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# Ambiguous avant-gardes and their geographies: on blank spots of the postgrowth debate

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## Abstract

*In the following article, the focus is on the transformative potentials created by so-called persistence avant-gardes and prevention innovators. The text extends Blühdorn's guiding concept of narratives of hope (Blühdorn 2017; Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019) by considering those groups that are marginalized within debates on socio-ecological transformation. With a closer look at the narratives of prevention and blockade that these actors engage, the ambiguous nature of postgrowth avant-gardes is carved out. Their discursive, argumentative, and effective inhibition of transitory policies is interpreted as a pro-active potential, rather than a mere obstacle to socio-ecological transformation. Adding a geographical perspective, the paper pleads for a more precise theoretical penetration of the ambivalent figure of avant-gardes when analyzing processes of local and regional postgrowth.*

## Zusammenfassung

Mit dem Beitrag richten wir den Fokus auf transformative Potenziale, die von sogenannten Beharrungsavantgarden und Präventionsinnovatoren ausgehen. Der Text erweitert Blühdorns Leitkonzept der Hoffnungsnarrative (Blühdorn 2017; Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019), indem er jene Gruppen in den Blick nimmt, die in den Debatten um die sozial-ökologische Transformation marginalisiert werden. Mit einem genaueren Blick auf die Präventions- und Blockade-Narrative dieser Akteure wird die Mehrdeutigkeit der Postwachstumsavantgarden herausgearbeitet. Ihre diskursive, argumentative und effektive Verhinderung transitorischer Politiken wird als proaktives Potenzial und nicht als bloßes Hindernis für eine sozial-ökologische Transformation interpretiert. Unter Hinzunahme einer geographischen Perspektive plädiert der Beitrag für eine präzisere theoretische Durchdringung der ambivalenten Figur der Avantgarden bei der Analyse lokaler und regionaler Postwachstumsvorgänge.

**Keywords** alternative economies, transformative policies, change agents, postgrowth, regional development, East Germany

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past years, public debates in Germany about climate change, ecological transformation and urban transition have increasingly taken up the subject of postgrowth (Brokow-Loga and Eckardt 2020; Lange et al. 2020; Petschow et al. 2020; Schmelzer and Vetter 2019). Especially during the Covid19 pandemic since spring 2020, issues of postgrowth have been debated widely, due to the search for causes of the pandemic on the one hand and the search for alternative economic practices on the other hand (Gong et al. 2020; Sarkis et al. 2020).

Characteristically, one strand of public discussions focused on positively portrayed avant-garde peer groups that developed alternative economic practices. These groups have usually been operating within niches – as there are: makers (Budge 2019), small-scale regional producers (Brunori et al. 2010), neighbourhood care activists (Paulson et al. 2020), urban gardening practitioners (Rosol 2018), community-oriented repair organizers (Helfrich and Bollier 2019), recycling and upcycling eco-start-ups (Fiorentino 2018) or self-organized mobility networks aiming to reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> footprint (Liedtke et al. 2015). All of these avant-garde protagonists were generally uplifted in public discourse and even more so during the pandemic. They were described with attributes that underlined their elevated social significance (Sarkis et al. 2020), suggesting that they represented a desirable postgrowth avant-garde.

Scholars have so far taken avant-gardism as a positive fact, rather than a social imaginary or a contested item of discourse. Heterogeneous and inconsistent as the scenery of postgrowth actually is (Lange et al. 2020), it might be hasty to assume a rectified movement. For the moment being, it is rather unclear if there are any concordant motives, political orientations, and concepts of agency among the various protagonists. As we will discuss below in more detail, there are not only 'lifestylish' avantgardists on the move but also proponents of 'other' avant-gardes (Engler 1999) that hesitate to join the leftist or green party spearheads of the postgrowth scene (Röpke and Speit 2019).

The widely shared optimism about the recent collective search for alternatives to growth-oriented capitalism notwithstanding, we argue that ambiguity and ambivalence are important but still missing subjects of research that can help to critically assess this rela-

tively new social phenomenon (see chapter 3). According to political scientist *Ingolfur Blühdorn*, the quest for ecological sustainability paradoxically implies persisting politics of unsustainability (Blühdorn 2017: 42). This does not necessarily mean that ecological avant-gardism carries the seed of its own corruption. Rather, it indicates that heterogeneous avant-gardes are at work that develop their own frameworks of reference and self-assertion, leaving the scene splintered and the idea of sustainability a matter of different approaches towards 'right consciousness'.

Following this assumption, it can be postulated that community building based on ecological awareness and shared identity almost inevitably involves boundary drawing towards rivalling communities and non-peers (Benkler and Nissenbaum 2006). This, in turn, may be interpreted as an impediment to the reformist agenda as a whole, as it might become difficult to establish inter-group solidarity, shared intellectual insights and the pursuit of common goals. However, it may also be understood as a natural process of social diversification that develops as soon as experiments in lifestyles, work and spatial politics are collectively pursued from different points of departure. And it is likely that over time new elites develop their own rationalities and 'deviations' from formerly shared views on nature preservation and climate rescue. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on the notion of ambiguity and the relationship between different or even diverging avant-gardes (Engler 1999).

