Politics of public interest: Finnish forest capital’s strategy in the Kaipola paper mill shutdown

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ABSTRACT
Depoliticization has emerged as a key concept in analyzing the changing political dynamics of capitalist democracies. Yet, the concept of public interest has been relatively absent in depoliticization literature. This article argues for a more systematic inclusion of public interest politics in scrutinizing de- and repoliticization. The argument is advanced through strategic-relational theory by interpreting public interest as (1) a terrain of political struggles, (2) a mode of doing politics and (3) a method of enquiry. These dynamics are examined in the empirical context of Finnish forest industry’s political strategy in the Kaipola paper mill closure in August 2020. The forest conglomerate UPM-Kymmene politicized its paper mill shutdown by shifting the responsibility to the centre-left governmental coalition’s purportedly business-hostile policies. However, analyzing the case through UPM strategies and the paper production crisis, the closure falls in line with the forest industry’s long-term business strategy. The forest industry’s and UPM’s strategy is recognized as a forceful defense of a corporate polity where public interest is equated with the success of key economic actors. The article concludes with an argument for the politics of public interest as a vital research perspective for analyzing contradictions surrounding ‘the economy’.

1. Introduction

The defining feature of the development of a distinctly capitalist polity is the economization of politics. This process has narrowed the space of political deliberation by establishing a dominant economic rationality managed by expert knowledge, and by linking the legitimation of political power to the success of key economic actors (Eskelinen 2019). As such, narrowing the scope of politics to rational management of ‘the economy’ (Mitchell 2008, 2011) and governing other societal issues through it, is constitutive of the depoliticization of advanced capitalist democracies. The counter trend of right-wing populism has sought to redefine the agenda of politics through resentment and xenophobia, but they too seek political credibility by recourse to economic rationality defined through fiscal austerity.

A key signifier in defining the content of politics in an economized polity is the notion of general, common or public interest. In this paper, public interest is analyzed in relation to the politics of depoliticization (Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019). We situate our analysis in the intersection of political theory and cultural political economy (Jessop 2004; Sum and Jessop 2013) by examining public interest as a terrain of political struggles, a mode of doing politics and a method of enquiry.
interest in the context of a dispute between the centre-left governmental coalition and a key fraction of capital – the forest industry – in Finland. Our focus is on a case of political intervention by the forest conglomerate UPM-Kymmene to challenge the economic and social policies of the current Finnish government. The shutdown of UPM’s Kaipola paper mill, as part of its long-term corporate strategy, was publicly declared to be the result of government policies by UPM’s CEO in August 2020.

Theoretically remarkable feature of this intervention was the insistence that the strategic act and the consequent politicizing move by the economic actor were non-political in character, whereas the government response foregrounding the labour perspective and consequences for national and regional economies was perceived as political. The case illustrates UPM’s attempt to delimit the government’s maneuvering space and at the same time depoliticize the conditions of regulation (taxation and labour) by asserting the need for economic policies that would extend beyond governments’ terms in office. This also brings to the fore the struggle over the meaning of public interest in the face of multitude of interests – economic, social, regional and political – each capable of producing their own logics for defining the common or the public interest. Thus, we seek to formulate a notion of public interest politics that should be identified as: (1) a terrain of political struggles, (2) a mode of doing politics and as (3) a method of enquiry.

In recent years, there has been a huge proliferation of academic literature on depoliticization (Buller et al. 2019; Burnham 2001, 2014; Flinders and Buller 2006; Hay 2014; Kettell 2008; Marcuse 2015), post-politics (Davidson and Iveson 2015; McCarthy 2013; Swyngedouw 2017; Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014), anti-politics (Fawcett et al. 2017; Wood 2016) and post-democracy (Crouch 2004; McLeod 2011). Even though literature on depoliticization has been advanced in different fields and research contexts ranging from studies of the spatial restructuring of the state and city-regionalism (Deas 2014; Etherington and Jones 2018; Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019; Sirviö and Luukkonen 2020), urban politics and governance (Beveridge and Koch 2019; Davidson and Iveson 2015), resource governance and environmental politics (Anshelm and Haikola 2018; Bond, Diprose, and Thomas 2019) to feminist research (Ylöstalo 2020), the engagement with the concept of public interest has, thus far, been relatively unsystematic – the discussion of which has been more active in planning research (Campbell and Marshall 2002; Hytönen 2019; Kanninen, Bäcklund, and Mäntysalo 2013; Lennon 2017; Moroni 2017; Puustinen, Mäntysalo, and Jarenko 2017). We argue for better integration of public interest in the analyses of depoliticization, not merely as an ‘illusory’ general interest (Jessop 2016, 86) meant to obfuscate the functioning of political power, but also as a central politicizing concept through which the ‘public’ character of economic and political projects can be asserted.

The general or public interest is often recognized as a depoliticized imaginary that is used to legitimate a particular accumulation regime or a spatio-temporal fix (Ahlgvist and Moisio 2014; Jessop 2000). Public interest is construed or imagined for resolving conflicts between particular capital fractions and between capital in general and the interests of the wider society. The notions of ‘general interest’ and ‘public interest’ can be separated based on the scope of the settlement: the general interest refers to the imaginary resolution between capital fractions, whereas the notion of public interest includes the public articulations of capitalist interests relative to the complex reproduction-regulation of capital accumulation (Jessop 2000). This is why we prefer the term public interest. The collectively resonant notion of public interest delimits the relations and spatial and temporal horizons within which the calculation of interests occurs. This is important for determining the identities and interests that can be included or represented in and through public interest politics, the relevant time horizons (short-, medium-, and long-term, business cycle, electoral cycle, etc.), and the relative importance of different spatial and scalar horizons (local, regional, national, transnational, etc.) (Jessop 2000).

As such, references to public interest are not only depoliticizing moves in a political struggle but articulations of particular interests that concern the socially accepted functions of the state apparatus (Jessop 2007, 9).
To explain what motivated and enabled the structural adjustment of a forest conglomerate to be presented as a fault of government economic policy we seek to identify (1) the historical role of the forest industry as the central fraction of capital in Finland and its relation to the state above all during the welfare state era; (2) the relative position of the forest industry vis a vis other capital fractions, especially those engaged in the knowledge-based economy; and (3) the project of restoring class power (Harvey 2006) that is central for cohering capitalist interests and legitimating their rule through a politico-economic imaginary that can be recognized as the corporate polity (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014).

The paper is divided in seven sections. In Section 2, we seek to outline how the concept of public interest resides at the intersection of the state, economy and civil society as terrain of political struggles involving the major players, interests and political rationalities that seek to favourably influence its contents. From this conceptual basis, we move on to discuss the geographical and historical context of our case study.

From Section 3, we focus on the Finnish context in the neoliberal era where concern of international competitiveness and the project of restoring the class power of capital have become central in developing a polity that is receptive to promoting a competition state. We deploy the concept of corporate polity to identify the imaginary in which the interests of central capital fractions are articulated through the state and legitimated through public interest politics. The Finnish forest industry is closely linked to this process as it has historically claimed to represent the shared economic interest of the Finnish state.

