation from the rest of national economies and societies (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014: 73–83). It also makes education and personal attributes pivotal for peoples’ professional lives, and their experiences of work central to their political preferences (see e.g. Oesch, 2006). Moreover, the consumption of cultural products further encourages a
proliferation of distinctive lifestyles (Reckwitz, 2017), allowing segments of the middle-classes to decouple strategies of social distinction from their own insecure income perspectives. Whereas the well-educated participants of these processes tend towards universalist, cosmopolitan values, the outsiders, especially in deindustrialized areas, feel the need to defend their more situated, traditional and partly also authoritarian values and ways of life (Goodhart, 2017; Hochschild, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The emergence of this last constellation can be traced back at least to the 1990s, when the rise of ‘symbol analytic’ work was broadly noticed (Reich, 1991), and the shift towards service work was seen to bring about a new class structure (Esping-Andersen, 1993). ²

In research on party systems, the decline of social democracy, the rise of green parties and of the ‘new right’ have been attributed to both of the tendencies highlighted here: increasing inequality as well as new cleavages in education and culture. However, the relationship between these tendencies has been determined in varying ways. In the 1980s and 90s, a post-materialist impulse seemed decisive. Summing up its results, Herbert Kitschelt (1995; 2001: 434) has offered a clear-cut model of what since consolidated to a new constellation: the old spectrum of political demand and supply, in which a social democratic left oriented towards redistribution stood against a free-market-oriented right, has been replaced by a confrontation between political forces holding radically universalist values on the one side and new-right wing forces holding authoritarian values with regard to gender, sexuality, migration, or the environment on the other side. Political parties are not all equally equipped to adapt to this shift. Whereas conservative and social democratic parties tended towards compromises regarding the free market and the maintenance of welfare systems (especially in the era of ‘third way’ neoliberalism), the winners are now parties and fractions of the universalist left that stand for gender equality, liberal migration policies, sustainable industries etc., versus right-wing parties opposing these. To explain this culturalization of politics, Kitschelt refers to class structures: ‘While the educated white-collar ‘middle-class’ leans towards libertarian socio-cultural sensibilities, the less educated clerical and manual wage earners tend to be more authoritarian’ (Kitschelt, 2004: 129). He adds that it is the frustrated parts of the latter in particular who have reasons to turn to the right: ‘With socialist political options having become unviable, they may not vote on economics at all, but support an extreme authoritarian right with ‘welfare chauvinist’ demands to halt immigration and limit social policy benefits to the indigenous population’ (Kitschelt, 2004).

This last explanatory element became highly controversial as the economic situation turned bleak and right-wing politics gained ground. The general pattern of authoritarianism versus ‘libertarian’ universalism was undoubtedly helpful for analyses of Trump’s election, the Brexit referendum and the rise of populist right-wing parties across Europe. It also seems apt to account for the recent electoral successes of Emmanuel Macron in France and the German Greens. But does it make sense to suggest that voting for the right is a function of socio-economic deprivation? The strongest account in favour of this message is that of the ‘losers
of modernization’ (see e.g. Kriesi et al., 2012), with its implicit assumptions about winners of the same process. Based on a general description of globalization and technological change privileging educated labour in urban centres, this explanation identifies low levels of education and income together with manual occupations as decisive factors in the support for right-wing populism; in addition, people with cosmopolitan values are sometimes portrayed as cultural winners, looking down on the ‘culturally backward’ others (Fraser, 2017).

To a certain extent these descriptions are correct, and the term ‘losers of modernization’ also has the advantage of covering both economic and cultural change. ‘Losing’ not only refers to a loss of income, jobs or welfare benefits, it can also signify marginalized or denigrated values and lifestyles. Yet such a broad notion also tends to preclude insights. First of all, a term like ‘losers of neoliberal class politics’ could help to state more precisely who has lost economically; losers in this sense may well include well-educated young cosmopolitans in comparison to their lesser educated provincial parents. Secondly, the term ‘modernization’ signifies a tendentially inevitable and progressive development, whereas our context analysis hints at the opposite: Declining growth is a path which most political actors would not wish to pursue, and a fundamental crisis of accumulation calls for a change of direction. Finally, if the sense of direction is not already given, one needs to take a closer look at the political orientations in question: Which visions of growth, non-growth or alternative growth do the universalist left and the anti-universalist right entertain? And how do they address voter groups as potential winners or losers? Answering this last question will help us to connect the socio-economic and the cultural determinants of the new party constellations in a more precise way.

The (post-)growth policies of green and right-wing populist parties

To our knowledge, the issue of growth policies has not yet been inserted into the framework of left universalism versus populist authoritarianism. Indeed, it is not easy to identify the pertinent actors nor positions within party politics; even the starting points mentioned so far pose various problems. While there is an ongoing debate regarding capitalist growth in the green and radically universalist left, it is centred on ecological rather than economic problems. Nevertheless, comparing this debate to populist right-wing positions on environmental issues provides clues to the general socio-economic perspectives of both camps. Identifying the relevant actors poses additional problems. In a number of countries, the radically universalist turn of the left is not wholly represented by green parties, and it is only in central Northern Europe that these parties have continued to play a decisive role in elections and governments. Therefore, we chose to be highly selective in our explorative analysis, and even turn to a country which (after a period of stagnation) survived the crises of the early 2000s remarkably well. We look at the German Greens as a significant case where the turn towards universalist cultural policies
intersects with a critique of economic growth—very strong at first, but since readjusted by the responsibility of government. We explicate the paradigmatic value of this example by referring to the debates and proclivities which the German Greens share with other forces of the universalist left, taking Macron’s En Marche and the changes of the US Democrats as examples. As for the right, a comparative analysis of different parties in different European countries is more appropriate for understanding the pertinent features and class specificity of these parties’ visions of economic growth. We compare elements commonly dubbed ‘welfare chauvinism’, ‘protectionism’ or ‘EU scepticism’ in different European right-wing parties, including the Front/Rassemblement National, UKIP, FPÖ and the AfD. On both sides, special attention will be paid to the framing of ecological and (as far as discernible) economic problems of growth. Is there a sense of a general crisis of capitalist growth? How are the social groups these parties address situated with respect to problems of economic growth?