How can the seeming contradiction between 'progressive' and 'reluctant' avant-gardes be conceptually grasped? How do 'deviations' from, and counterpositions to, leftist or green approaches to postgrowth become relevant to policy making, especially in spatial terms, e.g., for regional policy and the solution of problems of regional development? These two questions will be discussed in the following against the backdrop of the telling empirical case of the region of Lusatia, located in East Germany in the federal states of Brandenburg and Saxony. We will base our considerations on already existing evidence on recent scenarios of lignite phase-out that have been set in motion there (Haas 2020; Herberg et al. 2020a; Herberg et al. 2020b; Staemmler 2021). This case is particularly interesting because it involves small discursive niches-within-niches that reveal the variegated nature of postgrowth avant-gardism.

Following *Staemmler* (2021) and *Herberg et al.* (2020b), the case of Lusatia does not follow a clear political or even strategic rationale. So far, in the transition of this former brown coal mining area towards post-fossil energy production, a small number of communities and peer groups are active that constitute small social and economic niches. Within local debates, but also in limited academic discussions, they have been described as being borne by various leftist and green ideas (*Grenert et al.* 2018) that not necessarily coincide. Rather, a tendency towards intellectual and political diversification can be observed. Does such diversification indicate that there is a process of subdivision that includes productive contention and respectful argumentation, or is it a process of separation based on antagonism and struggle between rivaling groups? In short: are nested niches or competing autonomous niches being produced?

Our discussion starts with a small stocktaking of recent research on postgrowth avant-gardes and related theoretical assumptions (section two). Section three sheds light on the key concept of ambiguity and its intellectual roots. In doing so, we position ambiguity as a theoretical element that is an essential prerequisite for the study of postgrowth geographies. This leads us to a discussion of the case of Lusatia that hosts 'other' avant-gardes (section three), i.e. those operating beyond leftist and green activism (and also pragmatism). We will refer to them as 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators'<sup>1</sup> that are part of the field of postgrowth activism as well. In section four, we discuss the discursive dimensions of the mutual separation of avant-garde groups and highlight the socio-spatial dynamics of othering that is involved here. Our conclusions reflect the opportunities for future postgrowth geographies that come into sight through the emergent foci on ambiguity and othering.

## 2. Postgrowth avant-gardes as an analytical problem

Why are local practices and related discourses, kept going by representatives of postgrowth avant-gardes, an unresolved conceptual problem for the social sciences and human geography? One possible answer is that they might be so diverse that they cannot be grasped within a single theory. Consolidating this answer would e.g. require laborious in-depth milieu research and comparative analysis of local and supra-

local discourses. For the moment being, relevant social studies are grossly missing. As a rare example, in-depth milieu analysis has been done by *Bude et al.* (2011) in the city of Wittenberge located halfway between Hamburg and Berlin. However, referring to the region of Lusatia in East Germany, at least the policy field has been the subject of systematic in-depth analyses (*Herberg et al.* 2019; *Herberg et al.* 2020a; *Herberg* 2021). Both strands of research are based on more or less isolated case studies that leave comparative perspectives and overarching theoretical issues largely untouched.

Another possible answer might be that postgrowth avant-gardism is not only based on a sharp juxtaposition of niche communities towards mainstream economies but also on rivalry and contestation among each other. Currently relevant evidence can hardly be found because nascent opposition between various avant-gardes created an analytical problem that so far went almost unnoticed. At least it has become palpable that postgrowth communities, following their need for attractive identities, tend to prefer latent social and ideological boundary drawing towards competing groups, rather than inclusion or mainstreaming. While avant-gardes are often the key promoters of identity-based othering (see more about this concept below, section four), this observation is not sufficient to assume straightforward strategies and related social orientations (*North and Weber* 2013). However, such assumptions have already been taken as a basis for empirical research practice (*Feola and Jaworska* 2019; *Grin et al.* 2010; *Seyfang and Haxeltine* 2012).

A third possible answer consists in the assumption that analysis still lacks categories and notions that aptly describe diverse phenomena. Empirical research has relied on more or less superficial descriptions of community structures, peer groups, work types and prototypical (mostly urban) places, e.g. meeting places and worklabs (*Bulkeley et al.* 2018). At the same time, it has conveyed hopeful expectations for positive effects of postgrowth activities on urban contact zones, as well as upscaling effects into the economic mainstream or even society as a whole (*North and Weber* 2013; *Schirmer* 2010; *Sirkku and Westerhoff* 2011). Consequently, there is a veritable analytical blank spot concerning the details of community formation, activism, and social interaction, in particular with respect to their ambiguous and ambivalent aspects.

