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A sustainable myth: A neo-Gramscian perspective on the populist and post-truth tendencies of the European green growth discourse

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ABSTRACT

In the search for environmentally sustainable economic paradigms, the green growth approach has been developed by the EU and economic networks, as part of a wider sustainability discourse. While the EU repeatedly promotes sustainable development in the context of its greened hegemonic economic discourse, its member states' frustrations regarding the EU's integrative policies have been a breeding ground for counter-hegemonic populism. Such anti-EU and typically right-wing populism promotes national and conventional modes of energy production that is emancipated from foreign providers, science, and EU legislation; and it reveals post-truth tendencies in the sense that it relativizes conventional knowledge as well causation and correlation. In this paper, we seek to uncover the populist and post-truth tendencies within the hegemonic green growth discourse itself. In our paper, we seek to unmask the myth of sustainable energy transformation of the green growth discourse, in terms of a hegemon's engagement University of Twente, Department of Public Adm EU and associated economic networks – with –University of Twente, Department of Public Adm post-truth: we find that post-truth tendencies are not only manifested by counter-hegemonic anti-EU and right-wing populism but is also expressed within the environmental populist expressions of the hegemonic green growth discourse itself.

1. Introduction

The environmental crisis has been increasingly discussed within the frame of a contemporarily apparent global crises discourse [1], yet, it is a crisis that differs from other crises in terms of our perception of it, its unfolding, and our responses to it, with a possible potential to strongly impact on various forms of life on earth. Since 1938, when Guy Stewart Callender found a global temperature increase of 0.3 °C and suggested a causal relation to “the increase in atmospheric dioxide from fossil fuel burning” [2], there has been a long path of rejecting and recognizing scientific evidence for climate change; and more than that, of its origins in human beliefs; in a modern cosmovision that justifies the exploitation of nature and its conversion to capital and energy [3]. Natural resources have fueled (post-)industrial societies for around two and a half centuries and continue to play a key role in economic activities. In the European region, energy independence has become one of the central geopolitical questions – one that is closely connected to science, technology and innovation as the tool for materializing social imaginaries on possible energy futures [4]. With a growing consensus on climate change throughout recent decades, its roots have increasingly been identified in the emission- and waste-intensity of growth-oriented

economic models. Debates led by scientists, NGO's, think tanks and various politicians orbit around the definition and significance of economic growth and promote transformation processes that address patterns of production and consumption, most importantly in the field of energy [5].

In the past decade, green growth has become a fuzzy buzz word. Promoted by international organizations like the World Bank, the UN and the OECD. Green growth is based on the idea of re-orienting economic activities and technological innovation towards resolving environmental and social challenges [6]. Such challenges include sustaining biodiversity and ecosystems, lowering carbon-emissions and waste production, tackling overall climate-resilience, and addressing socio-political issues like giving up emission-intensive labour sectors, tackling poverty and inequality, and generating social justice [7]. In the paradigm of green growth, externalities – such as the pollution of soil, air and water, and the loss of biodiversity – are taken into account when natural resources are subjected to macroeconomic calculations [8]. Also, green growth offers a sustainable destination for the workforce as well as for investment, which are considerations that are key in making energy political decisions in line with the idea of green growth [9]. Similarly, in the green growth discourse, science, technology and

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innovation, including geo-engineering, smart grids and the circular economy [10], are expected to construct and improve renewable and efficient energy solutions that decouple generating energy from environmental degradation. The green growth discourse fosters synergetic projects, with economic activities contributing to environmental protection; and the latter, in turn, contributing to economic growth.

The EU and its associated economic networks like the World Economic Forum and the Brussels Economic Forum are key actors in the construction and reproduction of the green growth discourse. The EU explicitly recognizes the potential of “greening” the economy for both environmental protection and economic growth as it embeds the notion of sustainability into its current Economic Strategy “Europe 2020”. In Europe 2020, the EU sets the target of lowering greenhouse gas emissions by 20% and of increasing both the amount of energy coming from renewables and overall energy efficiency by 20%, for 2020 [11]. In this discursive framework, a more specific strategy, “Energy 2020”, defines the scheme for European energy strategies. In Energy 2020, the EU formulates the challenges of tackling issues concerning sustainability, energy security and economic growth [12]. These constitute the basis for figures and targets to be formulated for each decade until 2050, when the project of “decarbonization” is meant to be completed. Tightened targets for the subsequent decade have been set in 2014, in Energy 2030. Such targets are meant to reduce emission intensity by forty percent and to increase energy savings and the share of renewables by 27%, compared to 1990 levels [13]. In 2016, the European Commission introduced a set of legislative proposals in the “Clean Energy for All Europeans” package, in which it promotes “cross-border cooperation” and “public and private investment in the clean energy sector”, for the sake of integrating the goals of economic growth, environmental protection and consumer satisfaction [14].