The Green’s critique of growth society
The story of the German Greens is a remarkable story of success, which increasingly seems to be fuelled by their distance from traditional leftist values. After the party’s participation in government from 1998 to 2005 brought the harshest welfare cuts in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany and the first military operation since 1945, the German Greens only suffered a temporary loss in membership. Since 2010 the German Greens have experienced unprecedented growth and have continued to gain around 10% of votes in national elections, which is more than they had prior to 1998. On the level of federal states, they are often on par with or even surpass the traditionally strong Social Democrats (SPD). Moreover, they participate in nearly all current federal governments, in Baden-Württemberg even leading the coalition. Even if the Greens’ latest landslide victories of 2018 might not be representative, the party seems to be on its way to adopting a new role. Instead of offering a vanguardist program of radical ecological and social (or even socialist) change, the Greens tend to represent left-liberal elements of the democratic spectrum: neither anti-establishment nor conservative, but open to plural lifestyles, controlled migration, ecological reform, moderate market regulation and military operations as ‘humanitarian intervention’. Arguably, they constitute the counterpart to right-wing populism. As will be discussed in detail, this combination of liberal and universalist concerns makes them an ideal match for the political demands of the educated middle and upper classes. This has affected their attitudes towards economic growth.

In the founding years, in the wake of the ‘stagflation’ era preceding to our economic analysis, the German Greens drew heavily on the limits-to-growth debate. Based on the insight that ‘within a limited system, unlimited growth is impossible’, their first political program in 1980 was directed against a ‘one-dimensional politics of increasing production’ (Die Grünen, 1980: 4). After German reunification, as the (West) German Greens formed a new alliance with the
former GDR opposition (‘Bündnis 90’), the party continued to criticize capitalist
growth, but also turned against a ‘welfare state that attempts to mitigate societal
conflict by redistributing the gains of growth’ (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 1993: 30).
While this was certainly not intended as an adjustment to a neoliberal growth
model, it was at least compatible with welfare cuts. In the following period, par-
ticipation in government necessitated a variety of further adjustments of the
Greens’ political program. The 2002 program still included a critique of economic
growth in general terms, but there were some important exemptions: Women’s
unpaid care work was now criticized as a ‘decisive limit to economic and societal
growth’, and ‘ecology’ itself now also figured as an ‘important area of growth’ for
the economy (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2002: 44–45).

In the longer run, this reformist attitude has prevailed. When degrowth move-
ments gained ground in Europe after 2008, the Greens were no longer a partner. In
contrast to the continued embrace of degrowth ideas within the broader milieu of
the party, Ralf Fücks, a leading functionary of the green Heinrich-Böll foundation,
published a book on ‘How to grow intelligently’ (Intelligent wachsen, 2013). The
leader of the Dutch Greens in the European parliament best explicated the new
green critique of radical degrowth: ‘The growth-degrowth debate is a non-issue
that hampers […] any discussion on the ways to transform Europe into the smart,
sustainable and inclusive society that we all want it to be’ (Eickhout, 2012). In
discussions for their new political program, the German Greens found a handy
formula for a new compromise: While a simple orientation towards GDP-growth
is wrong and misleading, other qualitative indicators of human and social well-
being must be found and employed.

In order to understand this development in socio-economic terms, one needs to
make the link to what is known about the universalist left electoral base. Those
who are most inclined to vote Green are well-educated and for the most part well-
earning professionals, the middle management strata, cultural workers and public
sector employees (DIW, 2017). They are mostly not earning a wage in industrial
production, and they can only partly profit from a redistribution of its gains.
Rather, they are inclined to promote a welfare state that invests ‘intelligently’ in
knowledge-intensive production, competitive ecological technologies and social-
educational work. This goes hand in hand with a defence of the political and
economic preconditions of such investments, such as a strong European Union
and the export orientation of the German economy (including the industrial
sector). The large proportion of Green votes and Green participation in govern-
ment in the wealthy states (and well-off urban neighbourhoods) of Baden-
Württemberg, Bavaria and Hesse confirms these political-economic links. At the
same time, it should be no surprise that (opposition to) economic growth as such
has become an intensely debated issue within the Green discourse. The classes
which the party has come to represent have no interest in restricting production
per se, but wish to ‘sustainably reindustrialise Europe’; the concern is not with set
principles, but with a balance of values: ‘clean air, a healthy environment and a
resilient economy providing quality jobs for quality wages’ (Eickhout, 2012) within
an ‘equal, but diverse, society’ (Eickhout, 2012). The socio-economic bias of this program is clear. It appeals to the educated middle classes, while it has little to offer less privileged strata, and in spite of adaptations, it remains suspicious to milieus with traditional growth-based lifestyles. While growth scepticism remains a strong force within the intellectual and activist milieu of the Green party, striving for the electoral support of an educated middle class has become the main guideline of its economic policy. In this respect, the development of the German Greens can be seen as representative for changes within the left and centre-left party spectrum.

