Talk of crisis is no longer the prerogative of drama-seeking intellectuals. It is increasingly difficult to overlook the many current incidents of economic, ecological and political malfunction and breakdown that call for structural explanations.

In the economic dimension, two multifaceted crises frame the last decade. While there has been scant recovery after the global financial breakdown of 2008, the economic rupture caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to contain it are the next blow for the global economy, with as yet unclear outcomes. Politically, liberal democracies have been unsettled by the sharp rise of far-right parties, movements and governments, with severe effects in some countries. As this Special Issue goes to print, there is widespread uncertainty about the US
presidential elections. With legitimacy already being called into question and voting rights disputed in many local contexts, it is uncertain whether the incumbent will accept defeat if he loses or whether democratic procedures will remain intact in the case of a narrow result. At the same time, strained ecological conditions are making themselves felt in all parts of the world, from melting polar icecaps through to flooding and massive wildfires returning autumn upon autumn with increased force.

It is plausible to relate the longer-term tendencies beneath these ruptures to crises of growth and of liberal democracy. Capitalist growth is not only visibly coming up against ecological limits of sustainability, especially in regions of the Global South (Brand and Wissen, 2018). It also struggles with problems of economic deceleration, especially in deindustrialized countries of the Global North (Gordon, 2016; Teulings and Baldwin, 2014). And while liberalism in many parts of the world has come under attack by right-wing populism, potentially even with neo-fascist tendencies (Albright, 2018), democracy has been seen to be devolving into a post-democratic, technocratic system ever since the high times of neoliberalism (Blühdorn, 2013; Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 1999). Thus, this Special Issue aims to develop a deeper level of explanation—we intend to carve out the structural connections between the crisis of capitalist growth and the crisis of liberal democracies.

The connection between these tendencies is a matter of many disputes. Can the political drift to the right be understood as a reaction to the failures of technocratic neoliberalism? Do the growth problems of deindustrialized countries offer hope for a more ecological capitalism, or will they only cause increasingly desperate global competition for shrinking resources? Will the Western model of liberal democracy—with all its ingrained illusions, exclusions and inequalities—survive the increasing social and international tensions, or will it give way to more authoritarian forms of government?

The idea that these questions might be answered by analysing the connections between the crises of capitalist growth and liberal democracy is not entirely new. Some efforts have been made (Becker and Dörr, 2018; Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2018; Dörr et al., 2019; Fioramonti, 2015; Galbraith, 2014; Hall, 2020; Streeck, 2011), but conceptual debate and collective theory building is still a desideratum. One important structural link between economic and political crises that is missing in many analyses is the breakdown and remaking of hegemony in the sense of Antonio Gramsci, meaning the coordination of economic powers and popular consent, along with prevailing worldviews, values and attitudes. This hegemony is threatened when an established regime of accumulation (Juillard, 2002) or growth (Hall, 2020) hits economic and ecological limits. When material living conditions such as income, health or an intact natural environment visibly deteriorate, people tend to lose trust in established political structures and patterns of legitimation. In such situations, new claims to legitimacy emerge and institutions of liberal democracy are challenged by alternatives such as technocratic expert rule or populist leadership. The repressive character which can be ascribed to most of
these alternatives might also signal an increasing awareness of the economic and ecological problems of growth. Rather than opening possibilities of collective progress and individual experimentation, such conditions seem to call for aggressive self-preservation or restrictions on freedom of choice. Dealing with problems of economic growth under capitalist conditions demands even more—in order to preserve profit rates, shrinking economic gains and increasing ecological costs will have to be distributed in ways that exacerbate inequality. It should therefore be no surprise that maintaining the acceptance and stability of established forms of democracy has become difficult.