The EC and the economic networks are not the only governmental and private actors involved in the construction of the green growth discourse. While the EU repeatedly promotes sustainable development in the context of its own green growth discourse, the individual member states appear frustrated regarding the EU’s integrative policies. Such frustrations have been a breeding ground for anti-EU and typically right-wing populist movements. And they have led to a resurgence of a public and scientific debate about the notion and significance of post-truth, discussed as the political logic of populist argumentation [15]. Anti-EU populism promotes national and conventional modes of energy production – modes that are emancipated from foreign providers, science, and EU legislation (cf. Fraune & Knodt in this special issue [16]). Thus, to make Brexit real, Theresa May has dissolved the Department of Energy and Climate Change and reallocated its tasks to other departments, thereby suggesting an emancipation from the EU’s green growth discourse [17]. In a similar move, the current Polish government breaks with the former Polish support of the European 2030 energy goals, establishing an Energy Ministry that disconnects ecology and economy and embedding energy politics in a geostrategic program of national independence [18]. In France, Front National (FN) argues against the EU’s energy paternalism and promotes the maintenance of publicly managed nuclear energy that guarantees low energy prices for consumers, combined with fostering national research on renewable energies for the distant future [19]. In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) insists that CO₂ is not a pollutant but the precondition for all life on earth; and it claims that climate change is not scientifically backed. Germany, according to the AfD, will not do without coal and nuclear power plants for the time being and should therefore quit the Paris Climate Agreements, stop the process of sustainable energy transformation (*Energiewende*) and cancel related legislations [20].

Given such political developments, it can be argued that the project of the sustainable energy transformation is challenged or at risk, given the struggle for its interpretation (see also Jefferson, Dotterud & Reimer and Fraune & Knodt in this special issue [21]). In this paper, we adopt a neo-Gramscian perspective in an attempt to uncover the populist and

post-truth tendencies within the hegemonic green growth discourse itself. Thereby we add to an increasing body of knowledge on discourse studies in the field of energy research – studies that emphasize the role of the myth in the realm of energy politics, technologies and innovations [22]. In our paper, we seek to unmask the myth of sustainable energy transformation of the green growth discourse, in terms of a hegemon’s engagement – EU and economic networks – with post-truth: we find that post-truth tendencies are not only manifested by counter-hegemonic anti-EU populism but is also expressed within the environmental populist expressions of the green growth discourse itself.

2. The green hegemony: its environmental populism and its post-truth tendencies

From a neo-Gramscian angle, the green growth discourse can be considered as a hegemonic, justificatory discourse through which the so-called “historical bloc” seeks to establish widespread acceptance of the current power relationships, if necessary through coercion [23]. The hegemony of such a discourse means that through the exercise of a particular language a dominating and integrative myth, for example an economic model over alternative models (such as models of de-growth and protectionist models), is reified by the historical bloc. In this paper, we identify the sustainable energy transformation as an example of such a myth. The historical bloc can be defined as a discourse coalition of networks of governmental, corporate and non-governmental actors [24]. Through the green growth discourse, the historical bloc manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules [25]. In Europe, the EU is the hegemon that constructs the green growth discourse, in an attempt to nullify challenges of counter-hegemonic powers that contest or resist the status quo through a “war of positions” [26]. In counter-hegemonic discourses, such as anti-EU and typically right-wing populist discourses, the terms of the green growth discourse are shifted by applying different definitions of the ecological situation. Hence, the language of the green growth discourse and its associated frame of the sustainable energy transformation are challenged [27]. The green growth discourse is, accordingly, a dynamic phenomenon, implicated in a dynamic web of power relations.

From a neo-Gramscian angle, the central theme of any discourse – that is, the “empty signifier” as Laclau and Mouffe call it – is the discursive element that makes its logic hegemonic. The central theme of the discourse can be understood as the discourse’s “programme”, something that gathers and structures all other discursive elements around itself and delivers a logic for discursively relating to each other. The central theme – such as the sustainable energy transformation in the green growth discourse – is empty in meaning, floating, subject to contestation, and typically functions as a discursive myth. Being subject to contestation of its “truth”, the central theme facilitates a so-called “war of position”. The war of position refers to the strategic building of hegemony through the institutionalization and the step-wise integration of counter-hegemonic positions into the hegemonic discourse, with the strategic objective of incrementally altering, reforming or even revolutionizing the character of the hegemonic discourse. Thus understood, post-truth can be regarded as an argumentative instrument. It is a practical tool for restructuring discursive elements into the hegemonic realm – an instrument that in sustainability discourses is mainly associated with right-wing populist rhetoric. Further beyond this connection, Laclau emphasizes that populism does not necessarily refer to a specific party or movement but inheres in the political logic of maneuvering consent in the quest for hegemony [28]. And this fundamental political logic, Laclau explains, works by the establishment of a central theme in a discourse as an empty signifier, serving as the blank page to be filled by the variety of elements it links together.

The green growth myth of sustainable energy transformation seems highly effective in masking contradictions and in unifying diverse and conflicting interests (including the conflicting interests of various industries and member states) within the historical bloc, to the point that

resistance and consent is managed concerning economy and ecology [29]. Through the enactment of such a myth a so-called “post-political condition” is established: the political (and hence also the potentially democratic) dimension of decision-making concerning economic and ecological issues evaporates in the managing of consent through a post-truth mode [30]. Given such neo-Gramscian logic, we construct our theoretical argument on the following assumptions: (1) populism is a counter-hegemonic force that promotes national and conventional modes of energy production; (2) the historical bloc is now compelled to find new ways of maneuvering a new post-political consensus in times of political upheaval; (3) the historical bloc does so through the enactment of the “empty signifier” (the sustainable energy transformation) that is floating to absorb counter-hegemonic discourses in the green growth discourse; (4) in this absorption, the green growth discourse arguments in a mode of post-truth that can be labelled “environmental populist” in the sense that it comes to communicate that environmental protection is impediment to economic growth and environmental protection is running contrary to the will of “the people” (in the sense that it causes disruptions in the labour markets or that a transition poses temporal dangers in terms of energy supply and consumer prices [31].); (5) the sustainable energy transformation can, accordingly, be considered as an environmental populist myth that claims to deliver “green” prosperity, combine economic growth with environmental protection and tackling external threats including the loss of jobs, the loss of prosperity, environmental threats or alternative ways of living [32].