A brief look at France and the USA shows that the described socio-economic bias is not only a specific feature of the German Greens and their voters. Another example is given by Macron’s En Marche, which combines motives of anti-right-wing defence, ecological modernization, and a dismantling and simplification of social rights. The French yellow vest protests in late 2018 and early 2019 were triggered by the tax increase on gas.6 As we will show below, this measure, presented as an important step towards ecological modernization, not only particularly affected people outside the centres of the large cities who rely to a much greater extent on the use of private cars. They also aimed, according to Thomas Piketty (2020: 799), on the counter-financing of the abolition of property tax.

The close connection between an alleged green growth policy and material redistribution in favour of the upper classes under Macron may be an extreme example. A more moderate and longer development can be seen in the case of the US Democrats, who have been merging an ecological modernization agenda with an economic redistribution in favour of the new, largely academic middle class since the mid-1990s. Due to Andy Scerri, the Clinton-Gore administration ‘maintained the cautious endorsement of mainstream Greens and, arguably, their supporters and allies amongst the technocratic suburbanites and urban gentrifiers while simultaneously enlisting all working- and lower-middle-class citizens in the cause’ (Scerri 2019: 106). However, there has been no lasting inclusion of the lower classes, as Scerri points out. The promised green jobs have not been created to the extent they were prophesied, while the welfare state has been dismantled under pressure from the Republican opposition and the adoption of neo-liberal ideas about personal responsibility and the primacy of the market. Also during the Obama administration, this policy of market-driven ecological modernization has been continued. In the presidential election of 2016, this has contributed to the fact that the percentage of Trump voters has been particularly high in mining areas such as West Virginia, where he won over 73 percent of the vote.

The populists’ defence of growth society

Already in the early 1990s, researchers observed that the successes of right-wing populist or extremist parties in Western Europe such as the FPÖ, SVP, Front National, Lega Nord or Vlaams Blok were largely due to votes from unskilled and manual workers (cf. Betz, 1994; Kitschelt, 1995). This was surprising, because
at this time these parties promoted neoliberal policies such as tax cuts, privatization and deregulation that would not benefit workers. Their agenda was predominantly addressed to the *petit-bourgeoisie*, i.e. the self-employed, freelancers or small-scale entrepreneurs, and the so-called ‘aspirationals’, i.e. people who have benefited from social mobility and resent welfare recipients (Connolly, 2017; Priester, 2011). It was these social groups who initially voted for right-wing populist parties and support among the *petit-bourgeoisie* is still particularly high (Inglehart and Norris, 2017: 33). Yet, during the 1990s large parts of the working classes began to support these parties. Today their voters are to a large degree less-educated, relatively low-earning, predominantly manual workers, meaning they match the criteria of ‘losers of modernization’ (Oesch, 2008; Kriesi et al., 2012; Ivaldi, 2017).

The development of right-wing populist parties in Western and Northern Europe is not uniform. Nevertheless, at least two trends can be identified. On the one hand, most right-wing parties have de-radicalized. Right-wing populism now often includes efforts to avoid openly racist positions, and it has partly replaced antisemitic with anti-Islam attitudes. Attitudes towards gender identities or the family are more varied. Positions range from a progressive affirmation of homosexual life-styles (e.g. in the Netherlands) to a strong affirmation of traditional family values (e.g. in Finland). On the other hand, many right-wing parties have shifted to endorsing social protection. This is certainly the case with the Front National (now Rassemblement National). While the party called for deregulation and massive tax-cuts under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, more recently the economic program of the Front National has been described as ‘left-wing, anti-capitalist and hostile to markets’ (*NZZ*, 13.12.2015; cf. Betz, 2015). Its current program clearly criticizes free-trade and calls for tariffs to protect national industries. Furthermore, the program advocates government support for low-income earners and pensioners. A very similar development can be observed with regard to the Dansk Folkeparti, which began as a tax-protest party, but nowadays opposes welfare state retrenchment, calls for the support of pensioners and for the expansion of the national healthcare system (Wirries, 2015). The Finns Party also exhibits a ‘a left-populist defence of the welfare state against market-led policies’ (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015: 71), albeit before they entered government and supported the more market-liberal politics of their coalition partner. In many Eastern Europe Countries right-wing populist parties promise to protect ‘ordinary people’ from market forces (cf. Kriesi and Pappas, 2015). Many right-wing populist parties in Europe today distance themselves from free-trade agendas (with notable exceptions such as UKIP or the Norwegian Fremskrittspartiet). All are, to different degrees, critical of European integration (Ruzza, 2019: 205-6), integrating the EU scepticism virulent in large parts of Europe’s population, yet no longer addressed by social democratic parties. Thus right-wing populist parties successfully transform social issues and questions of democratic governance into conflicts about nationality and national sovereignty. This consolidates a position the literature characterizes as ‘welfare-chauvinism’ (Keskingen et al., 2016).
In sum, the economic policies of most right-wing populist parties demonstrate an attempt to maintain support both among small-scale entrepreneurs (through tax reductions and calls for deregulation) and among working class members (through the defence or even expansion of the welfare state). An important strategy in appealing to both these parts of the electorate is simply not to focus too much on the economy, but to concentrate on immigration control, the criticism of Islam and a general critique of elites. Given the ‘heterogeneous economic interests’ of their voters, appealing to their ‘cultural anxieties [...] provided the least common denominator for their mobilization’ (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015: 3).

In addition to questions of immigration and gender relations, the parties’ distancing from a green, sustainable and health-oriented lifestyle also plays a decisive role in the strategies of right-wing populist parties. Nigel Farage, the former chairman of UKIP, represents this position in an emblematic way when he is repeatedly photographed holding a cigarette and a pint of beer. The commitments of AfD politicians to eating meat and driving large cars are also expressions of a cultural and lifestyle-based policy orientation. A particularly vivid example of a seemingly cultural struggle in the field of environmental policy are the ‘Rolling Coalers’ in the US. These are pickup truck drivers who deliberately produce a great deal of diesel soot (using manipulated exhaust pipes) when driving through the better districts of the cities. In these cases of populist symbolic politics, just like in anti-populist ones, cultural and economic factors are densely entangled.