If the perpetuation of the corporate polity as an imaginary has been integral in the neoliberal project of the capitalist class, the forest bioeconomy has been Finnish forest industry’s specific strategy for restructuring the economic and material preconditions of forestry. The policy agenda of the bioeconomy has attracted attention in Finland in several economic sectors with new formulations like the blue (use of renewable aquatic resources) (see Albrecht and Lukkarinen 2020) and yellow (agriculture and food production) bioeconomy (MMM 2021) as well as bioeconomy and tourism (Kurppa et al. 2018). However, this article focuses specifically on the forest industry due to its central role as an export-led fraction of capital sustaining the Finnish bioeconomy – for example, the Finnish Bioeconomy Strategy (FBS 2014, 8) states that over half of Finland’s bioeconomy relies on forests and forest bioeconomy products make up 80% of all bioeconomy exports (FBS 2014, 9).

The aims of the bioeconomy have been to pivot the industry away from declining paper production, to update its image as a carbon neutral industry based on renewable materials, and to recentre the forest industry in the state spotlight as the spearhead of future accumulation. These are analyzed in Sections 4 and 5 while progressing towards the empirical analysis in Section 6.

The three meanings of public interest politics come together in the empirical section that focuses on the Kaipola shutdown case. In the concluding section, we summarize our argument for developing public interest politics as a research perspective.

2. Public interest as a terrain, a mode and a method

The theoretical motivation for this section is to outline the analysis of public interest politics through a tripartite division of public interest as; (1) a central terrain of political struggles for different contending actors and interests, (2) a mode of doing politics through which societal actors seek to delineate the contents of hegemonic political projects and (3) a method of enquiry into the strategic-relational composition of a social formation and polity, which we seek to demonstrate in our empirical study. Thus, we seek deliver on that promise by grounding the approach on strategic-relational theory and revisiting key passages of Gramsci and Marx.

Strategic-relational theory (Jessop 2000, 2007, 2016; Poulantzas 1978) recognizes public interest as a central terrain of political struggles at the core of the state apparatus:
... the core of the state apparatus can be defined as a distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on a given population in the name of their ‘common interest’ or ‘general will’. (Jessop 2007, 9, emphasis in original)

In this ideology, a neutral State appears as the representative of the general will and interest, and the arbiter among struggling classes . . . . (Poulantzas 1978, 156)

A key addition from Marx and Engels (1976, 46) can be made that the public interest concerns not just the state apparatus but social organization in general through the division of labour:

Further, the division of labour also implies the contradiction between the interest of the separate individual or the individual family and the common interest of all individuals who have intercourse with one another. And indeed, this common interest does not exist merely in the imagination, as the "general interest", but first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labor is divided.

Thus, public interest is not only ‘the business of the state’. This is evident in the case of the Finnish forest industry which has, throughout its history, been closely linked to state policy and has sought to present its economic interests as beneficial to the state and society. Forest industry’s intensely political role continues in the guise of the current forest bioeconomy regime (Ahlqvist and Sirviö 2019; Harrinkari, Katila, and Karppinen 2016; Kröger and Raitio 2017; Takala et al. 2020).

Public interest also denotes a mode of doing politics – public interest politics – in which various actors engage in deliberately or to which they are drawn into unwittingly as they come into contact with opposing political interests. The specific mode of public interest politics is universalization; actors seek to articulate sectional or class interests as the general interest of the whole society. In Gramscian terms, one central facet of the production of hegemony under capitalism is the representation of the particular interests of the bourgeois class as the general interest of the society. The mode of universalization contained in public interest politics and its ability to ‘force’ various actors to delineate its contents is noted by Marx and Engels in The German Ideology:

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones. (Marx and Engels 1976, 60)

Further, it follows that every class which is aiming at domination … must first conquer political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest, which in the first moment it is forced to do. (Marx and Engels 1976, 48)

A central concern connected to public interest politics is its depoliticization. The capitalist class often seeks to articulate its interests from an ostensibly depoliticized position and to affect the ‘balance of forces’ at ‘arm’s length’ (Flinders and Buller 2006). As Gramsci (1978, 364) notes, the industrialist’s relation to parliamentary politics emanates from an ‘apolitical’ position – politicization without the appearance of politics:

The great industrialists utilize all the existing parties turn by turn, but they do not have their own party. This does not mean that they are in any way “agnostic” or “apolitical”. Their interest is in a determinate balance of forces, which they obtain precisely by using their resources to reinforce one party or another in turn from the varied political checkerboard …

Thus, depoliticization appears through a subtle ‘arena-shifting’ between the economic and political spheres and rests on their illusory separation in capitalist ideology (Burnham 2014). Rather than positing that there are separate and clearly demarcated social domains, the arena-shifting between the economic and the political is, indeed, a method for capital interests to exercise explicitly political power while retaining the ideological cover of appearing ‘apolitical’. Through depoliticizing manoeuvres, key capital fractions – like the forest industry in Finland – attempt to shield their operations from unfavourable political regulation.
Relating to the third facet of the tripartite division, by focusing empirically on public interest politics we aim to develop a method through which the constellation of social forces can be further interrogated. We argue that the politics of public interest is one key feature in solidifying growth models (Berry and Lavery 2017; Koch 2018, 2020) by building political legitimacy and fractured consensuses around particular strategies of accumulation. The paper’s empirical case concerning the conflict between UPM and the governmental coalition demonstrates how the changing contours of forestry – declining paper production, sustainability critiques and emerging bioeconomization – compel the industry to rearticulate its economic interests toward the state and the public sphere and in intra-capital competition.

From the perspective of spatio-temporal variation and sensitivity to context it becomes pertinent to ask what kind of conceptualizations of public interest have the most political purchase? In the next section, we turn to the formation of a corporate polity in the Finnish context, through which public interest politics has been primed to respond to the demands of key capital fractions. Furthermore, the corporate polity has its own internal divisions and struggles between capital fractions that need to be identified.

3. Corporate polity and the restoration of class power

Geographically and historically viable articulations of public interest are closely connected to particular state forms. During the era of the Finnish competition state (Moisio and Leppänen 2007), the discourse of international competitiveness has been pivotal in defining the public interest. The corporate polity signifies the ideological base of the competition state that has at its core the idea that the state should be managed like a corporation for optimizing economic performance (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014). The corporate polity should be understood as a process and a project that has produced a politico-economic imaginary centred around the notion of competitiveness. Imaginaries are loosely bounded meaning systems that can be associated ‘with different standpoints which frame and contain debates and conflicts over particular ideal and material interests’ (Sum and Jessop 2013, 165, emphasis in original). The key producers of the corporate polity imaginary are political decision-makers and state officials, representatives of companies and organizations as well as myriad of public intellectuals.