The environmental populism of the hegemonic green growth discourse has its own post-truth tendencies. Post-truth tendencies as such are marked by the attempt to make all claims to knowledge and information suspect, so as to discredit the green growth discourse and to build up an alternative world insulated from alternative myths or even blatant lies – such as the lie of “clean coal” [33]. The post truth-tendency of the green growth’s environmental populism is characterized by the establishment of a so-called particular “regime of facts” that justifies and supports the persistence of the historical bloc’s preferred neoliberal economic model of economic growth and the exclusion of alternative (post-neoliberal or post-capitalist) pathways in the area of energy politics. In the green growth discourse, the post-truth tendency is manifested in various ways; for example, sustainability suddenly becomes part of the new agenda of multinational oil companies which are championed as the green leaders of the sustainable energy transformation, fracking is introduced as a sustainable energy solution, new technologies and the business of geoengineering are meant to provide environmental protection, etc. Such post-truth tendencies, facilitated by the empty signifier (the myth of the sustainable energy transformation), function to secure the continuation of the use of fossil fuels and the nihilist championing of giant energy corporations like BP and Shell – in truth the key producers of environmental degradation – as the leaders of the sustainable energy transformation. The reactionary forces of the green growth discourse are presented as the political subjects of radical change. This post-truth tendency adds a new dimension to the green growth discourse and to the environmentally populist style and repertoire of the historical bloc. In our critical discourse analysis, we seek to find out to what extent and how post-truth has discursively changed the green growth discourse in environmental populist directions.

3. Discourse analytical approach

We borrow and share our neo-Gramscian understanding of discourse from Laclau and Mouffe [34]. We regard the green growth discourse as a dynamic, continuous process of meaning construction that defines and changes the relation between subjects and objects, representing “material reality sui generis” [35]. As such, our discourse analysis aims at revealing the political struggle over which a hegemonic relation between subjects and objects – a political reality marked by domination – is created and chose to put a close eye on economic

forums and networking organizations as a space of exchange and agenda-setting for private and governmental actors of the hegemonic bloc. Economic forums and networks are as yet under-researched in debates on energy transformations but they play an important role in the reproduction of the green growth discourse, including in the reproduction of environmental populism and post-truth tendencies. Economic forums and networks are the places for exchanging the hegemon’s practices, ideas and imaginaries, as well as for formulating hegemonic visions, strategies and agendas.

We collected forty-two documents issued by the EC and associated economic networks that deal with the topic of energy, issued by ten economic networking organizations ranging from 2012 to 2017 – the post-financial crisis period and peak times for populism, including Brexit and the rise of AfD and FN in Europe. We deliberately sought for statements on present positions and future visions concerning energy, as well as reports of networking events, that summarize positions brought forward by related social actors. We included the World Economic Forum (WEF), which has, since its establishment in 1971, emerged with the objective of offering a platform for exchange for various stakeholders [36]. The clique-like framework of the annual meetings in Davos, Switzerland, gives the network an exclusive and elite-like character, which is evident by common terms like “the Spirit of Davos” [37]. The WEF issues competitiveness reports for the EU as well as it formulates major political challenges. In a similar spirit, the Brussels Economic Forum (BEF) stages annual meetings for “top European and international policy makers and opinion leaders as well as civil society and business leaders” [38]. Speeches that accompanied podium debates given by European officials are included in the dataset. With a special focus on energy-related topics, the European Energy Forum (EEF) offers a platform for (sponsored) dinner debates each month, in which stakeholders can present and debate their projects and visions. These are documented in annual activity reports [39]. The European Energy Network (EnR) takes a more specific focus on sustainable energy. Due to limited availability of its documents, we only added its 2016 consultation paper to the dataset [40]. For stakeholders in nuclear energy, the European Nuclear Energy Forum (ENEF) organizes plenary meetings, which are documented. We have selected three (2013, 2015 and 2017) of them for our analysis [41]. The European Business Network for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR Europe) describes itself as the “leading European business network for Corporate Social Responsibility” and functions as a platform for business interaction. It is a platform that uses the global sustainability agenda to stress the social, economic and environmental relevance of corporate activities [42]. We have selected their “Enterprise Europe Network 2020 Manifesto” from 2015 as well as two press releases from 2016 and 2017 for our analysis [43]. The European Business Network (EBN) produces market observations and economic impact reports. It is included for its focus on innovation, which is deeply connected to transformation. We select the reports of 2013, 2016 and 2017 for analysis [44]. The European Economic Network (EUREN) is an actor that mainly communicates half-annual forecasts. We include their summer forecasts from 2012 onwards, as well as their 2016 winter forecast, due to availability of data [45]. Business Europe (BE) is an association that represents European companies in Brussels. It issues annual position papers, which form part of the textual data we aim to analyze [46]. The Energy Infrastructure Forum (EIF) has issued a report, which accompanies the Copenhagen Forum of June 2016 [47]. Apart from these documents, Europe 2020, and especially Energy 2020, are included for analysis – these policy programs provide the discursive framework for the other stakeholders of the historical bloc.