One central aspect in the programs and rhetoric of right-wing populist parties is a nostalgic, backward-looking perspective. Paul Taggart (2000) described this as the transfiguration of an imaginary ‘heartland’. On the one hand, the ‘heartland’ is in rural areas, where ‘honest’ people live and work. On the other hand, the better world that is longed for lies in the past. Invoking this past was vital for Trump’s popularity and is expressed in his campaign slogan ‘Make America great again’. It also was an essential part of his election victory speech. There he sketched an image of the USA as a country lying in industrial ruin. The message was clear: the chimneys must smoke again! A very similar picture is painted by the French Rassemblement National, whose economic and industrial policy advocates subsidizing traditional forms of industrial production. All in all, these programs express the promise of a revived industrial modernity, where jobs were secure and living standards were rising.

These preconditions explain the environmental policy agenda of right-wing populist parties, although some differences remain. On the one hand, almost all of these parties range from scepticism to denial regarding (anthropogenic) climate change. Donald Trump exemplifies this with his withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement and the reversal of the climate policy achievements of his predecessor. Similarly, the AfD’s political program stipulates climate change to be not man-made, but a core feature of the constant changes the earth naturally undergoes. As a consequence, the AfD opposes the further construction of wind turbines, advocates abolishing the Renewable Energy Act and proposes to extend the operating lives of nuclear power plants. The Polish Law and Justice
Party (PiS) also disputes anthropogenic climate change and advocates further coal mining. Like the Fidesz government in Hungary before, PiS is now trying to reverse the climate protection measures set out by the previous government. In spite of some exceptions (Lockwood, 2018), most of Europe’s right-wing parties oppose climate protection policies, including the expansion of renewable energy, the reduction of speed limits for cars and energy-efficient renovations of residential buildings (Selk et al., 2019).

Why are right-wing populist parties so resistant to renewable energy in particular and post-growth policies in general? One possible answer lies in the cultural struggle between urban elites and people living in rural areas or urban outskirts. Climate change denial and the many practices of unsustainable lifestyles can then be interpreted as expressions of a deeper resentment or at least a cultural split between the ‘anywheres’ and the ‘somewheres’ (Goodhart, 2017). However, this is only one part of the story. Like all statements about social reality, it has to be qualified.

Shortly before the protests started in autumn 2018, Benjamin Griveaux, the spokesman for Emmanuel Macron, characterized the ‘Gilets jaunes’—initially protesting against fuel tax hikes—as ‘guys who smoke cigarettes and drive diesel cars.’ However, this characterization met with strong counter-arguments in public and academic debates, which in turn pointed to the economic concerns of the lower middle class and saw the protests as a legitimate rebellion of people who have come under pressure in recent years. While the Gilets jaunes resist party politics, both the right-wing Marine Le Pen and the left-wing Jean-Luc Mélen-chon, chairman of La France Insoumise, staged themselves as advocates of the protests. Indeed, it is these two parties that have hitherto been able to give a voice to the anger of ‘peripheral France’ (Guilluy, 2019). This fits the thesis that ‘populism’ articulates the economic protest of the lower and non-intellectual middle classes against the effects of a globalized economy. The discussion over the legitimacy of the ‘Gilets jaunes’ protests and the recognition of the typical socio-economic conditions that inform them (in this case needing to drive long distances to workplaces or schools) suggests a complex interplay of cultural struggles and material interests. In any case, they support the perception that the costs of green growth policy are very unevenly distributed.

Examples from other countries substantiate this observation. The most obvious example for the material costs of post-growth is indeed driving a car, with conflicts over petrol prices in France or over banning diesel cars from big cities in Germany. It is people living on the periphery of cities and commuting to work by car every day who would be particularly affected by both measures, not people who live in districts with metro connections or who can manage their daily journeys by bicycle. Another essential part of post-growth policies is the conversion (or externalization) of industrial production in general and the phasing out of coal mining in particular. Both objectives come with the loss of industrial jobs and, above all, manual labour. This obviously affects different groups in different ways. When the Polish PiS Party or the German AfD advocate the continuation of lignite mining,
they are expressing the interests of miners and their families. It is therefore hardly surprising that these parties are doing so well in coalmining areas.

A different example is the cost of energy transition, which affects low-income households much more than others. Solar and wind energy is usually not generated in cities but in rural areas. The plants take up a lot of space and many people are against wind turbines (especially their noise and lighting), large solar fields and above-ground power lines on aesthetic grounds. In addition, neighbourhoods near such plants risk a decrease in the value of their properties. All these negative externalities hardly affect people living in cities. Overall, there is an unequal distribution of the cost of climate-friendly policies. To the extent that many social democratic parties have now committed themselves to the goal of energy transition, there is a lack of political representation of negatively affected groups that is increasingly addressed by right-wing populist parties.

The transformation of political representation and the dilemmas of the political left

As shown in the previous sections, policies pursuing an ecological post-growth or (rather) smart-growth economy produce winners and losers, often exacerbating divisions produced by neoliberal deindustrialization. With respect to the general crisis of economic growth, this not only applies to social milieus, but also to political parties. Due to shrinking growth rates the large social democratic or Christian-conservative parties are less and less able to fulfil their promise of social integration. Furthermore, their increasing commitment to a neoliberal agenda has led to even more social disintegration. This has had negative consequences for both centre-left and centre-right party families.

