

# Not A Clear Line

## The post-growth spectrum in Germany lacks an anti-fascist consensus, and the Far Right knows how to use it

*Felix Wilmsen\**

**Abstract:** Attempts by Neo-Nazis and the “intellectual” New Right to take over post-growth ideas have become more frequent in Germany. Far-Right members have referred to key figures of the post-growth spectrum to call for racist segregation and population politics in the name of ethnic or ›cultural‹ homogeneity. What might read like common growth criticism follows a mimicry strategy: the adaptation of post-growth rhetoric is intended to transport and normalise their inhuman ideas. While some post-growth proponents have spoken up about it, most of them with a feminist and capitalist-critical background, the majority ignores or plays down the issue. In this article, I argue that the post-growth spectrum in Germany should examine the integrability of its ideas and rhetoric in the field of Far-Right ideologies and draw a clear line. An emancipatory growth criticism should not play out the ecological crisis against struggles for social justice. It needs an anti-fascist consensus.

**Keywords:** Far Right, Anti-fascism, Post-growth, Degrowth, Germany

### Introduction

In autumn 2012, a certain Landolf Ladig wrote in the German neo-Nazi magazine *Volk in Bewegung*, “the post-growth economy with its appreciation of regionality, variety, non-alienation and its ideas for land and monetary reform could be easily integrated into the world view of the identitarian opposition to the current system” (Ladig, 2012: 15). Ladig explicitly praises the model of the prominent German growth critic Niko Paech. Under the slogan “Liberation from Excess”, Paech (2012) relies on regional self-sufficiency and frugal lifestyles to break away from the ecologically destructive growth paradigm. A declared anti-liberal, Ladig wants to use Paech’s model to counter the liberal and growth-friendly programme of the Green Party. Touting a “space-oriented”, regionalised economy, he aims to “recapture the ecological mission” from “left-wing ecologists” (Ladig, 2012: 13). Such an economy could not be focused on economic growth, he argues, because there is no absolute decoupling from resource consumption. Instead of a globalised economy, he aims for a “a multiplicity of sub-global economic areas« that should be” in line with established cultural areas« (Ladig, 2012: 15).

Thanks to the linguistic analyses of sociologist Andreas Kemper (2019), it is considered highly probable that “Landolf Ladig” is an alias of Björn Höcke: a Far-Right figurehead of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* who made a name by calling the Holocaust memorial in Berlin a ›monument of shame‹ (Oltermann 2017) among other scandals. While Höcke denies being Ladig, he has referenced Paech’s post-growth economy under his real name, too (Kemper, 2019). This may come as a surprise for some as his party platform is not suspicious of being growth-critical. However, it is

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\* Artec Sustainability Research Center. University of Bremen. Email: felix.wilmsen@uni-bremen.de.

less surprising that of all possible currents of the German post-growth spectrum Höcke makes use of the sufficiency-oriented version to which Paech's work is counted. It makes such appropriation easy. In Paech's post-growth economy, ecological constraints take precedence over social justice (Paech, 2016). Social power relations, especially gender issues, are left out (Dannemann & Holthaus 2018). The responsibility for social change lies with the individual who must radically reduce their consumption. An avant-garde should exemplify the necessary lifestyle changes and prepare for the ecological collapse in parallel social niches, strengthened by regained craftsmanship skills (Paech, 2016).

The post-growth economy also includes regional currencies with a negative interest rate to eliminate a structural growth driver. Paech (2006, 2008) refers to the monetary theorist Silvio Gesell who developed this ›shrinking money‹ in 1916 for his concept of a *Natural Economic Order* (Gesell 1958). With the negative interest rate Gesell wanted to reduce all monetary assets to ensure equal conditions in the Social-Darwinist struggle for survival. Historically, his criticism of interest proved to be compatible with anti-Semitic thinking (Geden, 1999; Altvater, 2004). The fact that there is not a word about this in Paech's work accommodates Ladig's deficient criticism of capitalism. According to him, the end of the medieval interest prohibition allowed for “cancerous growth in all directions”, which he sees as a “characteristic of our degenerate epoch of civilisation” (Ladig, 2012: 14).