Given our aim of unmasking the environmental populist and post-truth tendencies of the green growth discourse, we opted to perform a critical discourse analysis [48]. The design of the steps of our analysis is inspired by Siegfried Jäger’s focus on the modes of articulation of the “social acting subject” as the “constructor” of discourse. Following his suggestions, we divide the analysis into a structural analysis, in which

the content and context of the documents we have collected stand in the center; and into a language-oriented step, focusing on the argumentative enactment of “the sustainable energy transformation”. Laclau and Mouffe’s “nodal point”, “empty signifier” and “myth” serve as the analytical categories applied, which we briefly outline for clarification. In the realm of the discursive as in the realm of the social as such, the meaning of the discourse is permanently contested; and so is its identity. This phenomenon is what Laclau and Mouffe label “floating”, as the signifiers of the discourse – that is, the terms that bestow the elements of the discourse (a topic-related area of the social) with meaning – are permanently rearticulated and put into relation to one another. “Nodal points”, Laclau and Mouffe point out, refer to “privileged discursive points” that represent those terms and topics that structure the discourse, like the knots of a net. The nodal points appear in the form of dominant or often-repeated demands, positions and characterize the discourse’s content in relation to one another. This net of relations is structured around or by a central theme, the “empty signifier”, which is the element of the discourse that gives the discourse its identity. The sudden occurrence of elements of the discourse that cannot be integrated into the realm of the established identity, such as counter-hegemonic discourses, requires the alignment of such counter-hegemonic elements with the help of the “empty signifier” in form of a myth. Given its fundamental emptiness, the empty signifier can serve as a “surface” to accommodate the range of diverse visions and positions into a “new objectivity by means of the re-articulation of the dislocated elements” [49].

In performing our critical discourse analysis, we first analyze the structure of the green growth discourse. We make use of both quantitative and qualitative insights. We code interest groups (Code 1: “Fossil energy”: oil | gas | shale gas | coal; Code 2: “Renewable energy”: renewable* | wind | solar | hydro | tidal | geothermal | biomass; Code 3: “Nuclear energy”: nuclear) in order to derive insights of the weight that respective positions possess in the discourse, as well as with what point in time and what type of actor such positions can be brought in connection. Second, we focus on the language-oriented aspect of argumentation, in order to understand the populist position and the post-truth tendencies in the green growth discourse. We, therefore, identify discursive elements that function as central motives, as “nodal points” in the argumentation patterns produced within the framework discourse of the European Union that is reproduced by actors in the forums and economic networks. With this second step, we have a closer look on nodal points as central motives and focus on populist and post-truth tendencies of their surrounding argumentation patterns.

4. Post-truth tendencies in Europe’s green growth energy discourse

In this analysis section, the results of our critical discourse analysis are presented. We present our findings in two parts. In the first part we describe the structure of the discourse; in the second part we focus on the use of language, paying special attention to post-truth tendencies in the argumentation for the “sustainable energy transformation”.

4.1. The framework of the green growth discourse

The results presented in this section are based on a quantitative analysis of the data followed by the qualitative examination of relevant text-matches. In this step, the analysis focuses on the guidelines formulated in the European framework discourse and on the interests these guidelines reflect. The EU, sets policy guidelines and produces strategy papers, thereby delivering the hegemonic sustainability frame for action for the associated economic networks.

The hegemonic green growth discourse, as articulated by the EU in Europe 2020 and Energy 2020, includes discussions of energy-related strategies, which are introduced to guide various actors of the “energy mix” into the path of a “sustainable energy transformation”. In the

European strategy papers, the frequently appearing notion of “sustainability” functions as the central discursive theme, the empty signifier, and is predominantly interpreted in the sense of green growth. The “sustainable energy transformation” functions as an extension of this term for the specific discourse on energy. Sustainability is presented in the papers as a new source for economic growth. This discursive phenomenon can be understood as the European Commission’s response to a growing global consent on the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as well to the challenge of regaining economic potential after the financial crisis. The context in which the term sustainability is used rarely connects discursively to the ecological realm. While mentioning “environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and unsustainable use of resources,” the main focus of the strategy papers is global competitiveness to be achieved in Europe through a “lead in the market for green technologies”, tackling climate change with the “potential of new technologies”, “improving resource efficiency”, and formulating new “energy goals”. A paradigm shift in the full sense of the sustainable development agenda is missing. The updated energy goals are formulated in terms of an increase of the share of renewables to 20% and a possible reduction of oil and gas imports by 60%, backed up by arguments of financial savings and energy security. The central environmental argument brought forward – not for a lower share of exploited and imported fossil fuels but for the increased share of renewable energies within Europe’s ‘energy mix’ – are the state of its emission-intensity. In line with the material reality of existing energy production sites and in line with the status quo of current energy consumption patterns, the European Commission formulates a sustainability strategy fostering the maintenance of such sites as well as their complementation by renewables.