Centre-right parties from the French Gaullist party to the Christian Democrats in Germany have experienced growing tensions regarding Christian-conservative values, especially in the area of gender and family policies, with corresponding electoral losses mainly in traditional milieus. At the same time, these parties have only partially succeeded in attracting new urban constituencies. Yet social democratic parties have also been unable to maintain the successes they witnessed at the turn of century. By embracing neoliberal economic policies on the one hand and progressive family and environmental policies on the other, parties such as the Democrats in the US, the SPD in Germany, New Labour in Britain, the Italian Partito Democratico and the French Parti Socialiste pursued policies that Nancy Fraser (2017) has summed up as ‘progressive neoliberalism’. The traditional members and bases of such parties were less and less able to identify with such policies and in part migrated to the camp of non-voters, to left-wing parties where possible, and more recently to right-wing populist parties (Jörke and Nachtwey, 2017). But the new middle-ground to which social-democratic parties appealed also failed to keep voters on board in the long term. On the one hand, in some countries green parties became increasingly attractive for middle-class voters with bourgeois attitudes (in Germany, this has also included moderately conservative voters).
On the other hand, somewhat desperate social democratic efforts to win back traditional voters (for example by demanding tax increases) deterred the new middle-class voters.

In many European countries, new left-wing parties like La France Insoumise, Podemos in Spain, the Left Party in Germany and—to a certain extent—Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) in Italy were also able to attract former voters of social democratic parties. While these left-wing parties are sometimes classified as ‘populist’ too, their electoral basis differs significantly from that of right-wing populist parties. For one thing, the proportion of so-called ‘losers of modernization’ is much lower (Ivaldi, 2017: 159). Moreover, degree-educated voters are dominant. This is largely due to the fact that, although these parties are clearly to the left of the centre-left parties in terms of economic policy, they also have a strong orientation towards cosmopolitan cultural values. With regard to ecological issues, these left-wing parties represent a program that differs little from that of green parties. For example, the political programme of La France Insoumise calls for a drastic reduction in resource consumption and for all energy to be renewable by 2050. Podemos in Spain is in favour of a green energy transition; the party programme also includes a call for the expansion of public transport and for an ecological overhaul of agricultural production. The Italian M5S has very similar proposals. Since Italy has a comparatively weak green party (Federazione dei Verdi), many supporters of a post-growth economy have joined the M5S. Finally, the German Left Party also advocates forceful environmental policies.

Within some of these parties, heated debates about the prevalence of socialist versus plural-universalist orientations have taken place. Notable efforts to bring both sides together have been made in British and US-American centre-left parties, which also remain dependent on voters outside educated urban milieus. Both Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn aimed at a leftist revival of social democracy, with a combination of old socialist and new universalist goals, including the strong environmental agenda of a ‘Green New Deal’. Both efforts failed for reasons that are pertinent to our argument. On the one side, Sanders and Corbyn faced massive resistance from party elites who feared economic radicalism and were able to employ universalist-style accusations, reaching from sexism to antisemitism. On the other side, they failed to mobilize voter groups attracted by values of belonging. This was obvious in the case in the Brexit-dominated British elections of 2019 and partly explains the lack of African-American support for Sanders in Southern states’ pre-elections. Some analyses explain Sanders’ defeat in terms of his narrow social base, which is dominated by young college-educated voters. The socio-cultural cleavages analysed above thus also impeded these ambitious projects of leftist reform.

If the trends outlined here become more firmly established, the polarization of the party landscape in post-growth capitalism will continue. On the one side a green-liberal block of an educated middle-class will consolidate, with a more or less radical left-wing. Counterposed to this block there will be a right-wing populist one made up of a less educated middle strata, workers in labour- and energy-
intensive industries and populations of peripheral regions. Both blocks (of course always dependent on country-specific path dependencies and electoral systems) are capable of achieving the kind of force previously held by the old centre-left and centre-right parties. However, there is a crucial difference. In contrast to the old catch-all parties that positioned themselves in the middle of the political spectrum and were therefore able to form grand coalitions in multi-party systems, universalist left-wing and populist right-wing parties in most European countries are diametrically opposed. This not only makes it more difficult to form a government, it is also likely that the two camps continue to reinforce the trend of ‘identity politics’, which is often ascribed to the new social movements and to right-wing counter-reactions (Fukuyama, 2018; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Lilla, 2018). Examples include the disputes over migration after 2015; an increased sensitivity towards the discriminatory use of language on the one hand and a polemic against political correctness on the other; the legal recognition of homosexual lifestyles and the struggle for the traditional heterosexual family on the political right. The case is the same for the cultural divide between emphatically ecological and ostentatiously unsustainable lifestyles. As has been shown, this does not mean that class interests and social situations of voters become unimportant for the formation of political preferences. Yet the new constellation of twisted class politics tends to deepen social divisions, because in contrast to distributional conflicts, compromises are very unlikely: after all, the struggle is over the integrity of a particular way of life as well as fundamental moral convictions. It therefore concerns the most preciously held values.

There has been much discussion about the concept of ‘identity politics.’ Instead of joining this debate, we propose to deepen the analysis of the economic causes and political functions of the respective ‘cultural’ lines of division in the context of capitalist transformation. While the tendential voting preferences of social groups help explain recent political changes, they are not sufficient to understand the new polarizations. With the help of Gramscian theory, we will suggest two further elements of explanation: the conditions for capital accumulation and the aim of a basic ethical-political consensus. From a Gramscian perspective, both sides are strongly interdependent—and as we argue, the more bewildering aspects of the given situation can only be understood as an unfinished struggle between hegemonic projects or different versions of a new economic, social and ethical-political compromise.