The corporate polity operates on an ontology of nature-like global market forces necessitating constant care of the state’s international competitiveness, which has become the central concern structuring the discourse on public interest. Within the imaginary of corporate polity, competitiveness is conceived as the primary goal of state activities and as the solution to a myriad of problems confronting the state. Thus, the care for competitiveness has informed state practices ranging from economic and labour policy to regional planning and education. We use the corporate polity as a name for the political project of restoring the power of capital that has been challenging the institutions and practices of the welfare state era (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014). The imaginary of the corporate polity has been successful among the economic, political and bureaucratic elites. Nevertheless, due to the legacy of the welfare state era, there are widely persuasive competing meanings for the content of the public interest, especially that of the public provision of welfare itself, which paradoxically has also served as one of the main arguments for the care of competitiveness.

In their account of the corporate polity, Ahlqvist and Moisio (2014; see also Moisio 2018) posit this emergent imaginary as the product of neoliberal policy reform and state restructuring associated above all with knowledge-based economization. We build on this preceding analysis by seeking to establish the relations between key capital fractions within the imaginary of the corporate polity, and especially the status of the traditional capital fraction of forest industry. In our reading, corporate polity serves the function of integrating the interests of capital in general and legitimizing the political class domination. The imaginary of the corporate polity provides the discursive basis for achieving this by representing the key capital fractions as the income providers of the state and the ‘national economy’ that are crucial for the provision of welfare in society. Thus, the public
interest can be conceived through the notion of international competitiveness, which identifies the interests of key capital fractions as the public interest of the whole society. This imaginary allows little space for political disagreement concerning the relations of power within society and it is designed to suppress the politicization of class antagonisms.

From this perspective, the penetration of state administration and the public discourse by corporate rationalizations is a constituent part of what Harvey (2006) has recognized as the restoration of class power. Beyond the objectives of enhanced capital accumulation and increased income and wealth disparities, Harvey interprets the neoliberalization of capitalist societies as a political project. The central features of this project are efforts to redefine the public interest through business interests, the restoration of fiscal discipline through austerity policies and ideological struggle to question the efficiency of public policies and state regulation. Public support for the project is sought by undermining forms of solidarity through rhetoric of liberty, individualism, and consumerism. These general features pertain in the case of Finland, with contextual variation.

For our purposes, the most important context specific feature is that the notion of welfare has remained the central concept in legitimating political and societal power in Finland. For this reason, the corporate polity imaginary has not been able to dispense with the public provision of welfare services. The political right and the spoke persons of business interests have been actively criticizing the high public spending to produce a sense of continuous state fiscal crisis (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014) focusing on public debt. This, in turn, is used to legitimate measures that purportedly enhance the international competitiveness of Finnish businesses and industries. Regarding the measures, differences between the strategies of different capital fractions emerge. In labour policy, the knowledge-capital fraction foregrounds the attractiveness of Finland as a working environment for transnational talent by focusing e.g. on privileging this key segment of labour power in taxation and immigration policy. In contrast, the traditional industry seeks strategically to undermine the labour union power in order to bring down the labour costs relative to key competitors. These two labour policies manifest two different spatialities of labour: the one with high mobility that needs to be attracted globally, the other tied down to industrial localities together with the fixed capital invested in industrial facilities. Lately, the state spatial strategies have favoured the processes of urbanization and the building of agglomeration economies according to the logic of knowledge-intensive capital fractions.

Furthermore, the case of bioeconomy illustrates well the internal divisions of the corporate polity. The policy idea of the bioeconomy concerns the material basis of the economy as a whole (Walker 2016) (renewable vs. nonrenewable raw materials) and has transnationally attracted significant investment in research and development of biotechnology throughout its existence. The capital fractions invested in knowledge-based economies and their spatial imaginary of transnational network of urban nodes and agglomerations are seemingly rather far removed from the industrial production networks that are reproducing the rural areas as resource peripheries. Their accumulation strategies require different kind of state attention and support.

For example, the intense centralization and metropolitanization of the Finnish state has been politically justified by a form of highly economized public interest politics in which the economic growth and efficiency of core urban areas has been set up as the self-evidently shared interest of all regions (Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019; Sirviö and Luukkonen 2020). On the other hand, the forestry bloc has sought to articulate its interests through the bioeconomy regime not only as the national interest but also as the shared interest of peripheral regions, thus, presenting a more integrative model across the urban/rural divide (Ahlqvist and Sirviö 2019; Albrecht and Kortelainen 2020).

However, the actually existing bioeconomy has faced intensive sustainability critiques and it has become a synonym for the intensified use of forest biomass and pulp production. The public debate on the environmental effects of the bioeconomy relies at least partially on the incommensurability of the different politico-economic imaginaries. Also, the political legitimation of the bioeconomy relies heavily on innovation-driven ‘high-value accumulation’ (Kellokumpu 2021) of new forest
products while the new product catalogue is still in a developmental state compared to the industry’s traditional paper and pulp exports.

4. Development of forest industry as a central capital fraction and the bioeconomy regime

Throughout the twentieth century, the central fraction of capital in Finland that amalgamated with the public interest was the forest industry and state policies and strategies often revolved around bolstering its competitiveness (Kuisma 1999). Along with this process developed the ideology of forests as a form of national prosperity (Kuisma 1997), which relied on the concrete material gains forestry provided. The reasons for the peculiar historical development of forestry as a centre piece of public interest were manifold, but three important factors can be highlighted: (1) a relatively dispersed forest ownership structure which provided an additional income source to large numbers of smallholder peasants, (2) forestry as a form of industrialized regional development for rural economies that integrated these regions more tightly into state space and (3) the connections to international markets and trade through wood exports.

After the declaration of independence and the Finnish civil war, the land settlement act of 1922 (Lex Kallio) boosted the class of land-owning peasantry and over 65,000 new farms were established (Kotilainen and Rytteri 2011, 432) while, in 1925, its complementary act (Lex Pulkkinen) prohibited forestry capital from further land grabbing (Kuisma 1999). Forestry allowed the agrarian population to capitalize on their assets and find side income streams. The revenue from harvesting state-owned forests naturally bolstered the state’s finances. A tripartite ownership structure formed around the central natural resource. Because of the land ownership structure, the forest industry was forced to purchase its raw material mostly from the land-owning small peasantry and the state.

Forest-based accumulation implicated a range of different social strata from land-owning peasantry to finance capital. Forests created the material foundation and the economic impetus for the formation of a hegemonic bloc that came to represent the public interest. To this day, the ownership structure is dispersed as 60% of forests are privately owned, 80% domestic raw material comes from privately owned forests, and there are approximately 350,000 forest properties of two hectares and above (Natural Resources Institute Finland 2019).

After the Second World War, the forest-based accumulation regime and export-led growth provided the basis for the emerging welfare state reforms. The political power of labour unions had increased, and the tripartite system of national income policy agreements (tulopolitiittinen kokonaisratkaisu) was established between the trade unions, employers’ organizations and the government. This marked a rather stable class compromise and reconciliation of interests between the state, labour and capital denoted as the ‘cartel polity’ (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014).