As a contribution to filling the gap, we address the purported significance of postgrowth pioneers as forerunners and role models of societal change (Aryan et al. 2018; Müller et al. 2013; Özkan and Büyüksaraç 2020). This focus has been established in recent social studies and socio-ecological research (Coenen et al. 2010; Hargreaves et al. 2013; Savini and Bertolini 2019). Other scholars have described urban co-working spaces, makerspaces and worklabs as places that are inspired by activist enthusiasm and optimistic views on future postgrowth realities (Amenta et al. 2019; Avdikos 2019; Bulkeley et al. 2018; Lange 2017). Characteristically though, only few analytical perspectives enable critical reflection about the shortcomings of everyday sensemaking, as well as their political and spatial implications (Haas 2020; Herberg et al. 2019; Herberg et al. 2020a).

Moreover, as a second step we address the ambiguities that arise from ‘tales of regional avant-gardism’. In an earlier paper, we have demonstrated how bottom-up collective shifts in norms, lifestyles and everyday practices have led scholars to assume associated mechanisms of spatialization (Lange and Bürkner 2018). However, the collective construal of space must be critically deconstructed here rather than taken as a positive fact. Especially dynamic community building and experimental attitudes often go along with rapidly shifting spaces and context-dependent mental orientations. In short, within the social field of postgrowth not only political and social orientations are ambiguous but also the spaces involved, understood as mental constructs and inventions. One and the same physical or social space (e.g. an urban plaza) may host a variety of different communities that direct their ambitions to this particular urban spot for very different reasons.

In spite of the fundamental fuzziness of spatialization, recent studies have narrowed down the contribution of new concepts of working and living to urban and regional transition mainly to the efficacy of postgrowth avant-garde lifestyles and the practices developed by their protagonists (Lowe and Vinodrai 2020; Richter 2019). They appear as if they followed a single direction or cultural pattern, although it is clear that there are other civil society avant-gardes around, both at local and global levels. These do not necessarily propagate turning away from capitalism or growth principles. But they may share the desire to act in ecologically sustainable or locally responsible ways.

A closer look at current arenas of regional transition (see below, sections 3.2 and 3.3) reveals that these ‘other’ avant-gardes tend to achieve autonomy and create leeway for experiments in work, economic concepts, and community building. As an example, we refer to post-industrial renewal in East Germany that involves regional planning institutions as well as individual or organized bottom-up activities. In the Lusatia region, a former brown coal mining area in East Germany destined for final closure, new leitmotifs and planning imaginaries have recently been identified that are geared towards postgrowth futures (Haas 2020; Lintz et al. 2012; Staemmler 2021). Their promoters are not only leftist, ecologically active, or digitally experienced ‘bearers of the flame’. They also come, as Staemmler (2021) has shown, from more conservative milieus and the local political centre that is under pressure to find alternatives to further economic decline.

In East Germany, many of these actors have paved their way through post-socialist transformation, which for the most part was a political and economic landscape of decline and precariousness (Mau 2019; Schmelzer 2005). Their individual experience and cleverness in concept building have been grossly overlooked and sometimes even negated when it came to conceiving postgrowth futures. We claim that it is time to establish concepts that explicitly understand these ‘other avant-gardes’ as potential contributors to alternative pathways of urban and regional development.

### 3. Approaching postgrowth geographies through tracing field-specific ambiguity

#### 3.1 Defining and contextualizing ambiguity

While applied research has obviously been driven by the intention to identify straightforward pathways into postgrowth futures, we point out that neither practitioners within their local fields nor political approaches are aware of the wide gazes, antagonisms and conceptual multiplicities involved. To gain a more differentiated analytical perspective we borrow theoretically from the reflexive approach developed by Blühdorn (2017) and Blühdorn and Butzlaff (2019). As one of very few authors Blühdorn develops an explicit concern about the ambiguities of what he calls the sustainability paradigm (ibid.). He states that “we are witnessing, more than anything, the further advancement of the politics of unsustainability – and

that in this politics the new narratives of hope may themselves be playing a crucial role" (*Blühdorn* 2017: 42). Taking this notion further, we postulate that the layout and the configuration of an emerging research field per se must promote the search for open-ended developments and their ambiguities, rather than propagating clear-cut paradigmatic shifts. The awareness of field-specific political cleavages and the heterogeneity of social milieus thus become ever more important. Only with the help of a dialectic view on the equivocal aspects of sustainability, postgrowth, alternative economies, avant-garde peer groups and communities, an insightful and robust concept of postgrowth practices and geographies will come into sight.