In this Special Issue, we aim to analyse the crisis of liberal democracies in post-growth capitalism, using theories of hegemony which we modify in the light of debates on the limits of growth and scenarios of degrowth. There are two theoretical claims at stake in this effort which point beyond most existing explanations and which have not yet been combined. On the one hand, we aim to establish a general framework of salient connections between (post-)growth and (social) democracy, or between the economic-ecological and the political aspects of today’s crises. The notion of a zero-sum game in distributional conflicts, as opposed to growth-orientated games, is useful in giving a schematic account of the options at stake. On the other hand, we address concrete economic problems, social conflicts and political strategies in traditional liberal democracies of the Global North (especially in Europe and Germany) as constellations of hegemonic rupture and new hegemonic projects. Both claims will be explained in turn, preceded by a short account of our geographical focus and historical background assumptions.

In the second half of the 20th century, (social) democracy as we—in affluent, early industrialized welfare states—know it evolved as a ‘game’ with various winners. After World War II and after a series of fierce labour disputes, corporations, organized labour, national governments and a growing state-subsidized middle class came to participate in a project of social pacification and industrial growth. Losses and costs were also evident (although often effectively made invisible) in the diminished autonomy of housewives at the side of the typically male bread-winners over the low pay and status of migrant workers to the exploitation and dependence of people living in ‘peripheral’ areas of resource extraction. Not least, economic growth came at the price of increasing resource throughput and ecological damage. Yet since the integration or exclusion of subaltern groups in the core countries worked without major frictions, regimes and discourses of growth were vital for Western liberal-social democracies. Studies from Alain Schnaiberg’s (1980) analysis of ‘growth coalitions’ to genealogies of the growth discourse (Schmelzer, 2015) and recent critiques of growth-based capitalism (Malm, 2016) all document this entanglement.

In contrast, growth crises have been shaking the hegemonic consensus of liberal-social democracies from the 1970s onwards, and what has been called secular stagnation might transform them into different kinds of polities. The ongoing trend towards socio-economic polarization which, according to Thomas Piketty
(2014), directly results from a discrepancy between growth rates and rates of return on capital, has been a pivotal direct and indirect cause of the political upheavals of recent years. Leftist parties and leaders from Podemos and Syriza to Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez have harnessed some of the protest energies. In most cases, however, the losers and/or opponents of increasingly dysfunctional growth regimes have turned to right-wing populism, which poses challenges to liberal-democratic political institutions. The resulting political changes are likely to make a possible re-acceleration of growth in industrial and post-industrial economies dependent on nation-centred strategies at the price of international coordination, a move which has been championed by protectionist-nationalist figures like US President Donald Trump.

Within this context, fundamental critiques of growth become crucial for understanding debates and conflicts over distribution. Since these critiques tend to concentrate on productivity, material throughput and consumption, thereby excluding the concrete class divisions of industrially advanced countries, two radically different ways of thinking suggest themselves here.

From the perspective of a radical ecological critique, the Fordist model or vantage point of growth-based social democracy can be analysed as a deep ideology. According to human geographer Alf Hornborg, whose perspective is taken up by Éric Pineault in this volume, growth is really a zero-sum game, in which even ‘technological development in some parts of the world system [is] . . . organically linked to underdevelopment and environmental deterioration in others’ (Hornborg, 2003: 215). Under conditions of capitalist accumulation, every gain for someone or at some place means a loss somewhere else. As Pineault argues, one needs not accept this argument tout court to see that at least a significant part of the productivity gains which allowed for social compromise in the Fordist core countries was only gained at the expense of global resource pillaging, pollution and displacement of waste.