Forestry provided an export-led growth strategy for the Finnish state. Although the forest industry’s share of total exports has slowly diminished to around 20% (Table 1) due to diversification of the economy, paper and paperboard, for example, are still the number one export products (FFIF 2019a). The forest industry holds considerable political and economic power because of its integral connections to other sectors like finance and technology industry and it is looking to reinvigorate its central role with the bioeconomy in the context of climate change.

In this article, the forest conglomerate UPM takes the centre stage, but it is important to remember some of the internal divisions of the forestry bloc. First, the industry is divided into mechanical (timber) and chemical forest industry (pulp and paper). The main operations of the three big conglomerates UPM-Kymmene, Stora Enso and Metsä Group dominate the pulp and paper industry.

Table 1. Wood, paper and printed products share of total export products (Statistics Finland 2016).

| Year | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 | 2015 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Share | 94%  | 84%  | 77%  | 87%  | 75%  | 56%  | 43%  | 39%  | 27%  | 21%  | 22%  |
while the mechanical forest industry consists of a collection independent and small-scale sawmills and the smaller side operations of the big three. Second, each of these three conglomerates represent a different facet of capital accumulation with private, state-led and cooperative capital: (1) UPM-Kymmene formed through a series of mergers between different privately owned paper mills, (2) Stora Enso’s precursor Enso-Gutzeit was a state-owned company and the Finnish state-owned investment company Solidium is still the largest shareholder in Stora Enso, and (3) Metsä Group is owned by a cooperative of 100,000 forest owners that first started as a policy of gaining a better bargaining position for forest owners in timber trade in the 1930s but later acquired its own production facilities from the 1950s onward (Kuisma, Siltala, and Keski-Sarja 2014). Thus, the strategies of public engagement differ, and it might not be totally coincidental that specifically UPM took the more audacious role of challenging the government coalition in the shutdown of its Kaipola paper mills.

The globalization of Finnish forest conglomerates has also enabled them to exert new types of political influence through the outsourcing of operations. The conglomerates have outgrown the national state as the prospects of new investments especially in the Global South loom large. One such project is UPM’s new 2.7 billion dollar and 2.1 million tonne pulp mill in Paso de los Toros, Central Uruguay projected to acquire its raw material from eucalyptus plantations (UPM 2021). The outsourcing of operations has given forest capital another tool to discipline labour in the domestic setting by appealing to the industry’s ‘poor labour competitiveness’ in Finland.

Despite the internal differences, the forest industry has been able to unify behind the project of the bioeconomy and produce a relatively coherent pathway for resuscitating the industry’s role as the spearhead of future economic development. Through a critical gaze, the main concern in the bioeconomy strategy for the big three agglomerates is to pivot away from paper production while continuing the ecologically destructive strategy of intensified use of forest biomass (Ahlqvist and Sirviö 2019; Soimakallio et al. 2016). The strong focus on paper exports and the rise and decline of paper as the industry’s most valuable product has created the pressure for the restructuring. In this light, the Kaipola paper mill shutdown and the forest conglomerate UPM’s attempt to politicize this shutdown can be interpreted as an attempt to politically redefine the industry’s conditions of regulation.

Indeed, the global emergence of bioeconomy (Birch and Tyfield 2013) as a ‘sustainable’ economic growth model based on renewable and biological resources has given the forest industry a new political angle to legitimize its core business model. As Goven and Pavone (2015, 1) analyze, the bioeconomy should not merely be understood as an economic or scientific project but also as a political project that attempts to facilitate a ‘particular set of political-institutional changes that will shape the parameters of possible future action.’ The key part of this political imaginary is the promise of the bioeconomy as the successor to the fossil economy and framing of the industrial utilization of biomass as the future solution to climate change (Kellokumpu 2021; FBS 2014).

As such, the bioeconomy appears as a reconciliation of economy and ecology: the replacement of the fossil economy with a biobased renewable resource base and energy production and the continuation of (bio)innovation-driven capital accumulation and economic growth. With dwindling paper production, attempts to bioeconomize its core business, and increasing public demands for sustainable forestry and carbon sink preservation, the forest industry finds itself in a conjuncture where its key political and economic interests need to be defended.

Along with the material changes in production and new formations of fixed capital in, e.g. biorefineries, the bioeconomy’s political project is also framed through policy narratives. Albrecht, Grundel, and Morales (2021, 124) analyze how the public financing of regional bioeconomies is driven by ‘success story’ policy narratives linked to, e.g. regional development and growth, sectoral renewal and innovation as well as local jobs. New investments into refineries and industrial renewal produce bioeconomy hype through which growth-oriented political legitimacy is built and sustained, and especially regional centres and industrial towns can attempt to rebrand themselves through bioeconomic imaginaries (Albrecht and Kortelainen 2020).
With the emergence of the politics of bioeconomy, Kröger and Raitio (2017) analyze how the dominant bioeconomy pathway is aimed at safeguarding the timber production goals of the forest industry at the expense of sustainability and biodiversity concerns. Thus, the forest bioeconomy imaginary falls in line with forest industry coalition’s long-term strategic influence in Finnish society and politics (Harrinkari, Katila, and Karppinen 2016; Kotilainen and Rytteri 2011). This strategic influence emerges through, e.g., the use of discursive power in mass media and the aggressive defense of the boundaries of ‘legitimate’ forest politics seen to guard the industry’s interests and productivity (Kellokumpu 2021; Takala et al. 2020). Because of the dispersed forest ownership structure, managing the public image of the industry has always been crucial in regulating and guiding the great mass of small-scale private forest owners. Forestry’s public relations management does not concern only the creation of good press but is integrally related to the concrete practices of forest owners (Kotilainen and Rytteri 2011), e.g. what kind of forest management methods and forest use practices are viewed as beneficial and promoted in the public view. The larger forest policy regimes – of which public relations management is only a facet of – are aimed at securing favourable operating conditions for the industry.

5. Kaipola shutdown context, data and methodological approach

We contextualize our argument on the public interest politics through the recent case of the Kaipola paper mill shutdown where the changing relations between the state, industry and labour came into focus. As a public conflict between the government and one of the key capital fractions in Finland, the case is a rather rare occurrence. In the Kaipola case, the forest industry moved to challenge the labour unions and also the government to influence industrial regulation as well as labour and economic policies.

During the 2015–2019 centre-right government, the development of bioeconomy was elevated to one of the spearhead projects of the coalition (Valtioneuvostonkanslia 2015). The current centre-left coalition has been less enthusiastic in continuing this path, rather attempting to focus in many ways on the institutional commitments of the state in public provision that have been neglected during previous governments focusing on competitiveness measures. The first line of the current government program aptly summarizes the approach with an emphatic rhetoric: ‘In a Nordic welfare state, the economy is managed for the people, not the other way round’ (Valtioneuvosto 2019).

