

A Post-Growth Society for the 21st Century: Opportunities and challenges for Europe

My starting point is that all of us, I think, have extremely good reasons to try to deconstruct the growth narrative. The growth narrative is not anymore helpful to give our societies an orientation. On the contrary, it's dangerous. There are some ideas that are so wrong, that even the opposite is not right and growth is one of these ideas. So I think to answer the growth narrative with a de-growth narrative is not getting to the point because it sticks to the paradigm of just quantitative measurement. But what we have to talk about is not quantity but quality of direction. It's very difficult to construct a non-growth narrative and two phrases have been offered in the presentation in the first part of this event. One was that it could be called a post-growth narrative and one was that it could be called a prosperity narrative. I would clearly opt for the second and I will explain as I go along why that is.

One reason is already obvious: as long as we talk about post-growth, we still take growth as the pivot of our discussion. I want to get beyond that. Then also, we have to take note that this is not the first attempt to deconstruct the growth narrative. Ever since the "Limits to Growth" in the 70ies, there have been these attempts. And as far as I can tell, all of them have failed politically. Not that the analysis wasn't correct, that's not my discussion. But politically they have failed. Why is that? I think to some degree they have failed because they did not manage to communicate well with the majority of our societies. So I think we have to make a very clear and considerate political choice. In trying to come up with a new narrative are we trying to just impose a new vision of a radical break by saying sentences like "Europe must...", "Europe has to...", without being able to answer who are the people that will be affected by what we think has to be done, or will we formulate a new discourse that approaches this from a transformative perspective and I would clearly side with the latter. I am giving a few reasons there.

Number one, this is what Ralf [Bürk, Economist, Parliamentary Advisor to the Greens in the State Parliament of Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany] pointed to in his short comment on the presentation, the problem of the average. We have a lot of people for which growth seems to be a great promise, because they feel deprived, they feel unjustly dealt with, they clearly see, that they are disadvantaged in our societies. They want to do better. And growth has been made an integral part of a narrative - a left-wing narrative - of progress for more than 100 years. So for people to analyse their own situation, for people that are affected by these shortcomings of justice in our societies, that are affected by that, to understand, that a progressive answer to this situation could be developed without growth would demand a major change of understanding. For the time being you cannot expect that. Talk to the trade unions and you will see what happens. In Germany, in the most recent election, my party tried talking about some issues as if there was no problem with the possible negative social effects of an environmental transformation. Guess what we got, people didn't vote for us in the numbers we expected. I am not saying that we should just acquiesce to that and say well, that's how it is, I'm just saying this is a difficulty that we're up against. There is injustice and for some people their personal income has to grow, to put it very simply, also for some regions. I would clearly think it would be a great transgression - and there I agree with Philippe [Lamberts, MEP] completely - to start telling people what they should want, dictating to them, what we think the good life should be, is never going to serve green policies well. There have been many experiments in that regard, if you allow the green

perspective regarding the transformational economies and lifestyle to become the opposite of freedom of choice and personal dignity and personal emancipation, then the whole political project would be wrecked.

Second, there is a great fear of shrinking. It has been mentioned. Look again at the slide presented today. People see that destruction is eminent. So not talking about growth does not alleviate the fear of shrinking, of a loss. Maybe we can find a way of talking about shrinking in a more interesting approach. For instance, I would advocate, that by shrinking fossil fuel subsidies we could promote prosperity. And I think it is not difficult to demonstrate that. So there are efforts that could be made to shrink particular sectors that are particularly negatively impacting our economies and our well-being and still have more prosperity. Or only by doing that, we could add to our prosperity, which means however, that we have to take a differentiated approach, not talking about shrinking per se but talking about shrinking where the existing realities are hurting.

Next, there is an interesting book from a Harvard professor of economics by the name of Friedman - not Milton - the title of which is "The Moral Consequences of Growth". Professor Friedman in that book argues, and he goes through American history, that only in political phases in which there has been growth has there been social progress. Because, and this relates to what has been said by one of the presenters earlier, it's much harder to make a political choice if there is a lack of growth and you're running and bumping into much more opposition. So if there's more growth, than obviously you can give up a mammoth share of the wealth and still have some tiny bits left for everybody else. So everybody seems to be profiting or could even profit from that. And this is I think one of the important reasons why growth has been so deeply engrained in every left-wing progressive discourse. And in this regard Greens have to break with that tradition of a left-wing progressive discourse.

A fourth reason why I think we have to find a transformation of the growth narrative is external. There is continuously the argument that other regions in the world are growing "at our expense". Like China and if we don't do what they do, we will be losing out. Most recent example: shale gas fracking in the US. We have to do that in Europe also, because industrial investment in the US is profiting from shale gas fracking. Now everybody can read studies that say this is a bubble and it will soon burst. But still it's a valid argument as regards to policy makers and if you go around Europe and ask people, it has a major impact. I think that this comparison with countries where the growth paradigm goes unchallenged is a major political challenge for us. If we can answer to that only by pointing out text book solutions, not being able to say, well, in practice that works, then we're hard-put. I think one of the best examples that we can offer in that regard is the success of European policies with regard to promoting renewables and energy efficiency. There we can say that prosperity benefits from a changed perspective that does not rely on the old growth paradigm. So I think we have to come up with practical examples of how a prosperity strategy and a prosperity narrative works in practice, if we want to win that battle.