Meanwhile, in the actual situation of decelerating or vanishing growth, a less general albeit potentially even more unsettling and urgent problem of class struggle and compromise can be described in terms of a zero-sum game. While ecological and social problems can potentially be tackled under conditions of stability on the basis of sustained progress, fatal antagonisms prevail when the only feasible redistribution is that some gain at the expense of others (see also Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2018). With Piketty one can understand the polarization between poor and rich segments of national populations as the ‘natural’ capitalist form of this kind of zero-sum game, with the possible result of a re-feudalized social order (Zinn, 2015). Still, on an international—or inter-regional—scale, there is room for other, politicized conceptualizations, which also offer potential gains to the less affluent parts of (national) populations. The United States might gain ground at the expense of China or European countries, welfare chauvinists in several European countries aim to defend national social security against migrant labour, while the European Union is itself fencing off migrants. The contribution
of Tilman Reitz and Dirk Jörke in this volume argues that right-wing populism owes much of its success to the increasing attractiveness of such scenarios.

Consequently, if unmitigated distributional conflicts between social classes are complemented by conflicts between national or regional economies, it remains to be seen whether and how the system of parliamentary representation and popular mass parties survives this critical moment. Post-democracy may turn out to be more than just the silent dominance of economic and politico-bureaucratic elites criticized by authors like Colin Crouch. For theories of hegemony in the tradition of Gramsci, the crisis of political institutions generally indicates an erosion of their capacity to coordinate (conflicts between) social forces. What needs explaining is not a political crisis of this or that institution, party or principle, but rather an ‘organic crisis’ of a way of organizing social compromise under capitalist conditions. In the context of this volume, we can specify both this theory of organic crisis and the specific ruptures described so far—since no established regime or strategy of growth seems to be trustworthy anymore, growth-based compromises between ruling and subordinated classes are eroding; parties that once organized these compromises (and represented these classes) tend to lose their raison d’être, principles of institutionalized solidarity and redistribution are suspended, and even prevailing ways of living, producing and consuming are unsettled. In the famous words of Gramsci (1971: 276), ‘in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’. In the present situation, once again, the question is whether some of the apparently morbid visions turn into working political-economic regimes.

The contributions to this Special Issue analyse the various layers of the hegemonic post-growth situation in different ways. First, the visible ruptures in democratic representation deserve specific attention and explanatory efforts. In some cases, as with the massive electoral successes on the right in Eastern Germany, a close connection between post-growth living conditions and post-democratic attitudes is hardly deniable. The contribution of Stefan Schmalz, Anne Hasenohr and Ingo Singe in this volume presents empirical results supporting this point and situates them within a discussion of regional disparities and the growth/post-growth dynamics of deindustrialization. In other cases, such as that of Greece, the economic crisis has produced a different kind of post-democratic situation, namely that of an (EU-led) technocratic government, which directly turned against popular will and exacerbated the growth crisis with austerity measures. Maria Markantonatou in this volume discusses the strategic choices of democratic counter-movements in this very specific post-growth environment. Meanwhile, a comparative perspective on European democracies reveals a new constellation of the hegemonic projects of liberal technocracy and right-wing populism. The contribution of Reitz and Jörke in this volume argues that right-leaning parts of the electorate should be studied in their adversarial relationship towards left-liberal or radically universalist orientations, which are often highly compatible with reformist government policies but struggle to retain or gain popular support.
The contribution of Reitz and Jörke in this volume also introduces a second analytical focus—the idea of changing regimes of accumulation, which is central to Gramscian explanations of historical class compromise and hegemony. The article by Pineault and the article by Dennis Eversberg in this volume address the changes from Fordist to neoliberal to contemporary accumulation regimes in ways that are critical of growth, but from radically different analytical angles. Pineault focuses on the resource and energy throughput of the ‘Golden Age’ of capitalist growth, detailing the hidden costs of Fordist productivity and class compromise. As a result, he expresses strong skepticism about a truly sustainable ‘Green New Deal’. Eversberg, for his part, analyses growth orientations as essential for the Fordist and for entailing accumulation regimes. However, turning to the level of individual dispositions, he introduces a third thematic focus. Inspired by David Graeber, he studies ‘ways of life’ as units of work and consumption, elements of social hierarchy and building blocks of hegemony. Eversberg argues that subjective growth orientations must be understood in their specificity in order to identify the extent to which liberal democracies, their social compromises and exclusionary mechanisms are kept intact or are threatened.