On August 26th, 2020, UPM announced the closure of the Kaipola paper mill in Jämsänkoski, Central Finland and the potential laying off of 600 employees. The next day, UPM’s CEO Jussi Pesonen published an official bulletin decrying a hostile business environment in Finland with an excessive tax burden that hampers the competitiveness of the forest industry and forces to outsource operations to other countries. An intense media cycle ensued in which the Prime Minister Sanna Marin called for the social responsibility of corporations and criticized the closure of a profitable mill. The stage was set in a way that placed the initiative firmly in the hands of the UPM posing as the guardian of rational economic policies defined through competitiveness, whereas the government was left asking questions about the wider societal consequences of conglomerate’s decision. What was not discussed in public at the time, were the relationship between UPM’s decision making, public performance, and business strategy. In our reading, the UPM’s closure decision can be recognized as an outcome of a long-term business strategy of the forest industry relating to the structural crisis of the paper industry.

The plant closure, while strategic, offered an opportunity for UPM to also exercise extra-parliamentary political power by connecting the closure to the politics of the centre-left coalition not seen as ‘properly fostering domestic business environments’. We argue that the politicization of the closure decision through Pesonen’s open letter to the government and subsequent media statements was a strategic choice of the forest conglomerate to exercise depoliticized extra-parliamentary influence by seeking to foreclose the political manoeuvering space of the coalition and to delegitimize it.
The reason for this is the current government’s perceived departure from the imaginary of the corporate polity: with the focus on issues like public healthcare reform and climate policy the government could not be trusted to further the interests of key economic actors under the guise of international competitiveness. The political engagement of UPM and the forest industry can be interpreted as an attempt to bring the government in line for the continuity of the corporate polity.

Methodologically our analysis is based on the cultural political economy approach developed by Sum and Jessop (2013) through which we focus on the politics of public interest. By adopting CPE approach, we seek to bridge the gap between economic determinism and discursive voluntarism (Jessop 2004; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008), and show how the forest industry’s strategy of recentering itself has been conditioned both by material and structural changes in the global markets and compelled industry actors to exercise their political power. In our data, we combine the public debate and the long-term strategy of the UPM to correctly identify the political character of the Kaipola debate. Our reading of the case through the concept of public interest politics seeks to demonstrate the value of the research perspective in analyzing the strategic-relational dynamics between capital fractions, the state and society.

The research material consists of a mixture of strategic documents and news material that has been gathered from publicly available sources. Our analysis proceeds in three phases. First, through previous research and publicly available data pertaining to the recent development of Finnish paper industry, we seek to demonstrate how the structural crisis of paper production has affected the forest industry throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Second, we analyze the strategic documents of the UPM conglomerate (e.g. reports to shareholders, the Biofore strategy) that outline the company’s relation to the structural crisis of paper production and the bioeconomy transformation of forestry. Furthermore, we aim to show how the Kaipola paper mill closure is a logical outcome of the long-term strategy adopted by UPM which bears no direct relation to the specific policies of the current governmental coalition. Third, we analyze UPM’s statements and Pesonen’s open letter and a data-set of online and print news articles of the following media cycle through which we exhibit how the paper mill closure was strategically politicized by the UPM.

6. UPM’s extra-parliamentary strategy of depoliticization

6.1. Paper production crisis and UPM strategy in the 2010s

Paper has been one of the main exports of the forest industry and Finnish industry in general. With digitalization and internet adoption globally, paper production has been in perpetual crisis during the 2000s. This has led to numerous paper mill closures within the last decade. Thus, the forest industry has been looking to pivot away from print paper toward cardboard packaging, specialty papers and the bioeconomy, which in the industrial context signifies various renewable products made of forest biomass. Some of the key facts, economic reasons, and consequences of this process are listed in Table 2.

UPM has also navigated through the changing circumstances of global markets. ‘Bioeconomization’ has been one of its strategic spearheads and business models throughout the 2010s. UPM has branded its internal long-term strategy as the Biofore -strategy (UPM 2019, 16) which they characterize in the following manner:

“Bio” communicates the strategic direction of UPM – and the entire forest industry. Bioeconomy and bioinnovations are present in every development initiative we have taken over the past decade … As a leader of the forest-based bioindustry, we constantly look for new business opportunities and end-uses of forest biomass to replace fossil-based materials and to meet the growing global consumer demand. (UPM 2020a)

As part of the long-term Biofore strategy, UPM has emphasized three spearheads for future growth: high-value fibre, molecular bioproducts and specialty packaging materials (UPM 2019, 20). Thus, paper production is framed within the strategy through specialty papers, label materials, and paper and cardboard-based packaging materials that are seen as the future growth opportunities for UPM.
Digitalization has been one of the main drivers of this change and it is recognized in the internal strategies as both an opportunity and a challenge. For example, in the 2017 annual report, the growth of online shopping is interpreted as driving an increasing demand for labelling, packaging, pulp, and transport while the challenge for UPM is the decreasing demand for print paper and its excess production capacity (UPM 2017, 20). In a September 2020 presentation for Helsinki Capital Markets Day, Winfried Schaur of the UPM Communication Papers subdivision presented the latest developments (UPM 2020b). Paper demand has dropped by 25% between 2014 and 2019 and UPM’s paper production capacity has been reduced by 22% during that same period while profits from paper production have been ensured through ‘uncompromising cost competitiveness’ (UPM 2020b, 4). Furthermore, the lockdown measures of the corona pandemic saw the plummeting of paper demand even further in the second quarter of 2020 with a projected permanent dent in the overall demand for paper (UPM 2020b, 5–6). Throughout the 2010s, UPM has slowly decreased its paper production capacity with ‘exits’ (ie. sales and closures) from 7 domestic and 14 international paper mills (UPM 2020b, 7). The closure of Kaipola with three mills and the selling of the Shotton mill in Northern Wales were the latest announced exits in August 2020.

Analyzing the structural crisis of the Finnish paper industry, the bioeconomy strategy of the forest industry overall and UPM’s own internal strategy in particular lead to the conclusion that the closure of the Kaipola mills was part of the long-term economic strategy adopted by the forest conglomerate. Thus, the fact that the closures happened while a centre-left coalition was in power was merely coincidental and presented an opportunity for UPM to exert political influence by framing the closure as integral related to the policies of the coalition. This is pertinent after the previous centre-right coalition enthusiastically adopted the bioeconomy – defined in the interests of forest industry – as a political strategy that tried to put the forest industry back to the spotlight of state economic policy. UPM’s manoeuvre of politicizing the closure is best understood as a way of disciplining the coalition seen to stray away from the elite consensus forged through the corporate polity imaginary, and as an attempt to weaken labour unions by appealing to cost competitiveness.