Following *Blühdorn* (2017), ambiguity can be defined as a state of semiotic undecidedness, a state that does not per se enforce specific interpretations of the situation or clear solutions to given problems. Societal transition seldom follows a pre-established plan but is always affected by contingency and unexpected interventions. The bitter irony expressed above by *Blühdorn's* citation reflects that transition is not per se a 'good' project that is only hampered by the literal 'spirit that always denies'. Rather, the irony observed emerges from rigid calculations of 'good' behaviour and governance that leave actors unaware of alternatives and balanced decisions. In this sense ambiguity in the field of postgrowth transition can take the following shapes:

- 1) Ambiguity of the field: societal development generally involves several distinct pathways to ecotransition that are available and accessible (*Grabher and Ibert* 2006). While the possible roadmaps are principally negotiable and a matter of more or less rational choice, there is a high degree of contingency and finding-out-in-the-making involved.
- 2) Ambiguity of agency: transition is not a prefixed goal but a collective learning process 'on the road to postgrowth'. Therefore, the analytical gaze on factual interaction and agency cannot simply follow normative fixations suggested by the idea that collectives strive to overcome late capitalist growth in a targeted manner. Like in any other political arena the presence of heterogeneous actors and a correlated diversity of ideas make it difficult to gather the activities of avant-gardes and followers under a joint perspective (*Carvalho and Vale* 2018).

- 3) Ambiguity of practical action: there are well-known dilemmas of 'doing good' while producing new ecological and social disasters, such as the endangerment of biodiversity through the worldwide production of bio-fuels under conditions of agricultural mono-culture. Instead of revising failing concepts of postgrowth many stakeholders are convinced that 'trying harder' might be the only solution. Present fights over sovereignty of opinion, exclusive rights to act, suspicion and growing intolerance towards critics of eco-policies indicate that a relaxing element is missing (*Agnew* 2020). Such relaxation might come from the awareness that shifting pathways of development and detours may characterize the future transition to a new social condition that can only partially be imagined today.

- 4) Ambiguity of standpoints within avant-gardism: it is often futile to ascribe progressive vs. reactionary attitudes to particular actors and groups in the field. The irony of sustainability is that progressive ideologies of political ecology and postgrowth activism include strong conservative elements (e.g. the will to 'restore' nature to an imagined ideal condition or to find 'back' to a natural or more equal society). Approved social innovators can be very conservative, just as their antagonists (e.g. declared preventers of change) can also be innovative. Hence political labels such as 'left' or 'right' tend to become meaningless.

Referring to such multi-dimensionality of ambiguity, we position this notion at the core of a research concept that shall deliver deeper insights into emerging postgrowth economies and their geographies. A clear focus on ambiguity, applied to nascent new economies and social innovation, will inform us about the dynamics of practices at a social ground level and general system change alike. More precisely, it will sharpen the focus on the evolution of creative and pioneering initiatives that have the potential to break up the lock-ins of globalized capitalism. But it will also be open to shifts in the guiding rationales applied by influential actors, e.g. in the sense of a comeback of principles of social well-being that might alter formerly rigid ecological imperatives. Last but not least, this will also enable researchers to reflect on the limitations of the problem-solving capacities that normative thinking entails.

### 3.2 Referencing ambiguity by highlighting the counterparts within the field: 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators'

In public debates, opposition to ecotransition and postgrowth is often equated with reactionary attitudes and political extremism. This equation can be found in various shades within German discourses on transition (Loorbach et al. 2020). However, we perceive this as not necessarily insightful. It neglects that many promoters of eco-transition are still interested in preserving their social status quo and therefore reject immediate subversion. They rather prefer gradual change in social micro-practices while keeping to evolved social structures that they find within stable communities and surroundings. They also reject radical societal swings of the 'big reset' type (see Schwab and Malleret 2020; cf. the respective economic and political narratives that have recently emerged within global debates on Covid-19, globalization and the global climate crisis, e.g. in the way they became visible at the World Economic Forum 2021, or in recent books by Soper (Soper 2020)). They welcome step-by-step evolution towards an open-ended future, a stance that often implies sympathy for a limited dose of social innovation.

From a heuristic standpoint we address these agents as 'prevention innovators' and 'status quo avant-gardists'. We assume that they are not the putative 'dialogue blockers' they appear to be in the public eye. Rather, these neologisms shall indicate that the respective actors have the fundamental ability to make meaningful innovations relevant to everyday life. On closer inspection it may turn out that they have their very own views on how to effect change and improve living conditions. Often, they have found new solutions to old challenges on their own. An outspoken orientation towards bottom-up invention and practical innovation makes them oppose radical shifts that are guided by ideology or even iconoclast. In their ranks are many hyped practically-minded 'makers', problem-solvers and also down-to-earth small entrepreneurs who found their economic niche, often at a local level (for East Germany, see Mau 2019). What is needed now is an unprejudiced and more precise view of their positioning vis-à-vis issues related to ecologically motivated social change.