Geopolitical and economic objectives for energy policy prevail in the green growth discourse. Such objectives are related to environmental concerns as strategized in Europe 2020 and Energy 2020. The geopolitical realm is foremost expressed through the objective to ensure the coverage of the European energy demand through external and internal sources – with the ambition to secure the “uninterrupted physical availability of energy products” – and functions as a central theme of European energy politics. As suggested by the European Commission’s energy strategy, energy policy shall be programmed in such a way that it meets “social and climate goals”. Security of fossil fuels plays a central role in this programming, as oil might be scarce in the future. Hence, Europe’s energy dependency on external sources remains a weak spot. One consideration is to keep up good political relations with third countries, as well as with energy companies who act within and supply the European common market. Another one is, as communicated by the discursive framework of the green growth, is a vast potential for energy independence hidden in the soils of Europe itself. If natural gas can prove to supply energy in a reliable manner, which is also seen as depending from the construction of necessary material infrastructure, it “will continue to play a key role in the EU’s energy mix in the coming years”, as claimed. The turn towards shale gas within an explicitly “sustainable” energy strategy is also presented as a potential factor that increases political independence. This turn can be understood as a response to recent moves by world powers like the US and China, where the EU’s main worry is losing attractiveness for global investment in its own energy sector.

The fossil energy orientation, which refers to keywords like oil, gas, shale gas and coal, appears by far the most frequently discussed topic in the green growth discourse (it matches roughly 700 times within the documents we analyzed). This phenomenon may signal the discursive domination of a strong interest group as well as a strong examination of the issue on part of its stakeholders. The fossil energy orientation appears comparatively often in early discourses, foremost in the 2014 WEF Competitiveness Report or in the 2012 EUREN forecast, not so much in the two years after; and it reappears more strongly around 2016, for example in the Business Europe’s 2015 position paper, EEF’s Activity Reports from 2015 and 2016 or in the EUREN forecasts of 2016

and 2017. The post-2016 green growth discourse still shows a slight decline in dealing with the issue of fossil energy. Generally, the fossil energy orientation often found its way into the WEF documents and into the position papers of Business Europe and EUREN, in part; EUREN mentions the issue of fossil energy in its economic forecasts utilizing oil prices as an indicator for macroeconomic development. The EEF is the actor that produces most of the discourse on fossil fuels. Neither is the term contained by documents of the CSR network, nor within those of the ENEF or the EU-officials' speeches during the Brussels Economic Forum, who predominantly evaluated the financial crisis, whereas other stakeholders like the ENEF or the EIF mention it scarcely or not at all.

Although not as frequently discussed as fossil energies, renewable energy appears as an often-discussed issue in the documents we analyzed. We found 420 matching locations referring to wind, solar, hydro, tidal, biomass or geothermal power. Before 2016, the topic is picked up 469 times as opposed to 219 mentions afterwards. The discourse on renewables has not significantly declined (roughly 60 – 40). In the pre-2016 period, it has been mostly addressed by the European Energy Forum and within the WEF Competitiveness Reports. After that year, EBN frequently addresses the topic of renewables, as well as the CSR network and the European Energy Network. Across both periods of time, actors like the EUREN, and the BEF leave the issue of renewable energy widely untouched. The nuclear energy orientation is, relative to the foregone two other topics, weakly represented in our data, with as little as 49 matches. A comparison of the frequency of the topics mentions of the times before 2016 and now shows that the topic has been only picked up by nuclear-specific ENEF as well as by the EEF, who invite actors from all spheres of energy politics. The WEF gives the topic one mention within their Competitiveness Reports of 2012 and 2014, respectively, and so does BE in its 2015 position paper.

In sum, the EU's strategy for satisfying the three ambitions of energy policy – the sustainability, security and economic efficiency of energy –, fosters the integration of energy markets and the maintenance and development of secure energy sources. Furthermore, the EU suggests a diversification of sources for its “energy mix” and related scientific research and technological innovation portfolios. These portfolios play a leading role in directing and attracting investment. The EU claims that its energy political objective is to increase the share of renewables within an existing framework of predominantly nuclear and fossil power. The reproduced green growth discourse by the economic networks is predominated by interests from the sphere of renewables and of fossil fuels. As a hegemon, the EU acts to normalize fossil energies (and the pursuit of natural gas) in its discussion of the “sustainable energy transformation”. Nuclear energy appears to have a rather random role within the discursive structure of the green growth discourse, as it is only picked up by actors that are directly involved in nuclear industries. However, all three energy orientations are included in the EU's energy mix – the energy mix can be understood as a narrative that responds to the diversity of stakeholders of the historical bloc concerned. And they all request their attention in the form of investments in industry infrastructure and research that increases their energy-efficiency; and thereby, realize their potential to maintain a role within the European energy regime. In the next section, different nodal points within the green growth discourse are identified.

4.2. *The reproduction of the green growth discourse by economic networks*

In this section, we present the central motives that inform the patterns of argumentation in the reproduction and discursive exploitation of the green growth discourse by economic networks. The first motive has already been introduced in the former section: the ensemble of European energy actors discursively constructed as an “energy mix” to be optimized in terms of emission intensity and share of renewables. The “energy mix” comprises actors from the field of fossil, renewable and nuclear energy. The project of constructing a regime based on

sustainable energy includes actors from all of these energy spheres, which enables such diverse energy political actors to interpret the central discursive theme – the “sustainable energy transformation” – in accord with their own specific energy interests.