The intensely political role that UPM adopted for the closure announcement can be further expounded upon by taking a brief look at Northern Wales. At the same time with the Kaipola closures, UPM announced its plan to exit and sell the Shotton paper mill in Deeside, Wales. Contrasting to the role adopted in Finnish media, UPM announced to local and UK media that the exit from the Shotton mill was due to weakened economic outlook, declining demand of newsprint and the need for internal company restructuring (Chapman 2020; Deeside.com 2020; Kilgannon 2020). Thus, the Shotton exit was framed first and foremost as a business decision stemming from changes

| Key facts on the paper production crisis | Reasons and consequences |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Paper and paperboard #1 exports of the Finnish economy (7.4 billion euros in 2017; FFIF 2019a) | • Rapid development of internet and telecommunications; the demand for paper reaching its peak globally (FFIF 2017a) and domestically (FFIF 2018b) |
| • Peak production and export volumes of paper close to 14 million tonnes in early 2000s (FFIF 2018a, 2020a) | • Economic forecasts see demand for paper plummeting well into the future with internet adoption globally (Johnston 2016) |
| • After 2008, both the production and export volumes of paper have dropped from 14 million tonnes to 9–10 million tonnes annually while the importance of chemical pulp and sawn softwood has grown relative to paper (FFIF 2020a) | • Coupled with the 2008 financial crisis, the accumulating paper production capacity was starting to become a burden (Kuisma, Siltala, and Keski-Sarja 2014) |
| • Print paper production has steadily fallen during the 2010s to just below 5 million tonnes in 2019 (FFIF 2020b) with exports following the same trend (FFIF 2017b) | • Paper mill conversions: For example, Stora Enso converting a paper mill in Oulu to cardboard packaging in late 2020 (Stora Enso 2019) |
| • The number of personnel employed in paper and pulp production fallen by 10 000 employees from 2007 to 2018 due to layoffs, closures and automation (FFIF 2019b) | • Paper mill closures: For example, Stora Enso announcing in April 2021 plans to close its paper mills in Kemi, Finland and Kvarnsveden, Sweden citing a 3.5 million tonnes of excess of paper production capacity and plummeting demand in the European markets (Lassila and Luukka 2021) |
| • The export of chemical pulp has taken some of the share of falling print paper with a production increase from 2 million tonnes to 3 million tonnes in 2010s (FFIF 2017b) | • New fixed capital investments in biorefineries |

Table 2. The paper production crisis in Finland during the 2000s.
in global paper markets. The decision of UPM to extend the Finnish closure from the conglomerate’s internal strategic and economic considerations to politics was predicated on the calculus that it could exercise meaningful extra-parliamentary power and pressure the current coalition to adopt ‘business-friendly’ policies.

**6.2. Closure announcement, media cycle and the government response**

UPM announced the closure of the Kaipola paper mills in Jämsä on the 26th of August 2020. Already in January 2020, the chair of UPM’s Board of Directors Björn Wahlroos delivered an ultimatum that the next paper mill closures of the conglomerate will be in Finland if cost and wage competitiveness of the industry were not ensured.

Finnish forest industry tries to defend Finnish jobs. If we accept the demands of the labour unions, we will lose a lot of those jobs. (Kajander 2020)

Next day after the closure announcement on August 27th, UPM’s CEO Jussi Pesonen published an open letter to the Finnish government concerning the closures (Pesonen 2020). The excessive tax burden and external costs of operations in Finland were framed as the main reasons for the closure decision. Furthermore, the letter decries that high taxes on diesel fuel and electricity create extra costs in resource transport and production and the labour union demands for consistent wage raises and a shorter working time forces outsourcing operations to other countries. The claims for the reasons of closure in Pesonen’s letter were highly selective and this was also noted in the media by industry experts who debunked some of the claims (Niinivuo 2020).

However, the more interesting fact than the specific claims of Pesonen is the way how the UPM, framed forest industry’s relation to Finnish society:

In the case of the closure, Finnish society is one of the biggest losers. Thanks to forest industry’s domestic value chains, approximately 80% of Kaipola’s yearly revenue is left in the national economy. It is high time to evaluate how Finland can implement holistic industrial, labour and tax policies that enable profitable industry and new investments. A successful private sector is a prerequisite for the sustainable financing of the society. The flagging-out of domestic industry is not in Finland’s interests. (Pesonen 2020)

Especially, the conglomerates integral relation to the value chains of the national economy and, by extension, its wider role in the ‘financial reproduction’ of society is invoked. This can be interpreted as a political gesture of centering the forest industry’s economic interests as vital in the provisioning of public goods. Thus, UPM sought to present forest industry’s interests as being integrally linked to the public’s interests through economic interdependencies.

The closure announcement ignited an intense media cycle and a government response. During her emergency visit to the Kaipola factory, PM Marin called for corporate responsibility amidst the corona pandemic, stated that paper mills had been profitable, and that the government would support the local and regional economy and the factory workers during the closure period (Heikkilä 2020). In a television interview later that week, Marin stated that UPM had generated 1.4 billion in profit in 2019 while also increasing its dividends to shareholders in recent years. She also speculated whether layoffs and factory closures are too easy in Finland from a legislative standpoint compared to other EU countries such as Germany (Toivonen and Vaaherkumpu 2020). The closure was interpreted by Marin as a politically strategic decision:

While we are in a very deep crisis and a tough economic situation, one can raise the question of why now? Was it necessary to close a profitable factory right now? (Toivonen and Vaaherkumpu 2020)

The opposition parties and business interests responded. National Coalition MP and former minister Paula Risikko accused the prime minister of ‘inciting class struggle’ (Tikka 2020):

… the employers’ interests are the employees’ interests and employees’ interests are the employers’ interests. And both the interests of employers and employees are, of course, Finnish interests.
Risikko’s definition is a prime example of a depoliticizing manoeuvre through which the public interest is moved to a terrain already exhausted of political conflict and conflated with the strategic interests of key capital fractions. The rhetorically pejorative mobilization of the term ‘class struggle’ in the case of conflicting interests of employers and employees relies on an illusory clear-cut division between the economic and the political. Through this manoeuvre, the critical remarks of the PM regarding UPM’s actions are presented as being outside the pre-given consensus of the corporate polity.

National Coalition’s vice-chair Antti Häkkänen also invoked the public interest in defending a ‘realistic’ economic approach to ensuring that Finland stays competitive for businesses (Kervinen 2020). The CEO of the Federation of Finnish Entrepreneurs Mikael Pentikäinen stated that it is not the prime minister’s task to evaluate or give advice on the business decisions of a single company:

If we start shortening working hours or making it harder for companies to layoff staff, it will lead to a situation where Finland is an even worse place to do business and invest. (Häkämies cited in Thomsson 2020)

The CEO of the Confederation of Finnish Industries Jyri Häkämies also chided the prime minister’s critical tone and called for a cooperative approach while arguing that there is no need for stricter legislative protection against layoffs (Kervinen 2020).