Research that demands analytical open-mindedness must take the related milieus and communities under careful scrutiny. From the perspective of the so-

cial and spatial sciences it is particularly interesting to know which constructions of meaning, patterns of interpretation and concepts of self-affirmation characterise the activities of the 'resistant' milieus.

- Which categories (e. g. safety/threat, stability/upheaval, custom/unpredictability, transparency/uncertainty) do these social groupings use to interpret their social and spatial surroundings?
- How is it that their members develop opinions that seem to be 'contrary to better and available ecological knowledge'? How 'skilfully' do these collectives ignore the dominant discursive frames of eco-transition and the claims to facticity embedded therein?
- What interpretations of their own (locally or regionally constituted) 'otherness' do they use to counter them? How effective are the corresponding patterns of interpretation in the public discourses?

Pursuing the notion of the largely invisible, potential influence of the 'status quo avant-gardists' and 'prevention innovators', we embark on a journey to uncover the underlying collective motives, logics of action and patterns of interpretation. On the one hand, the aim is to enable a balanced analysis of social transitions which not only considers the normatively charged drivers of change but also gives adequate space to their social counterparts. On the other hand, it is also about avoiding the pejorative rhetoric which has spread like wildfire in both the public and the scientific description of supposedly anti-modern and socially 'left-behind', change-resistant milieus. Such rhetorics presently express deep distrust in the moral integrity and the capabilities of East Germans. This is not restricted to the media or the speeches of alehouse politicians. Interestingly official statements by the Commissioner for the East of the Federal Government (Ostbeauftragter der Bundesregierung) suggest that many East Germans still "do not have arrived in democracy" (Anonymous-A 2021, n.p.) or that refusal of Covid-19 vaccination be caused by East German right-wing populism (Anonymous-B 2021).

An explicit focus on 'diverse' actors and milieus entails the endeavour to understand not only the milieu-specific changes in social practices but also the supra-individual process logics and discursive reproduction mechanisms involved. The latter are probably in part responsible for the public creation of labels such as 'deniers' or 'deviators from the mainstream' (Jones

et al. 2016). Such notions make come true what they promise in their pre-emptive normativity, both for the mainstream speakers and the so designated.

### 3.3 Applying the concept of ambiguity to recent debates in the region of Lusatia

The basic method of investigating ambiguity can be described as deconstruction. It is a procedure whereby categories are introduced that sound paradoxical at first but gain analytical strength through questioning political common sense and its taxonomies. Such deconstruction is not easy to carry out because first of all the researcher has to get rid of the positive ascriptions that ecologically oriented avant-gardes usually receive.

Deconstruction might particularly unmask the naïve component of the quest for alternative social and economic practices (White and Williams 2016). It can be observed that whenever the possibility of a linear development towards postgrowth is claimed, categorical expressions of linearity are created. They facilitate the recognition of positive achievements on a fictitious scale of 'moving from growth to postgrowth'. At least in part this is wishful thinking, including the creative invention of variables and processes that seem to be concordant to the aspirations of activism from below. It precludes those groups that resist transformative policies that require changes in beliefs and value orientations, and it ignores their recommendations for change based on practical experience (Haas 2020).

Such practically-mindedness may create different insights into the necessity to get involved in transition. At first sight it may appear as resistance to a postgrowth mainstream, and it may take various forms – sometimes emotionally charged, subversive and quiet, but in most cases also rationally based and politically well-informed. Its protagonists usually demonstrate discursive skills and support clear aesthetic value judgements. Such 'proficiency in one's own matters' can already be detected within regional contexts of structural change. A prominent example that can be cited turned up in German regional politics that tried to coin the decline of old industries, especially in East Germany, into the dawn of ecologically sound futures (Dax and Fischer 2018). Taking up the current beliefs of regional structural policy – at the latest since the establishment of European funding approaches and the closer integration of research, education, and in-

novation in the federal government – the focus had been primarily on transformation through technological innovation.

One region that is particularly affected by this basic narrative is the aforementioned old brown coal mining region of Lusatia. Structural change in Lusatia ran for a long time under the radar of the nationwide public. Only since in winter 2018/19 the Coal Commission had drawn up federal policy recommendations for the exit from the former coal mining path, the situation in Lusatia has also been widely discussed at a national level. The compromise, reached among the convened climate, economic and regional experts, came under public pressure from burgeoning climate protests and the electoral successes of the right-wing party AfD ('Alternative for Germany'/'Alternative für Deutschland').

This prompted the federal ministers of Saxony, Brandenburg, and Saxony-Anhalt to lobby the German government for high subsidies for the affected regions. Finally, 50 billion Euros from federal funds were promised. It also served as a political leverage for the successful compromise reached in the coal commission. In the local political arena of Lusatia many were embarrassed to see that formerly fierce opponents came together in a rarely seen agreement to commit to the future ecological good and renounce past evil. Ecologically motivated policies, such as the compromise reached for phasing out coal at the end of 2019 (Herberg et al. 2019; Herberg et al. 2020a; Lorenz and Träger 2020; Staemmler 2021) brought political decision-takers and their previous critics nearer to each other than they could imagine before.