Finally, Lars Gertenbach, Jörn Lamla and Stefan Laser emphasize in their contribution in this volume that these ways of life are currently being restructured not only by economic and ecological factors but also by technological change. Their exemplary case of cultured meat hints at the limits of perspectives which isolate any of these three factors. Whereas human meat consumption is clearly an ethical and ecological problem, the purely technological solution of artificially produced meat remains caught in the dispositif of capitalist-industrial growth orientations. Neither political nor socio-economic nor human-animal relations will receive democratizing impulses from such a setting.

Overall, this Special Issue aims to show that the contested and often antagonistic visions which are presently reshaping and threatening liberal democracies can be seen as attempts to address the economic-ecological crisis of growth. This is obviously the case for the differing versions and shades of a Green Deal, which aims to combine growth and sustainability; but it also applies to the hopes of defending or increasing wealth within individual nation states at the cost of other parts of the world, as well as to various technocratic approaches to governing which ignore the demands of the less wealthy. In order to analyse these connections, we work with a schematic reconstruction of hegemonic growth or post-growth strategies. Our contributions analyse (a) the growth regimes of Western democracies as they evolved after World War II, including their ecological boundaries; (b) the ‘zero-sum game’ situation which results when the steady increase of distributable extra wealth comes to a halt and social polarization increases; and (c) the range of possible alternatives for post-growth capitalist (post-)democracies, from populist-authoritarian projects of national enrichment
over elitist-authoritarian projects for securing transnational capital accumulation to technological solutionism.

Building on and developing this analytical framework, the contributions to this volume help to explain the crisis constellation that has become apparent in recent years. Post-war growth rates can neither be reinstalled in post-industrial economies nor generalized and sustained on a global scale. Nevertheless, the capitalist need for accumulation persists, political parties and civil society actors continue to advocate versions of growth, and expansive dispositions continue to be nourished on an individual and cultural level. Exceptions are still experienced as shock and disaster, whether on a national level as in the case of Greece, or in temporary situations such as the COVID-19 lockdowns, while even modest growth rates continue to be achieved at increasing ecological cost. At the same time, visions of growth have become either aggressive (such as economic nationalism) or questionable (such as green growth), and the intensification of distributional struggles engenders a rise of authoritarian political options. It remains to be seen whether these factors result in capitalist growth regimes beyond liberal democracy or ‘only’ in a permanent decoupling of profits and general welfare that is justified in the name of insubstantial democratic forms.

The range of the explorations assembled in this volume is obviously limited. Moreover, there are various blind spots. Although some contributions touch upon the ways in which ecological boundaries translate into social struggles (for example, those of Pineault, Eversberg, and Gertenbach et al.), this Special Issue offers no systematic analysis of such struggles. Further research is needed here. The same may be said about the prospects for a Green New Deal, which deserve more analysis and reflection than a review of Fordist expansionism (in Pineault’s contribution) can offer. The discussion might also receive new—possibly neo-Keynesian—impulses in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. The list of post-growth scenarios also contains alternatives that have not yet taken centre-stage in the dominant struggles over hegemony—a positive design for post-growth societies and a grassroots democratic renewal of the economy and of political and social institutions. Finally, there are new authoritarian growth regimes, including both ecological elements and anti-ecological attitudes, outside of the narrow range of European and North American societies investigated in this volume.

We hope to compensate for these gaps by presenting an account that could lay the groundwork for further theoretical and political debate. This Special Issue demonstrates that the comparative analysis of growth regimes must systematically take into account the question of economic and ecological limits to capitalist growth. Only against this background is it possible to develop a deeper understanding of the noticeable erosion of established political institutions and of today’s aggressive anti-liberal and anti-democratic political trends. And it is only
in recognition of the post-growth condition that more benevolent visions will be able to find fertile ground.

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