A second motive deals with its interpretation in terms of an urgent societal and technological challenge that, on the other hand, cannot be addressed soon (“it will take decades”). This is articulated by the WEF, who in cooperation with McKinsey & Company, refers to Energy & Sustainability as one the major societal and technological challenges that Europe faces. The WEF mainly sees a need “to digitize, decarbonize, decentralize and democratize our energy supply journey” in the context of “smart transition planning”. In 2016, the challenge to transform the European energy production towards less emission-intensity is perceived mainly in terms of an ambiguity between European and national energy objectives. In the discourse, the issue of anti-EU and typically right-wing populism is frequently mentioned by organizations like the WEF, the EEF or Business Europe as one of the political challenges the EU has to face. Apart from that, actors interested in renewable energies mainly focus on practical obstacles in technologically realizing the transformation of energy production, such as the integration of renewables into the existing grid. Other stakeholders see such challenges in terms of promoting conventional, “easier” forms of energy.

A third motive is energy efficiency, whose improvement is taken over especially by stakeholders involved with conventional energies (fossil and nuclear energy). This can be understood as an effort to translate conventional energy production into the green growth discourse. As such, nuclear energy actors emphasize the need to invest in nuclear waste management and in higher safety standards of power plants, being a major aspect of public opposition. Fossil fuel actors, on the other side, are interested in ways to lower the emission intensity of their product. The emphasis on the economic side of the sustainable energy transformation is evident in the widely used vocabulary of competitiveness and economic growth, which we identified as another nodal point. BE (2014) emphasizes that “the European business community is committed to ensure that EU's energy and climate become real drivers for economic growth.” This nodal point is widely picked up by the historical bloc, as it gives energy political actors a strong argument for their respective projects.

Finally, the economic networks' reproduction and exploitation of the green growth discourse can be found in arguments concerning cheap energy prices and uninterrupted market supply. These elements can also be found within the energy agendas of national populist movements, as mentioned in the introduction. In the realm of the national they appear as claims to renationalize energy policies and to pursue conventional modes of energy production and consumption. The competitiveness of the consumer price is discursively constructed as a precondition for the success of renewables. Renewable energy stakeholders therefore mainly highlight addressing the effective integration of renewable energy into existing structures and emphasizing an approach that integrates consumers, as is done, for example, by EIF (2016). What stands out, however, is the focus on natural gas in the role for both economic growth and secure energy supply. In the EU's discursive framework discourse, natural gas is mentioned as an option that can be assessed objectively. The aspect is widely picked up in the notion, as expressed e.g. by Business Europe in 2015, when it argues for “efforts to ensure reliable and long-standing relationships with existing suppliers at the same time developing relations with new suppliers and routes”, for “gas from new regions” and pleas to “set up new gas hubs” in Europe and “facilitate the construction” of new sites. Next to these arguments, environmental concerns are not dominantly brought forward within this objective assessment. They are stated in a vague fashion by promises of “guaranteeing the safety of operations and people” as expressed by IOGP director Roland Foster within a dinner debate at EEF in 2015. Doubts about environmental aspects remain softened, however, under the vision of “developing domestic

production of oil and gas”, “at a time, when security of energy supply has become a keyword in the European institutions”. Statements like these hint at a subordination of environmental consciousness and value not only in relation to generating economic growth in Europe, but also in relationship to Europe’s geopolitical objectives vis-à-vis Russia, Turkey and China.

In sum, the actors of the “energy mix” reproduce and exploit the European framework discourse according to their interests. By interpreting their own energy political projects in terms of green growth, they are able to redefine their position within a transformative energy regime and find their place within the leading thematic of sustainability. In the next section, the discursive enactment of the “sustainable energy transformation” is interpreted in terms of its environmental populist character and post-truth tendencies.

4.3. *The post-truth tendencies of the sustainable energy transformation myth*

In this section, we describe the appearance and instrumentalization of post-truth tendencies in the green growth discourse and point out some relevant discursive motives for this. Spaces like economic forums and networks in which present and future strategies are expressed and exchanged by energy political actors can be understood as manifestation of what Gramsci called the “war of positions”. In this section we seek to show that instead of combating counter-hegemonic interest groups (like anti-EU and right-wing populist forces), counter-hegemonic positions are integrated into the hegemonic green growth discourse, as a manifestation of environmental populism.

Populist movements have, in terms of energy, argued for cheap consumer prices and for cheap energy prices. They pursue conventional and traditional modes of energy production and consumption, for “the people” of the respective nation states. As such, right-wing populist movements are embedded in an overall strategy to emancipate from European, supranational energy policies that, by counter-hegemonic movements, are seen to object national well-being. Cheap energy prices are prioritized next to securing nation-specific traditional labour sectors and industry sites, like coal in Germany and Poland or nuclear energy in France, with the goal of providing energy independently and autonomously from the EU. Within the European energy discourse and within the reproductions of the green growth discourse by economic networks, national circumstances are not explicitly addressed by stakeholders, unless actors mention the need to adapt European energy policies to nation-specific “needs and speeds”, or the need to find measures to integrate national energy markets. Even though geostrategic aspects of energy policy can be considered as an objective shared by both member states and European Union, the motivations differ in their focus on the political position of the European Union in Europe and the nationalist quest for absolute national autonomy. Therefore, the geostrategic aspects of energy policy seem to be located in the sphere of national political campaigning and appear out of place in the European green growth discourse.