This general framework of regional change given, the local actors of Lusatia often position themselves in basic opposition to external political influence. Everyday life is virtually permeated by practices of social critique (Haas 2020). The locally rooted opposition claims legitimacy on the basis of life experience, apart from political and scientific expertise. In contrast, political leaders of the responsible state government have continued to ignore such claims. For example, Klaus Freytag, the Lusatia representative of the Brandenburg state chancellery, is cited in a regional newspaper article as demanding the submission of Lusatia under the new state policy: "If Lusatia does not know where it wants to go in the future, there will be no billions for the region" (citation taken from Herberg 2021: 99; original source: *Lausitzer Rundschau*

27/08/2020). The regional readership is confronted here with a view of their region as a deficit model, according to which the region has no future.

Once environmental protection and climate rescue had been addressed as desirable goods, mining workers and their supporters, who had fought against joblessness and social decline, saw themselves left without substantial political support – while the majority of the intimidated local population remained largely silent (*Herberg et al. 2019; Lorenz and Träger 2020*). The ambiguity involved in the commitment to the ecological good became clearly visible. On the one hand, it elevated confessed abolitionists of mining to bearers of the ecological flame, while on the other hand it turned formerly well-respected defenders of social solutions discussants into ‘losers’ and seemingly dubious contenders (*Grenert et al. 2018; Haas 2020; Hepp 2020; Staemmler 2021*).

In this process the key point is that ambiguity is created as an unplanned effect of purposeful political and everyday activities. More often than not, local groups are not the opponents that politics and green activists have declared them to be. Rather, they are part of a silent majority of malcontents. Although they resonate with the buzzword of postgrowth, they would restrain from open activism and rather prefer small experiments with lifestyles and day-to-day practices (*Lorenz and Träger 2020*). They might nevertheless take an orientation function for their surroundings. In this sense, some individuals and communities assume partial tasks of an avant-garde. However, they would not boast about their achievements or label themselves ‘postgrowth’ or ‘alternative’. Their performance and impact are usually overlooked in the public discourses, which mostly concentrate on the protagonists of the intended change.

The experience of being ousted from the ‘mainstream of transition’ for reasons of ecological correctness is presently being shared by more and more parts of the population. Surprisingly, this phenomenon has only reluctantly been addressed by social studies. Although socio-economic polarisation was progressing for quite a while, there had been only a few sporadic examples of analytical ‘deep drilling’ (*Bude et al. 2011*) into social milieus. Such investigations brought differentiation and evidence of milieu-specific ambivalence to the coarse-grained debate but remained without further follow-up research activities. Even studies on environmental awareness among members of par-

ticular milieus often failed to work out necessary differentiations, especially if they were loosely based on the well-known milieu typology drawn up by the German Sinus Institute for Market and Social Research (*Barth et al. 2018*). Relevant research has pointed at the dominant significance of macro milieus based on opinion polls, rather than exploring milieus on the basis of the qualitative analysis of social interaction and everyday practices. No wonder it has been overlooked that change was already happening at the local level, even though the nature of this change did not exactly conform to overarching policy options. Government studies based on Sinus opinion polls simply dissected out a flexible eco-political avant-garde based on progressive macro milieus, as opposed to more static milieus that seemed to defy ecologically motivated change (*Bundesministerium für Umwelt 2019*).

### 3.4 Operationalizing ambiguities as geographical items

Crude as they are, such insinuated divides have geographical implications that afford differentiated analysis. At first sight the political sorting-out of ‘pro’ and ‘con’ milieus seems to follow a power strategy. It facilitates to accuse members of the ‘wrong’ milieus of generally opposing modernisation, denying ecological reason and rejecting dialogue.<sup>2</sup> However a closer look reveals that the divide is reported to be geographically localised and regionalised: the reactionary forces have been primarily identified in rural areas and in the ‘left-behind’ peripheries, especially in East Germany.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the progressive forces are seen as being located in the urban centres, preferably in West Germany.

Such juxtapositioning is by no means compelling, as the example of the case of Lusatia and the regeneration debate exemplify (*Haas 2020; Herberg et al. 2020b; Staemmler 2021*): local defenders of social standards and economic resilience on several occasions strived to reconcile this objective with ecological reason. At that moment the ‘regional question’ was rendered ambiguous, meaning that it allowed for retreat into the defence of regional wealth as well as for experiments with economically insecure eco-jobs and pollution-free, digitized ways of ‘doing economy’ (*Budge 2019*). However national politics and their claim that the activities of ‘adverse’ macro-milieus had detrimental effects brought an atmosphere of scapegoating into the debate. Seemingly ‘delegitimized’ agents pushing ‘delegitimized’ discursive positions were increasingly

marginalized (Röpke and Speit 2019). Accordingly, local discourse lost its initial ambiguity: the former sense of 'open futures' vanished as the discourse proceeded.