In an article for the German weekly *Die Zeit* from 2017, Paech warned against attempting to achieve global justice through »cultural homogenisation« and described a “culturally destructive pull” that Europe's consumer freedoms exerted on the rest of the world – in his view, a cause of flight migration (Paech, 2017). Such incautious language reminds of the racist ethnopluralism of the so-called ›intellectual‹ New Right (the German version of the Nouvelle Droite in France and the Alt-Right in the US), according to which “naturally grown cultures” around the globe should not mix (Hufer, 2018). Such ambiguities must be critically reflected in the post-growth spectrum. While a growth criticism directed against the imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen 2018) in the Global North has the potential for a strong global justice perspective, playing out the ecological crisis against struggles for social justice may easily attract the Far Right.

**Image 1: A "natural" division? Far-right growth criticism is highly exclusive and a threat to social justice. Author: Eveline de Bruin on Pixabay**



### **Politically, “growth” is open in all directions**

The sufficiency-oriented current is a source of concern for feminist and capitalism-critical post-growth proponents. Paech is still the most prominent growth critic in the German-speaking media, not least because he introduced his version of the French *Décroissance* thinking to Germany labelled as “Postwachstum” (post-growth) around 2006. Since then, the debate has become more diverse, and representatives of other currents have been tough on Paech’s one-sided sufficiency orientation.

His work, however, is only one example of a much deeper problem. “Growth” can mean all sorts of things: an increase in production; an increase in the throughput of matter and energy that are extracted from the global ecosystem as resources during production and consumption and returned as waste (Daly, 1996); an increase in demand as a result of consumer promotion and status competition (Rosa, 2014) – or an increase in population. With such a broad range of meanings, the term is equally open to the political Left and Right (Eversberg 2018).

This becomes particularly clear when the supposed issue of ‘overpopulation’ is considered. Herman Daly, a much-cited growth critic from the US, regularly attracts attention with calls for immigration stops and national population limits. He regards both as conditions for a Steady-state Economy. Such a stabilised economy requires a stable population to keep its ecological consumption constantly low, he argues. (Daly 2006, 2015). Consequently, “mass migration” (Daly, 2015: 130) to countries whose population is solely growing through immigration would have to be prevented. Instead of emigrating, Daly says, people should simply cope with the situation they are born into (Daly, 2015).

In Germany, such misanthropic arguments are gladly taken up by Far-Right activists to discriminate against refugees and other migrants and to call for closed borders and swift deportations. *Sezession*, an important magazine and debate blog for New Right “theorists”, features many examples where growth-critical arguments provide the foundation for racist, anti-migrant slurs. In 2015, Felix Menzel, a former activist of the Far-Right *Identity Movement*, argued in a series of articles titled *Wachstumskritik* (growth criticism) that people from countries with a lower level of consumption would cause higher total consumption globally when migrating to richer countries by adapting their consumption patterns. Therefore, they should be kept out of Germany – not least to protect “us Germans” and “our culture” (Menzel 2016) from foreign influence. He draws “evidence” for his argument from Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity Without Growth* (2011). A further example is Jonas Schick, a fellow activist of the *Identity Movement*, who has published commentaries on Germany’s climate policies, directly referring to Daly and Paech (Schick, 2019a, b, c). It seems that *Sezession* is becoming more interested in occupying recent ecological issues.

Another weak spot are concepts of “local economies”. These play a critical role for most growth critics because of their shorter value chains among other benefits (Paech, 2012; Muraca, 2015; Schneider & Nelson, 2019). Combined with local patriotism and autarky efforts, these concepts can also be integral to politics of closure (Muraca, 2015; Gorostiza, 2019). When Alain de Benoist, a mentor of the Nouvelle Droite, published the growth-critical book *Demain, la Décroissance!* in 2007, he attempted to introduce the racist concept of ethnopluralism into the post-growth discussion via demands for deglobalisation and culturally homogenous, self-sufficient regions. A German translation was published two years later (Benoist, 2009). *Décroissance* pioneer Serge Latouche was enthusiastic enough about it that he refused to distance himself from Benoist and instead recommended his attitude be reassessed (Schmid, 2016).

That the proximity of one-sided sufficiency-oriented and localist ideas to Far-Right thinking does not remain theoretical can be witnessed in several rural areas of Germany where ethnic settlement projects are spreading at increasing speed (Speit, 2019). The romanticising of a communal, pre-modern, rural life, animal protection, and even veganism are no independent features of left-wing environmentalism but have been present in the German “völkisch” (ethnic) movement since the late 19th century. The issue of shared ideas with the Far Right is by no means limited to growth criticism. It concerns the entire environmental movement (Röpke & Speit, 2019).