Then, just three more short points. I already mentioned one word, that's the word *change*. I agree with Ralf Bürk that we should put the word change at the centre of the discourse. But there is a problem also, which is the question of security. A lot of people are very much afraid of their reality and they want to have security. Unfortunately, they believe that growth provides security even though we could argue that it is just the invers. Growth undermines security. But people are afraid of change because they think that change could undermine security, whereas change would be the only way of providing security. So that's a dialectical

dilemma we have to deal with. I think that strategies to come up with a discourse that helps us creating a new prosperity narrative could focus on the two aspects that Ralf Bürk mentioned, in particular where the present day growth orientation is the most destructive. That's in one case debt-fuelled growth, where the debt-fuelled reality is creating a dynamic that seems to be unstoppable if you don't want to get devoured by the financial system you have to grow, and the other is green debt-fuelled growth, which is environmentally destructive growth. And so the financial markets and climate change is indeed standing for both of these dimensions of extremely destructive, excessive growth, and I think [by] focussing in and zeroing in on those two aspects of the present growth paradigm, we will be the most successful, hopefully, in undermining that. Interestingly, when we zero in on debt-fuelled growth we have more in common with some Conservatives than with Social Democrats. If we zero in on environmentally-fuelled destruction growth, we have more in common with some Social Democrats than with the Conservatives. So that is also an interesting political aspect of this conversation. I think that efficiency strategies can play a major role in that transformation narrative that we have to come up with, efficiency as regards to energy and resources. I don't even challenge what has been said by Yves [Cochet, MEP] that you can't have 100% decoupling, that's not my point. If I get to 90% or 95%, that's a huge difference against what we have. If I want to get to 100% somehow, I first have to go to 95. So it's no use basically, apart from a theoretical argument, maybe we should think twice if we want to go to 95 because we are not sure how to cover the last five meters. Let's go there. Also, what we have not defined, I believe, is what we could call an efficiency policy with regard to financial sources. How can we come up with an efficiency policy there.

The last point is again, less growth, as was said in the presentation, has to be accompanied by much bigger political ambition. Much bigger political ambition, because the political and societal controversies regarding who benefits from what will be much more intense. And there for the Greens, I think it's very important that we do not take a class-tainted position. Sometimes the policies, that Greens advocate, like with promoting renewables, it's good if you're a house owner to put renewables on your roof. You're even being subsidised by the public but what about those who cannot earn enough to afford a house? What is our offer for them? If we want to have a strategy that overcomes this growth paradigm, we have to find new ways of forging alliances with those, who are still captured, for the time being, by the growth thinking and the growth wishing.

Closing statement

Following up on what Anne [Sinnemäki, Member of the Finnish Parliament] said, I really believe, that to take the position that we must limit consumption, is an elitist view that Greens should not take. We should rather empower people to choose greener lifestyles. That's a completely different approach, but this approach makes a world of a difference, because in the second case you're also a libertarian party, a party that respects individual freedom which is the second core ingredient of the Green narrative. In the first case you're not. I think we have to make a clear distinction there and completely give up on the former.

Second, the question regarding capitalism¹, as long as we have capitalism, we are not beyond the error of growth, that's what constitutes capitalism. Marx called capital an automatic

¹ Regarding the compatibility of low-growth/de-growth future with capitalism, in a growth situation things are easier, you can pass profits and pass salaries and public services. But then when there is no growth, conflicts arise. What is your view on this? How do we deal with the primacy of profit, the primacy of the financial sector in our present political and economic system?

subject because the mode of production is being pushed ahead by always creating more value than you had at the start of the economic process, so there will continue to be a reality of a certain necessity of having some growth if you want to have that kind of mode of production. But the question is: does it need excessive growth? It could deal with very limited [growth]. If we focus on the growth issue per se, we have no way of aligning the transformation that we aim for the realities that we cannot change immediately. I would not say we are beyond the error of growth and as long as we have this error of growth there will always be temptations to go back and to make that the core value of the society. That will be a continuous fight, we will not be able to just ignore that and impose a new paradigm, it will always be a fight about our progressive paradigm and this traditional paradigm. I also believe that it would be extremely dangerous to try something that has never worked with anybody who has been on drugs. If you withdraw the drugs just like that all you get is a cold turkey. That's not good for an individual, for society it's catastrophe and social turmoil. We don't want to have that. There has to be a detox policy that helps transitioning. To some degree some phrases and some parts of our narrative, like sustainability or sustainable growth are part of what I would call a detox narrative that does not try to force people to immediately give up on what they have been educated to believe in and tries to reorient them in a new direction. I do disagree with the statement that we have no technological problem. I agree with Philippe [Lamberts, MEP] that we cannot contain all our ambition to just solving the issues technologically, but we do have a technological problem. We do not own the technology that would allow seven billion people on this globe to live sustainable lives. We do not own that technology, so we have to make sure that we don't ignore that necessity.

Also, I do not agree with the perception that we can somehow separate from international trade and pursue a strategy of autarky to get greener faster. I think it would be just the opposite. Ever since Ricardo, economists have argued, and I think it's true, that trade can help promoting efficiencies. If you rely on autarky, you need more growth just to avoid poverty than if you would allow for some exchange of goods or services. So that would be a very dangerous, I believe mistaken, very conservative, orientation, that does not lead into a green future. The last point, just regarding to the trade unions, I have this Spanish trade unionist still very vividly in my memory. When we talked about the Green New Deal he said yes, but we need a fair transition and then he argued - that was a few years ago, he was from the Comisiones Obreras - that fair transition in his mind meant continuing subsidising every single mining job in Asturias with 1 million Euros per year. I agree with your perspective Florent [Marcellesi, Ecological Researcher and Activist, Spanish Green Party Equo], that we should try forging an alliance with trade unions, but it is going to be very difficult, because on these issues they are extremely conservative.