As a consequence, the region itself has become a token of moral corruption and failing commitment. The fact that progressive ecological thinking obviously has its unexpected counterparts and deviants obviously affords a spatial marker to indicate that opposition is limited and under control. For instance, the national government and leftist activists unanimously ascribed opposition to eco-transition to the mainstays of right-wing parties in East Germany, often blinding out the fact that these parties had their followers in West Germany too. However, this attempt to define deviant attitudes towards postgrowth and eco-transition as being delimited to several regions in the east created new ambiguities. On the one hand, the narrative went that folksy catchwords were propagated by members of the party AfD and 'right-wing environmentalists' in rural areas to promote a backward-looking, exclusively 'German' attachment to the homeland and thus a return to their 'own' native soil (Röpke and Speit 2019).

Ironically, there are involuntary links here to the basic convictions held by the progressive forces of younger postgrowth orientations, even if only to a limited extent. One example of this is found in the emphasis they put on local communities, milieu-specific autonomy and a return to manual activities or more simple technologies – thus celebrating a paradoxical conservatism, simultaneously reactionary and progressive (Schmelzer and Vetter 2019). Should that mean that urban hipsters and rural right-wing populists share similar attachments to local 'soils'? The perplexity caused by this paradox has not dissipated yet. Rather, it presently finds its expression in green party and left-wing moralizing about the just cause. Such actors sense that they cannot muster convincing arguments to defend themselves against right-wing appropriation (cf. the rampant political fear of receiving 'applause from the wrong side').

#### 4. Discursive dimensions of resistance

The case of Lusatia has laid bare once again the necessity for local milieu analysis. However, this might not be sufficient. In addition to investigating the sensitivities of the resisters and their milieus, it is also impor-

tant to focus on the discourses in which they appear. More precisely, research should target the manifestations, drivers and functions of political positions of resistance in national and local discourses about social-ecological transformation and postgrowth. It should be noted that the self-positioning of 'othered' minorities (allegedly residing in East Germany) inevitably goes along with political framings created by majorities (mostly located in West Germany). From the perspective of media theory, these hegemonic framings, that drive the marginalisation of resisters, impede and other non-conformists, must first be analyzed.

In particular, the prevailing localisation of 'deviators' in certain regions and socio-spatial configurations can be a forceful driver of biased political framings. They provide a new research object for basic geographical investigations of socio-spatial disparities. Framing theory of the late 2000s and early 2010s offers a theoretical foundation here (Chong and Druckman 2007; Matthes 2012). It allows the medial and discursive representation of individual population groups and circumstances to be addressed in terms of pre-existing inclusion-exclusion mechanisms and othering processes (Borah 2011).

The concept of othering refers to the practice of attributing characteristics to persons and social groups that differ from those of one's own group. They are made to appear as potentially undesirable and inferior (Jensen 2011; Schwalbe 2000). The particular practice of powerful actors to degrade less powerful others has secured othering a prominent place in postcolonial theory (Said 2003; Bhabha 1994) where it is used to address political and discursive practices (Thomas-Olalde and Velho 2011). Apart from the crude forms that othering assumes in the context of top-down policies of postcolonialism and racism, the more sophisticated practices of everyday othering have been described as being related to emergent social identities and 'us-group' formation (Jensen 2011). Because they are implied in concrete interaction at the social basis, their analysis can easily be combined with milieu studies (see e.g. Birekul 2020; cf. Jensen 2011).

Thus, exemplary analyses of findings related to 'resistant' milieus and deniers in East Germany (e.g. Staemmler 2021; Mau 2019) allow for interpretations of othering processes as social phenomena that correspond with milieu-grounded struggles for dominance and power. This makes it possible to explore the interaction of external ascriptions and, at the same time,

the self-labelling of those affected. Both processes usually come together to sustain hegemonic interpretations of otherness (*Jensen 2011*). Othering can thus be described as a dual phenomenon, as both everyday practice and as a political discursive process. It needs the collusion of external ascription and internal adaptation: the 'others' thus seem to demonstrate what elite politics and majorities expect them to be and do. However, as soon as the minorities try to emancipate themselves, they engage in struggles for power. Therefore, by considering power relations, othering can also be defined as an elite project, namely as the process of forming and addressing political opponents.

The case of East German sensitivities calls for analytical advances beyond mere descriptions of the 'underdogs' of othering. The challenge is to adequately address the self-positioning of the resisters in various discursive and social contexts. In particular, the innovative and constructive elements of resistance and denial need to be uncovered. This is not a new demand, but so far it has not found much resonance within current transition debates. In the past, commentators on post-communist transition had already spoken of East Germans as a potential avant-garde that might transform experiences of uprooting, social declassification and (often enforced) flexibility into positive assets that West Germans often miss (*Engler 1999*).