### **Far-Right appropriation is little discussed**

In the German-speaking world, some growth critics have warned against playing attempts of Far-Right appropriation down (Muraca, 2015; Habermann & Humburg, 2017; Brandt & Krams, 2018; Eversberg, 2018). Herman Daly and Alain de Benoist have been disputed in the international degrowth community. For example, the ecological economist Giorgos Kallis (2018) has argued against a supposed ecological justification for closed-border policies. Other degrowth activists and researchers are developing concepts of local economies that do not amount to exclusion and closure (Veillot et al. 2015; Schneider & Nelson, 2019). The *Décroissance* thinker André Gorz warned as early as 1987 that self-sufficient communities can become prisons for their members (Gorostiza, 2019). In Germany, the Degrowth Summer Schools, which are hosted annually as part of the climate camps, have also taken up the issue. The proximity of parts of the post-growth spectrum to the climate justice movement seems to pay off here.

At the same time, it becomes clear that these debates have not arrived in the broader post-growth spectrum. They are predominantly led by feminist und capitalism-critical groups from the more radical degrowth community. These groups often take growth criticism only as one possible approach to a more structure-oriented questioning of capitalism and hierarchy (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016; Schoppek, 2018). In the case of the climate justice movement, this is also a strategic choice to remain more accessible to the general public than groups promoting an anti-capitalist agenda more aggressively (Brand & Krams, 2018). In contrast, sociologist Dennis Eversberg (2018) has shown that the social-liberal current of the German post-growth spectrum, which aims to make existing institutions independent from growth through liberal reforms, has so far only issued blanket warnings not to get involved with right-wing populists. Meinhard Miegel, a conservative growth critic with a controversial austerity agenda, only seems to reject the barbaric populist style but cannot bring himself to take a clear stance. Niko Paech has not commented on the appropriation of his work by the Far Right either. A survey among the participants of the 4th International Degrowth Conference, which took place in Leipzig in 2014, showed that about a fifth of the respondents fall into the category of the “Sufficiency-Oriented Critics of Civilization” (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2017: 348). This group is strongly oriented towards Paech's work and must be regarded as particularly vulnerable to appropriation.

In Germany, the current attitude of many growth critics toward their appropriation by the Far Right is ignorant, naive or downplaying. There is no anti-fascist consensus. What the lack of demarcation can lead to could be witnessed until recently in Italy, where the partly growth-critical *Cinque Stelle* hauled the neo-fascist *Lega* into government, paving the way for the deadly closure policy of then-Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini (Eversberg, 2018). The advances by the New Right should not be trivialised either. What might at times read like common growth criticism follows a mimicry strategy (Salzborn 2017): the adaptation of a post-growth rhetoric is intended to transport and normalise their inhuman ideas, making resistance more difficult.

## **Towards an emancipatory criticism of growth**

Directed against the imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen 2018) in the Global North, which generates and reproduces inequalities, conditions of exploitation, and externalises ecological and social costs, growth criticism can be a strong global justice perspective. Instead of reducing this potential to an individualistic “doing less” and depoliticising it, as Paech does, such a perspective must focus on the conditions for a good life for all. This means to call into question the capitalist mode of production as a whole. The strength of such an emancipatory growth criticism lies in taking the insufficient decoupling of resource consumption and economic growth seriously, while not playing out the ecological crisis against struggles for social justice and human rights, as the Far Right does.

Where individual groups of people and their bodies are declared an ecological problem, where local economies are accompanied by racist exclusions, or where a backwards-looking critique of civilisation delegitimises the emancipatory struggles of marginalised groups, the entire post-growth spectrum must draw a clear line. Otherwise, groups fighting for the rights of refugees and migrants or queer-feminist movements, who cannot afford such ambivalences in the face of authoritarian state repression and frequent right-wing attacks, cannot be expected to cooperate with growth-critical groups.

Growth critics need to examine the integrability of their ideas and rhetoric in the field of Far-Right ideologies. This requires the exposure and demarcation of inhuman positions as well as solidarity with anti-fascist initiatives. At least in Germany the post-growth spectrum needs an anti-fascist consensus.

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