**Radical universalism and new right-wing populism as hegemonic projects**

So far, we have argued that conflicts between radical universalist and populist right-wing parties are not simply cultural conflicts, but that they have a clear material dimension in terms of concrete life conditions and struggles over economic distribution. The theoretical task is to integrate material and cultural aspects in
an analysis which neither simply reduces political debate to class interests, nor just reproduces cultural polarizations. Political theory in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci offers promising tools to do so. While Gramscian analysis explicitly aims at explaining class relations, it focuses on political situations in which the shift from the economic to the cultural realm has already taken place. The basic idea is that the interests of economic groups can only become politically dominant, or 'hegemonic', when they act on a level of generality which includes a 'moral and intellectual' (re-)orientation, for example by invoking ideas of freedom or social justice.

The most widely discussed examples of successful hegemonic projects are Fordist societies with a strong industrial capitalist class, an extensive welfare state, high mass consumption and an ethics of normality (with regard to sexuality, work, education etc.) in contrast to neoliberal societies with a dominant financial capitalist class, weakened national and strong supranational institutions, debt-based consumption and an ethics of personal responsibility. Authors following Gramsci, especially the French regulation school, have highlighted how Fordist societies were characterized by an integration of large parts of the population through high wages, increased consumption and welfare (e.g. Aglietta, 1979; Boyer, 1990). In addition, these societies also had clear socially recognized role models that addressed the moral regulation of life and provided social recognition. The gendered roles of the ‘male bread winner’ and the ‘good housewife’ were paradigmatic for the Fordist way of life. According to manifold studies, the ‘post-Fordist’ or neo-liberal era profited from the revolt against such models (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). What comes into purview today is an ensuing protest against the loss of Fordist work and consumption patterns, role models and recognized social identities. The respective set of grievances, reaching from traditional gender roles to social citizenship, is effectively articulated by right-wing populism. What is less discussed is what connects such conflicts to conditions for accumulation beyond classical neoliberalism.

In spite of extensive debates over how, where and when societies actually resembled the ideal types of the Fordist and neoliberal hegemony, the growth orientation of the policies in question remains undisputed. Both these hegemonic formations enabled ‘regimes of accumulation’ (cf. Juillard, 2002) with stabilized profit rates for capitalist enterprises, and both were also ‘growth coalitions’ (Schnaiberg, 1980), based on and aimed at a continuous rise in GDP at the expense of increasing material throughput. Another pivotal point of the economic analyses discussed in section 1 is that the neoliberal accumulation regime saved profit rates at the expense of wage levels (McNally, 2011: 49; Shaik, 2010: 48–49; Streeck, 2014: 53), while still achieving popular support with its elements of mass consumption and individual liberation. In the following, we interrogate the extent to which similarly cohesive forces can also be mobilized in the current post-growth context, following the new political fault-lines identified in the first two sections of this paper.
For this purpose, the concept of ‘hegemonic projects’ has to be used in the precise sense that different projects compete for dominance. While the radically universalist project, in spite of its attractiveness to educated strata and large parts of the political class, has only partially won the consent of the governed, the populist-authoritarian project has become a serious contender within the last years. Moreover, it is crucial to keep in mind that neither project has yet accepted a post-growth condition. As demonstrated in the previous section of this article, both include some promises of economic growth (at least for their preferred voter groups), and both keep trying to restore conditions for accumulation—under adverse circumstances. We will start with discussing this aspect.

In search of new conditions for accumulation

Regarding conditions for accumulation, the decade after the financial crisis was characterized by experimentation—within remarkably narrow limits. Core elements of the neoliberal model have survived tentative efforts at re-regulation in Europe and in the US: an ongoing dominance of global financial capital and transnational corporations, low wage levels, and a public policy oriented at competitiveness rather than social mediation (Crouch, 2011; Streeck, 2014). The withdrawal of public spending (accompanied by ever-new market alternatives), as well as ‘structural adjustment’ by reducing labour rights, have even been strengthened in the period of (EU enforced) fiscal austerity, provoking notions of an ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff, 2014) or a ‘mutation of late neoliberalism’ (Peck and Theodore, 2019: 249). In retrospect, it is remarkable how clearly these efforts failed to revive growth even on their own terms. Rates of return on capital in the leading Western economies did not remotely come near the dynamics of the 1980s and 90s and remained below pre-crisis levels in the decade after 2009 (Roberts, 2020). Throughout European and North American OECD countries increases in productivity and rates of investment were equally weak, as job creation mainly took place in sectors with low labour productivity and low wages (OECD, 2019). This failure of mainstream solutions warrants a look at the alternatives available in the radical universalist and populist camps.

Although both camps are routinely judged as economically incompetent, their strategies have become remarkably influential. Radical universalist orientations proliferate wherever growth potentials are seen in the realm of collective goods. The classical case is the knowledge and information economy, powered by strategies of inciting (globally competitive) research, education and digitization (see e.g. Hall, 2020). In addition, prospects of a ‘green capitalism’ (Brand and Wissen, 2013: 140–43) are repeatedly invoked and have been adopted by leading political circles, most recently in the Green Deal program of the European Commission. Even the care sector keeps being discovered as an expanding site of investment; as populations grow older and care needs multiply, government subsidized firms claim their shares on what might be profitable future markets (Dowling, 2018). Hand in hand with these (relatively) new sectors, new economic practices based on sharing, access
and the cultivation of commons have been proposed. So far, the growth potentials of these developments for the most part only exist in proposals and plans, and there are various arguments that contradict the promise of profitable progressivism. In the care sector, even productivity is a problem because most rationalization tends to diminish the quality of the service (Dowling, 2018; Himmelweit, 2007); knowledge and information often move beyond private property (Reitz, 2019), so that exploiting them requires the monopoly business of ‘platforms’ (Srnicek, 2017); and a truly ecological economy would have to re-internalize costs that are currently off-loaded to poorer parts of the globe. But the promise is real enough for significant economic and occupational sectors in technologically advanced countries. Even if the problems mentioned prevail, the progressive principles will serve the interests of (putatively) advanced firms, employees and nations.