A common feature of environmental populism within the hegemonic discourse is its focus on simple and short-term-oriented solutions, rather than on a decision-making based on discussions of more complex chains of causation and corresponding long-term planning. In terms of transformation towards sustainability, the discrepancy between return-oriented economic priorities and such that integrate social, economic and environmental goals into a long-term strategy can be regarded as the weak spot of the green growth discourse that is an easy target for anti-EU and typically right-wing populist interventions. The motive of the “challenge that cannot be addressed soon” therefore deserves a closer inspection. While the European Union puts emphasis on the challenging character of the topic of energy production and consumption, it softens these claims by indicating that the project of transitioning requires a step-by-step-agenda, tying in all types of actors within the “energy-mix”. Rather than emphasizing efforts in terms of

recognition of a societal and technological challenge, the European Commission and the economic networks more frequently pick up the notion of spreading the sustainable energy transformation over a longer time-span. Some find that “the 2025 should be moved to 2030” and see the solution in slow change, highlighting that “a more gradual and more flexible approach does not mean that we have to give up our vision”. Others again understand these elements as both a challenge and as a frame for targeting present action at long-term gains. As CSR (2017) puts it, “to be sure, there are no silver bullets or shortcuts to a sustainable world; we are building for decades.”

This notion is not reflected in the vision created within an EEF dinner debate in 2013, sponsored by EURACOAL, an umbrella organization for the European coal industries, in which then Polish Prime Minister portrays progressive measures for “protecting the climate” as “irrational actions”, for which there is “no need to be taken too rapidly”. While the quote below is from 2013, EURACOAL’s website still promotes the extraordinary and persistent importance of coal for both economic growth and job creation and furthermore, claim its environmental value. This quote illustrates the issue of materializing the energy transformation, whereby existing material capabilities are taken into account but are paradoxically further extended because the challenge cannot be completed in the near future. With a similar rhetoric, former Greenpeace Canada president Patrick Moore, who nowadays advocates the interests of nuclear energy and fossil-driven economic actors, states, in 2015, that though science could point out that an increasing share of pollutants in the air is connected to burning fossil fuels, a direct link to human actions, let alone the actions of energy corporations, is not sufficiently proven. Apart from that, a future of clean coal, it is claimed, is the right focus when thinking about a future of sustainable energy. Other stakeholders of the historical bloc push away their responsibility not only across time but also across space when they interpret energy efficiency in terms of mechanisms like ETS-policies. These contain the idea to trade emissions in the form of certificates (whereas there is a consensus in science that in fact, air pollutants do not move accordingly). BE (2015) most clearly articulates this image of energy efficiency, when it states that “as a market-based and technology neutral policy instrument, the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) has the best potential to reduce GHG emissions cost-effectively and constitutes the market signal to drive low-carbon investments across Europe” (BE 2015).

The nodal point of energy efficiency as a prime necessity appears the key focus in narrating the sustainable energy transformation in the green growth discourse. The consent channels into the perspective, as articulated by BEF (2014), that “undoubtedly, energy efficiency is the way forward.” Scientific research and technological innovation are thereby limited in their task and resources to work on sustainable energy transformations within the given discursive framework if the main ambition rests on the efficiency-improvement of conventional energy. While improving energy efficiency of current energy production and consumption is a crucial aspect in the path towards lowering greenhouse gas emissions, its discursive weight is the subordination of the spectrum of alternative thinkable solutions, as for example its future replacement or a radical reduction of energy consumption. In the green growth discourse, the mode for arriving at a decarbonized economy is to try to withdraw from emission-intensive modes of energy production and redirect investments and research towards strengthening and improving renewable energy systems. Still, indigenous gas exploitation is considered as an option, that “must be assessed in all objectivity”, as is equally the case for nuclear energy. Apart from that, in the green growth discourse, investments into improving the European gas and oil infrastructure as well as technology and innovation capacities are envisaged. Opposed to dramatic references to the importance of energy as they appear in the EU strategy papers – references like energy being “the lifeblood of our society” or “the price of failure” of the European energy strategy is “too high” –, the EU softens its claim immediately by stating, in a rather undramatic fashion, that “it will take decades to steer

our energy systems into a more secure and sustainable path." With an energy mix that is developed into all possible directions, the completion of emission cuts of 85%–90% appears further distant than the year 2050.

Given that the very core of the green growth discourse is the integration of economic and environmental value by creating synergetic projects and policies (in which the environment is defined as a source of economic growth and the economy is defined as a source for "environmental growth", one would expect to find a balance between related arguments. Environmental protection, however, is typically discursively compromised with, or dependent on, its role in competitiveness and economic growth, which functions as a nodal point in Europe's energy discourse. As BE (2016) puts it, "an absolute reduction of energy consumption would provide the wrong incentive to 'consume less' and risk capping future growth prospects instead of 'being more efficient'." This quote illustrates the general nature of this way of argumentation, as more radical environmental decisions, as for example an absolute reduction of energy consumption, are presented in terms of "wrong incentives" and poor "growth prospects". What stands out is that such prospects are unanimously valued over environmental consciousness, despite a wide scientific consensus and call for rethinking this paradigm. This post-truth tendency of the "sustainable energy transformation" by the hegemonic historical bloc goes hand in hand with the idea of an "energy mix": actors are enabled to promote whatever projects with empty signifiers like "sustainability". Despite the strategy papers' specific emphasis on the consideration of social and environmental objectives when designing energy strategies, the green growth discourse, particularly in its reproduced and exploited form, displays a heavy focus on economic growth and geostrategic positioning. Energy actors from the field of renewables focus on the predominant economic model (which is more growth than green) and arrange their discursive constructs accordingly, mainly by framing their sustainable development project's potential value for the European economy.