UPM’s Jussi Pesonen also responded to PM Marin in a television interview on September 5th and further expanded on the conglomerate’s decisions (Vaaherkumpu and Keränen 2020). He denied the fact that Kaipola was profitable and stated that according to the latest quarter, UPM’s paper production was unprofitable in general. Furthermore, he claimed that the only reason for closure specifically in Finland was cost competitiveness and the fact that recent coalitions have not been able to implement labour market and tax reforms, opting instead to defer the reforms, raise taxes and incur more debt. He also presented the possibility that Kaipola would not be the last mill closed in Finland and other factories might be next in line. From the perspective of politics of depoliticization, the more interesting statement is the one Pesonen promotes as the solution to this problem:

I have tried to ignite a conversation on the need to develop economic policies that would extend beyond governmental coalition periods which would enable profitable industry and investment. Questions about industry, tax and labour market reforms would be included in that. (Vaaherkumpu and Keränen 2020)

Clearly, these economic policies extending beyond coalition periods are premised on the idea of delimiting the political manoeuvring space of coalitions and, thus, strengthening the role of forest capital in determining its own operational environment. This would mean first and foremost curbing the power of the relatively strong labour unions in the forest industry (see next section) and determining favourable tax treatment of the industry, e.g. exempting it from the increased tax burden related to climate measures.

On the basis of the preceding analysis, one can recognize two different conceptions of public interest politics coming into conflict with one another in the Kaipola closure case. First is the corporate polity model of neoliberal competitiveness through which the specific economic interests of the export fractions of capital are framed as vital for the general functioning and the well-being of society. These economic interests are elevated to a central position in arguing that the forest bioeconomy should constitute a new growth model that unifies capital, labour and the state. At the helm would be the large forest conglomerates that would be able to determine the favourable political conditions of business or, if necessary, outsource their operations. Second is the more traditional social democratic model that highlights a working compromise between capital, labour and the state in which all parties of ‘the tripartite’ sacrifice some of their goals. PM Marin’s approach represents this model. This approach was by no means as politically radical as it was framed, and it would at most denote a reference to the tripartite agreements that were in effect between 1967 and 2007. Thus, it seems that the hair-trigger response against rearticulations
of public interest politics has been primed with the two-decade long sedimentation of the corporate polity.

6.3. Forest industry’s withdrawal from collective bargaining

October 1st, a month after the Kaipola closure, the Finnish Forest Industries Federation – the employer organization of the forest industry – announced its withdrawal from collective bargaining with the labour unions (FFIF 2020c). The current collective agreements are valid 15–27 months and after their termination the forest industry employers will transfer their bargaining process to company-by-company basis. The decision is historic as FFI is the first employer organization in Finland to withdraw from collective bargaining after its establishment in the 1940s. The federation’s withdrawal is part of the same cost competitiveness strategy adopted by UPM, but on an industry wide scale. The decision was framed through a growth framework:

The Finnish forest industry is building a new kind of cooperation to enable business growth and future investments in Finland. The renewal of the industry requires safeguarding the Finnish national interests in the EU, implementing Finland’s carbon neutrality goal in a way that safeguards competitiveness, and structural reforming of collective bargaining. The industry wants to ensure the success of the Finnish and Finnish forest industries. In the world of climate change, the growth opportunities of the forest industry are significant – the climate benefits offered by Finnish companies’ wood-based products are considerable … Implementing the climate roadmap requires decisions that strengthen competitiveness and enhance the growth of Finnish forests. (FFIF 2020c)

Central here are the emphasized national interests connected to the continued economic growth and success of the industry. Bioeconomy is framed as the climate neutral growth opportunity for the national economy that replaces the current fossil-based economy, conveniently omitting the increased felling and the deterioration of forest ecologies and carbon sinks (Kröger and Raitio 2017). Forest industry’s move away from collective bargaining in October has also had larger ramifications as other employer organizations have seen this as an opening move: Technology Industries of Finland announced its exit from collective bargaining in March 2021 (Kukkonen 2021).

The Kaipola closure case and the withdrawal from collective bargaining show that the role of the forest industry has been profoundly political in attempts to frame its economic strategies through public interest politics and centering its economic interests as vital for the ‘national economy’. This political role has been activated in a time where a clear candidate that unifies state policy and economic strategy as a future growth model has not yet emerged. The politics of the bioeconomy have been explicitly connected to the Center Party’s agenda and the former coalition attempted to solidify the bioeconomy growth model as a state project. The current coalition’s less than enthusiastic approach to bioeconomy creates the political impetus for the industry to guard its interests by politicizing its strategic decisions. The long-term interest guarded by the actions of UPM is the imaginary of corporate polity and the relations between key industries, interest groups and the state defined through it. The actions against labour unions are better explained through the political project of restoration of class power, rather than through economic necessities. The current coalition government’s emphasis on social functions of the state at the cost of austerity goals are perceived to contradict the policies of enhancing competitiveness, which gives the central capital fraction an impetus to try and discipline the government that has strayed from the ‘elite consensus’.

7. Conclusions

7.1. Conflicting notions of public interest at the centre of public interest politics

The public debate on Kaipola plant closure exercised significant pressure on the PM Marin’s government. In the debate, the perception that UPM’s decision was economic and its timing decided by the business cycle in conjuncture with the unfavourable regulation were largely taken for granted,
and the government was forced to react to the events the best it could. The debate took place in an already depoliticized discursive environment where market competition putatively created a delimited economic rationality that should have determined the government policies and actions as the guardian of the public interest. At the same time, it is clear that the actions of the forest conglomerate and its proponents were politicizing the government policies, delimiting their time–space of action and pressurizing government to adopt ‘business friendly’ policies, in the exact sense of the politics of depoliticization (Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019).

The closure decision was known to be unpopular and the timing could not be worse for the society struggling in recession brought by the corona pandemic. An obvious angle in the actions of UPM was to shift the blame on the harmful effects of the closure to the government by referring to the deficiencies of regulation in the face of the market pressure. It is not evidently clear how well this blame game succeeded in the popular opinion, but at least the public claims accusing the government received wide circulation and resonated with the coordinated online harassment of government ministers in social media (Van Sant, Fredheim, and Bergmanis-Korāts 2021). In any case, the forest conglomerate decided the situation was opportune for advancing the strategic goal of cutting the paper production capacity and seeking political advantage. The strategic and political goals were threefold: first, to affect the regulation of industry’s operations; second, to set the scene for the withdrawal from collective bargaining as a key measure to curb the power of the labour unions and to enhance cost competitiveness; and third, to bring the government coalition back in line with the long-term elite consensus on competitiveness-as-public interest.

In the debate, the definition of public interest in terms of the corporate polity imaginary collided with the definition of public interest as the welfare of society coordinated and negotiated by and through the state. The Marin’s government emphasizes an inclusive imagery of public interest by focusing on climate policy, just transition, rule of law and labour market equality as its strategic themes (Valtioneuvosto 2019). Downplaying the corporate interests of established fractions of capital and placing them in an instrumental rather than a pivotal role has aroused their resentment, not least by going against the project of restoration of class power that can be said to have motivated the political intervention by a key industry. However, as the case demonstrates, for the key capital fractions such an approach already indicates a breach of the neoliberal consensus.