Universalist economic ideas might even matter at the level of supranational regulation. Some progress was made with UN conventions on biodiversity and climate protection, while the market-orientated frameworks of the WTO, TRIPS, transatlantic and transpacific trade partnerships faced deadlock and resistance in nearly all countries involved, including the US (Grewal, 2019; Nölke, 2018: 189–190). At this level, however, a principal alternative to supranationalism (and proclaimed universalism) as such has become obvious. While resistance to international regulations and treaties has been rising since the early 2000s, recent years have seen a turn to decidedly national efforts at reviving growth. The most prominent examples are the economic policy of the Trump administration and the Brexit route of the UK. Although the US continue to pursue free trade with weaker partners (Scherrer, 2019) and leading Brexit proponents envision the UK as ‘a low-tax, low-regulation, offshore haven’ (Bishop and Payne, 2019), there is a clear shift towards re-defining global trade relations in a national perspective. The tendency is not limited to these specific cases. It has to be situated in the wider contexts of US-Chinese rivalry and the centrifugal tendencies of the EU, and state-coordinated economic strategies of all BRICS countries have preceded the seemingly new paradigm (Nölke, 2018).

It is as yet hard to tell what tendency will prevail in the struggle for new conditions for accumulation. For the purpose of our analysis, a basic remark is sufficient: While for a long-time nation-centred strategies were portrayed as economic madness in a globalized world, they have become a serious alternative to supranational regulation. To the extent that inclusive growth remains highly unlikely in multilateral arrangements and universalist projects, focusing on national advantages becomes a viable alternative. Where such strategies become explicit, recent discussions of ‘externalization’ should be extended or modified: On top of the moral problem that people in the global North may be living at the expense of others (Lessenich, 2019), hegemonic projects increasingly promise to enable national economies do so. It remains to be seen how the strategies of selectively universalistic or openly particularistic growth are connected to strategies of enabling consensus.
Two versions of a new basic consensus

Experimentation after the financial crisis has not been restricted to conditions for accumulation. Obviously, a reconfiguration in the moral and intellectual views of the social world is under way and is already drawing large parts of the population towards opposing camps. Radical universalism and right-wing authoritarianism seem capable of providing comprehensive frameworks of political understanding and organization. Both projects can be seen as aiming at a new ‘collective will’ (Gramsci, 1971: 125), or more precisely at different new levels of generality: While the new left, together with a large part of political and economic elites, invokes objectives for humanity as a whole (from human rights to the future of the planet), right-wing parties aim to reassert the nation state as the decisive frame of political action. But how did these visions become dominant and why do they remain in deadlock confrontation? We conclude our analysis with a brief account of the unfinished unifying process achieved in both projects.

One starting point can be found in a recent article which, quite similar to our own argument, proposes to locate right-wing populism in ‘advanced capitalist societies’ where ‘economic growth rates are consistently low—far too low to sustain established arrangements for social equality and inclusion’ (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2019: 202). The turn to the right, and arguably also the discussed changes on the left, can thus be seen as an answer to a general political challenge: ‘The new big project—for society at large!—is to organize the legitimation and execution of a politics of increasing inequality and exclusion’ (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2019: 202). In non-intended cooperation with the agents of economic and educational inequality, the right-wing task in this project would be to ‘democratize the politics of exclusion, provide it with bottom-up legitimacy and activate the underprivileged themselves as agents to further entrench its logic’ (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2019: 203). While this sober account is partly illuminating, for example concerning anti-immigrant policies of the EU, it is less helpful where universalist and right-wing politics effectively block one another, something that is becoming increasingly obvious in countries like France, Italy, the UK and the US. Most importantly, it leaves open where the ‘new big project for society at large’ is supposed to come from. The task is not to explain why people continue voting, corporations continue lobbying, governments react to crises and political entrepreneurs try their luck, but how the unifying sense of a common project develops. In our framework, the reason is that the ongoing experiences of depravation, neglect and injustice in post-growth capitalism tend to produce disruptive conflicts unless a new basic consensus is achieved. Such a consensus, however, cannot afford too much exclusion. ‘Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account should be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is exercised’ (Gramsci, 1971: 161). So convincing calls for exclusion or inequality must be articulated as serving some bigger project of inclusion, and they need to be combined with a credible tribute to subordinated groups. This is more than an abstract theoretical consideration, for it is here that right-wing populism and
radical universalism, in spite of their partial successes, have failed as hegemonic projects so far.

The conflicting visions analysed here are already the result of processes of ethical-political concentration. New criteria for legitimate demands have been established, and alternative options have been marginalized. The remaining camps have not only found their respective levels of generality, groups of supporters and potential alliances, but also established respective ‘chains of equivalence’ between central political objectives (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985): international cooperation, free migration, gender equality and ecological sustainability on the one side, strong borders, the rejection of supranational governance, national self-determination and industrial development on the other. Movements, parties and governments that situate themselves in between these fronts (something that also repeatedly happens in the current phase of experimentation) immediately come under pressure to choose sides.