To sum up our interpretation, the green growth discourse promotes the persistence, and sometimes even the strengthening and widening of conventional energy structures. Accordingly, environmental (as well as social and cultural) objectives are subordinated to economic factors like competitiveness (which partly relate to the geostrategic realm) and growth. This means that the sustainable energy transformation, as well as the accompanying technology that is to make the transformation real in the material sense, is dependent on the economic growth prospective rather than on "truth", knowledge, argument or scientific evidence. This post-truth tendency does not originate in the counter-hegemonic anti-EU or right-wing populist parties and movements but is generated by the environmental populism of the green growth discourse itself. Even those energy political actors that are involved with renewables rely on their successful embedding into the hegemonic economic model and exploit the argumentation patterns that come with this model.

5. Conclusion

Triggered by contemporary concerns regarding the rise of populism in Europe and the resurgence of a public and scientific debate on the significance of post-truth, this paper is a search for post-truth tendencies within the green growth discourse and its myth of the "sustainable energy transformation". Post-truth tendencies appear part of environmental populist positions that are, as we discovered, often articulated by spokespersons of the European economic forums and networks that reproduce and exploit the green growth discourse for their own purposes. Such energy political actors – presented as the leaders of green growth – question the environmental impact of their own decisions, question climate change, and contest the urgency to enroll deep transition processes of the energy system. Their populist strands of argumentation are successfully integrated into the green growth discourse that, to facilitate this integration and reconcile many contrasting energy

political interests, manifests several post-truth tendencies.

The green growth discourse of the EU programs the sustainable energy transformation in terms of firstly, the targets of a gradual emission reduction and increase of energy efficiency; secondly, the diversification of energy sources within and outside Europe as well as the establishment of reliable and cost-efficient energy forms; and, thirdly, the increase of competitiveness in the face of global markets in the European quest for economic growth. By enacting the discursive myth of the "sustainable energy transformation", the EU reconciles opposite positions within the historical bloc: the myth enables the EU to harmonize the environment and the economy on the one hand and it enables the EU to reconcile the interests of a variety of energy political actors through the associated "energy mix". The apparent discursive change in energy production that comes with the inclusion of sustainability into EU agendas like the European economic and energy strategies is still subject to the historical bloc's preferred neoliberal economic model. The green growth discourse simply incorporates new vocabularies and new myths, without affecting the status quo in the field of energy politics. Within the European economic framework agenda, as well as in the discursive practices of EU-associated economic networks, environmental interests remain subordinated to energy political objectives like economic growth and safeguarding geopolitical pole positions. The main environmental motive in the green growth discourse is energy efficiency and the increased integration of renewables into the "energy mix". The green growth discourse communicates that energy efficiency is realized by renewable energy stakeholders of the historical bloc, yet we found, surprisingly enough, that the very same message is communicated by proponents of fossil fuels – actors of the historical bloc that envision a sustainable energy transformation that is based on the myth (or lie) of "clean coal" or on planning natural gas exploitation. In other words, the continuation of fossil fuel as well as the strengthening of renewable energy solutions in the realization of the sustainable energy transformation is discussed in terms of satisfying the economic, technological and geopolitical energy targets of the Union. In the green growth discourse, little argumentation is inspired by environmental justice, for that is a notion that tends to contradict the economic model that is preferred by the historical bloc. Taking environmental justice seriously would require a different economic model.

The post-truth tendency of the hegemonic green growth discourse does not manifest itself in the explicit or blatant challenging of scientific arguments, evidence and predominant truth claims (for instance, in the field of climate change). The post-truth tendency is revealed in the linguistic dynamics of (re-)producing contemporary strategies for the future of the European energy system. These are marked by discursive paradoxes and the introduction of causalities that enable the economic alignment of public and scientific claims for profound transformations towards environmental sustainability. Post-truth tendencies are not only found in environmental populism as such but also in the smooth application of the empty term "sustainability" in the green growth discourse. "Emptiness", in this context, is a notion that refers to a fundamental feature of language, with words becoming programmatic through their use in discourses. In other words, the "sustainable energy transformation" can mean everything and it is subject to energy political power relations, who and what sets the scope of possible definitions. The discursive meaninglessness of "sustainability" has two major consequences. First, its ability to integrate the variety of claims of stakeholders to the European energy political system. Second, the formulation of the "sustainable energy transformation" in terms of enacting an "energy-mix" enables both emerging as well as conventional energy actors of the historical bloc to exploit the green growth discourse and thereby reinforce their own vested interests. The green growth discourse, in its manifestation of post-truth tendencies in the quest for new economic growth, powerfully resists Callender's findings as well as contemporary natural and social science consent on the need for profound changes. The discursive exploitation of the "sustainable

energy transformation”, then, is a major “challenge” when it comes to radically rethinking and restructuring Europe’s energy politics.

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