A political outcome of the debacle was seen on May 2021 when the news broke on active lobbying for forestry interests in the European Commission by the Prime ministers Marin and her Swedish counterpart Stefan Löfven. The context of the lobbying is the EU effort to create a classification system of environmentally sustainable economic activities. The Prime Ministers called for relaxation of detailed requirements for forestry, which was seen to go against the environmental commitments of both governments (Vänttinen 2021; Kantola 2021). In our interpretation, Marin’s decision to turn against the goals of its key coalition partners and to do the forest industry’s bidding was secured by a successful campaign of exerting political pressure that began on earnest with the Kaipola closure.

The context of the actions of the Finnish and Swedish prime ministers is of course the long-term policy on forest issues advocated by the Nordic countries in the EU framework. For example, the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (EU-LULUCF) accounting has been an object of intensive lobbying. The EU as transnational site of negotiation and as a source of legislation illuminates well the complexity of actors involved in the regulation of political economy. In the context of EU forest policy, Finland and Sweden have acted as a coalition, and these state policies have been affected by a variety of actors both in their national contexts, and some with direct access to the EU forums. In case of Finland, such influential actors or ‘stake holders’ in forest issues include Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) as the Finnish participant in wider frameworks like the NSF and the CEPF, the Finnish Forest Industry federation as well as various environmental groups. Against the background of this well-established actor network in forest policy, there is a strong path-dependency restricting the
manoeuvring space of the Finnish government. Even so, and probably in relation to relative strengths of the parties forming the Finnish coalition government, the key forest industry actors went through the trouble of political intervention for reproducing the corporate polity focus on competitiveness.

7.2. Public interest politics as research perspective

Based on the analysis, we argue for an inclusion of the public interest politics as a perspective in depoliticization research. Analytically and methodologically the focus on public interest politics can bring to the fore the current societal relations and constellation of forces between key economic actors, political and state elites, interest groups, regional authorities and economic actors as well as the wider public. In Table 3, we bring together the empirical analysis with the tripartite division of public interest politics and seek to outline the potential of our approach as a research perspective.

In our conception, the public interest appears as an ‘empty signifier’ and indeed ‘illusory’ as it forcefully delimits the scope of participants and articulations – the metaphorical terrain – that are deemed politically serious. Public interest is never able to fully exhaust the interests at play in any given polity. On the other hand, the notion seems to contain a binding force that obliges political actors to engage in public interest politics and in definitional struggles over its contents.

The analysis of the political role of forest industry in Finland and the ability of different social strata to historically cohere behind forest-based accumulation show how the current conflicts regarding the bioeconomy and paper mill shutdowns became attached to public interest politics. The role of forests as the central natural resource and a form of ‘public wealth’ highlights this point.

Thus, public interest politics cannot be reduced to a merely depoliticizing manoeuver, but rather it needs to be understood through the dialectic movement of depoliticization and repoliticization. UPM’s strategy can be recognized as an attempt of shielding ‘the economic’ from ‘the political’ by suggesting economic policies and regulation schemes that would extend beyond governmental

Table 3. The tripartite division of public interest politics through the lens of the empirical analysis

| Terrain of political struggles | Mode of doing politics | Method of enquiry |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| **Governmental coalition**     | Contours of public interest politics legitimize the strategic direction of state policies | In parliamentary politics: Signalling allegiances to voter-bases and forming alliances with extra-parliamentary actors | Points towards analyzing public interest as a mechanism of political bloc formation |
|                               | ‘Neutral State’ as the representative of public interest and arbiter among struggling classes (Poulantzas 1978) | Coalition politics at the conjuncture of various social forces | Brings to fore how public interest functions as shorthand signaling of political allegiances |
| **Forest capital**            | Corporate polity aids in equating the interests of key capital fractions as the public interest | Actively seeking to further its class interests through de- and repoliticization | Points towards analyzing the economization of public interest |
|                               | Seeking to create a terrain of arm’s length policies and regulation while tapping into beneficial state investment | Invoking the role of the financial reproduction of society | Brings to fore how capital fractions seek to position their economic interests in relation to the state and civil society |
| **Labour unions**             | Defending the labour interests and the practice of labour negotiation | In defensive mode and relying on the institutionalizations established during Keynesian consensus of the post-war social contract | Points towards analyzing the calcification of the social power of labour interests |
|                               |                                                      |                                                                 | Brings to fore how labour interests have been evacuated from public interest politics |
coalition periods; one manoeuver for ‘arm’s length’ policies. UPM first sought to politicize its closure decision in the public sphere through a conflict with the governmental coalition while also attempting to sediment the continuation of the corporate polity by ‘developing economic policies that would extend beyond government coalition periods’.

We suggest that the public interest politics, conceived as a terrain of political struggles, a mode of political action, and a method of enquiry is a useful perspective for analyzing the contradictions concerning ‘the economy’ as the dominant public concern in the three interconnected fields of capital as a social relation, environmental policy, and spatial relations. Capital as social relation consists of the contradiction between capital and labour and the consequent class relations that have been our focus in the current paper. Environmental policy is becoming ever more relevant field of struggle concerning the public interest as the manifold environmental crisis affects everyone although in vastly uneven ways (foregrounded, e.g., in the discourse of just transition). The spatial relations concern the success or failure of regional economies and with them regional communities, which raises questions related to uneven development, spatial divisions of labour, and spatial justice.

Based on the preceding discussion, the specific relevance of public interest politics relates to the necessity of public negotiation of material interests. The relevant contradiction in the matter is between legitimation attempts based on depoliticizations and the openly political articulation of particular interests that are presented to public scrutiny and debate. In our view, the public interest has been too lightly dismissed as a readily depoliticized notion, yet at the same we recognize the necessity to lift the spell of depoliticization surrounding it by focusing on its political use. For example, breaking the calcification of the labour movement would likely entail a change from defending its sectoral bargaining positions towards articulating the worker’s interests and societal position through public interest politics.

The debate on the content of public interest is becoming increasingly relevant given the accentuating contradictions between environmental necessities, economic development, and social cohesion. Public interest merits attention as the focus of political debate, as it holds potential for providing at least a narrow common ground for rational debate in the circumstances of political polarization.

Notes

1. A fully fleshed out exegetic analysis of public/private (and general/particular) interests in Gramsci and Marx would merit a text of its own. In the context of this article, these figures are brought up to connect the analysis to its intellectual lineage and to demonstrate that the tripartite division developed can be developed out of this theoretical tradition.

2. Especially the sawmill industry has sounded the alarm on the unbalanced market of raw materials where the big conglomerates are able to dominate the wood purchases from forest-owners and control sawlog and pulpwood prices (Hänninen 2018; Järvinen 2020).

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