Both hegemonic projects, however, have so far failed to create a ‘general will’. The reason is not only that they block each other. They also both present versions of political will-formation which suffer from a limited capacity of social inclusion, which is in turn conditioned by the general post-growth-situation.

In the first case, the appeal to national particularism and egoism falls short of the standards of large parts of the politically active population and personnel. It is not only that many right-wing proposals for a long time ran counter to what most experts saw as economic rationality. A ‘national-popular will’ that excludes the educated and migrant (or non-white) parts of the working population is vulnerable to the self-defence of these groups and it is likely to meet hard resistance in liberal parts of the state apparatus and leading businesses. Even openly anti-ecological orientations are increasingly difficult to defend in the face of climate disasters. In contrast, the principles of the radically universalist project seem generalizable and not bound to backward and unsustainable interests. The parties and party factions of this side do not mourn a supposedly better past but advocate a better future that is founded on principles of social and ecological justice in a post-national context. Yet the universalist project is afflicted by democratic and social deficits. On the one hand, those people worldwide whose lives are to be improved have little to no control over bringing about the change that is demanded on their behalf. On the other hand, the interests of domestic populations only appear on the agenda very selectively. The prevailing strategy for a global division of labour through investment in innovative industries and highly qualified jobs leaves large parts of these populations virtually useless and dissatisfied. The universalist left has yet to develop convincing ways to realize its general values in democratic and socially acceptable ways.

**Concluding remarks**

We began by asking how economic developments explain the observable changes in Western party systems. By taking ‘post-growth’ experiences and growth-related
strategies as our points of reference, we were able to go beyond existing explanations of the new polarization between green-style and right-wing politics. It is not only possible to analyse the respective orientations such as the green shift towards ‘smart growth’ and right-wing longing for industrial growth as displaced class politics. There is also good reason to perceive an undecided struggle of hegemonic projects after the breakdown of the neoliberal growth model. Drawing together the efforts to restore conditions for accumulation and establish a new basic consensus in this context, two strategies can be distinguished: renewed efforts to develop a green and caring knowledge capitalism within a transnational horizon but with the allure of diverse competitive advantages, and an economic nationalism coupled with restored national self-determination. In their ethical-political articulations, both projects act on different levels of generality. In addition, they appeal respectively to classes with diverging interests, addressing either globalist industries and highly educated workers or industries in need of national protection measures, their (former) workforce and less mobile middle-classes. Even if these conflicts are not always as clear-cut as the parties suggest, the potential of hegemonic unification is limited, since the options of partial growth under general non-growth conditions preclude productive compromises. As long as a modernized would-be responsible capitalism offers no meaningful occupation for large parts of the population, all appeals to humanity will meet resistance at home. And as long as populist parties resolve their economic ambiguities by nationalist-xenophobic appeals, intellectuals and educated workers will have good reasons to oppose them.

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Notes
1. Whereas the left which emerged during the 1970s and 80s is obviously different from the socialist left rooted in the workers’ movement, it is difficult to find a positive term for the new formation. Talk of a ‘libertarian left’ is too close to anarchism or even market radicalism; ‘cultural left’ implies too much implicit evaluation and explanation. We therefore prefer to speak of ‘radical universalism’, which includes goals of emancipation and equality in areas such as sex and gender, migration, ethnic and post-colonial relations, and we highlight the ecological or green part of the universalist left when necessary.
2. First prognoses are as old as debates on knowledge driven tertiarization (Drucker, 1968) and a ‘new class’ of academically trained intellectual workers, dominating the uneducated rest (Gouldner, 1979).
3. For an empirical debate on applying these three factors in the German context, see Lengfeld (2017) and Lux (2018).
4. For contributions which aim at least partly in this direction, see Hall (2020), Blühdorn et al. (2020) and Blühdorn and Butzlaff (2018). We will discuss the main theses of these contributions in the third main section of the article.
5. Our own translation—as in the remainder of this paragraph.
6. As a result of the massive protests, this tax increase was finally withdrawn.
7. Important exceptions are the SVP and, with regard to the practice in government, the FPÖ. The Italian Lega, on the one hand, is still committed to tax relief and the reduction of bureaucracy, while on the other hand, during its coalition with the Movimento Cinque Stelle, it supported the expansion of the Italian welfare state. The development of the AfD is open in this respect. Initially the party was founded by neoliberal professors in response to the Euro-crisis policy, but there are increasing tendencies towards a social protectionist agenda, especially under the influence of the East German regional groups.
8. This development was also one of the main reasons for the split of the party in 2017. The stronger social protectionist wing was able to assert itself as the second strongest force in the April 2019 elections, just behind the Social Democrats.
9. See the report in Le Figaro, available at: https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/2018/10/29/31002-20181029ARTFIG00214-le-mepris-siderant-de-griveaux-pour-les-gars-qui-fument-des-clopes-et-roulent-au-diesel.php (accessed 15 June 2020).
10. In this respect, we differ from Peter Hall’s recent analysis of ‘growth regimes’: While Hall takes it for granted that we live in an era of ‘knowledge-based growth’ which is sadly jeopardized by ‘radical parties’ (Hall, 2019: 192–194), we also see the promise of knowledge-based growth as a partisan myth.
11. Thus they can be said to be closer to Gramsci, who saw the ‘formation of a national-popular collective will’ (Gramsci, 1971: 133) both as Machiavelli’s original project and as a key principle of modern politics. Gramsci has been discovered by thinkers of the New Right since the 1980s, who nevertheless did not concentrate on his concepts of the national-popular.
12. Examples include leftist Brexit sympathies or the European ‘Plan B’ of Varoufakis, Lafontaine and Mélenchon (disqualified as nationalist), as well as a non-nationalist conservatism in the US or UK.

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