By investigating the winners of previous transformation spurts (e.g. successful entrepreneurs), it is possible to identify everyday interpretations of the situation that include proactive attitudes, which in turn may produce well adapted solutions and enable successful strategic action. Simultaneously, the individual and milieu-specific counterforces to such attitudes come into focus, especially the tendency to accept political and biographically connoted narratives of being at a disadvantage (*Maaz 1995; Mau 2019; Kubiak 2020*). The conviction of being different from West Germans (as part of a separate identity) is often traded down to the younger generation (*Kubiak 2020: 193*). It constitutes an ambivalent product of external ascription (i.e. by being exposed to othering; see *Kubiak 2018*) and self-practiced social boundary drawing towards the outside. Here what requires clarification is the extent to which frustration and resignation are cultivated as milieu-specific attitudes, often alongside with optimism and persisting intentions to change the circumstances.

### 5. What does this shift of analytical awareness mean for the East German postgrowth debate?

Above all, it promises to provide answers to important questions concerning the constitution of 'status quo avant-gardists' in the social, political and media discourses. For example, the dynamics of othering can be demonstrated to be tied to an interplay of perpetrators and victims that dates back to moral accusations after the breakdown of the communist system of the German Democratic Republic (*Engler 1999*). While this may appear as a unidirectional west-to-east process, based on West German hegemony, it has the practically lived victim role of the East Germans as an important prerequisite. Victims can only be successfully installed in discourse as long as they are ready to accept the role assigned to them (*Maaz 1995*). In the case of East Germany this was almost inevitable because the victims were historically and biographically prefabricated, ready for use in future discourses. It was the particular post-communist history that facilitated or even enforced the acceptance of inferior positions and role models. However, this socio-political constellation also laid the foundation of new self-assurance among the victims who knew that they were able to master difficult situations and become innovative again (*Jancius 2006*).

From the perspective of social geography, a look at the addressees of othering thus allows to speak more precisely about the emergence of intersecting axes of social and spatial inequalities. In particular, East Germans are presently in danger of being disqualified from the postgrowth debate. Taking up the argument of *Röpke and Speit (2019)*, they are being more and more assigned the role of postgrowth preventers. A new focus on milieus and the workings of othering will have an emancipatory momentum as it creates a chance to draw them back into the discussion on equal terms. Among others, it becomes clearer that those who do not 'join in' with ongoing processes of social change might have good reasons to do so.

### 6. Conclusions: further ideas and consequences for analyzing postgrowth geographies

Coming back to the two initial questions that motivated this paper, the answers are as follows. The question about the contradiction between progressive and reluctant avant-gardes can be answered in a twofold

way. First, the ambiguities involved in postgrowth and eco-transition afford a balanced perspective on 'driving' and 'impeding' elements of change. In particular, the labelling of 'deviant' opinions and actions must be understood as hegemonic practice that prevents productive mutual learning.

Second, the use of conceptual mixes (milieu theory, framing theory, theorems addressing ambiguity and othering) supports a close-up definition of inter-group relationships (here: between the potential elites of postgrowth transition).

The second question about the relevance of 'deviations' and counter positions for local/regional policy making can be answered by a hint at the necessity to develop contextualized approaches to the progressing regionalisation of 'change resistance'. This perspective does not only create leeway for emerging discussions about the geographies of postgrowth (Schmid 2018; Soper 2020). It also directs more attention to the biographical rootedness, motivations and milieu relations of the actors involved in the formation of avant-gardes. This has direct political implications. Regionalisation processes can be understood as an expression of individual and temporary assertions of sovereignty, which emanate from regionally anchored milieus. As their internal differences in orientations and strivings often do not find their way into public discourse, it is a particular challenge for postgrowth studies to make them transparent. For Germany this is even more important as recent regionalisations of the 'preventers' type tend to overlap with older interpretations of socio-spatial (East-West) disparities (Mau 2019).

This not only leads to intensified othering (e.g. along the West-East gap described above); it may also redress degrowth activism as an intellectual avant-garde fight against eco-disasters and at the same time against supposedly dull and socially inferior defenders of the status quo. Regionalisation would thus help to politically declassify 'other' avant-gardes instead of recognizing their potential to build coalitions for future transition. In this case hegemony would also infiltrate the emerging postgrowth scenes in East Germany and many rural regions (wherever they may be located).

Are the change-resistant milieus only interested in preventing their further socio-economic marginalisation and that is the only reason why they cling to

apparently obsolete patterns of mobility, lifestyles, and consumption? Or are the denial positions adopted rather as a consequence of the marginalisation of these milieus in the public and political discourses, i.e. tendentially independent of factual socio-spatial disparities? Such research questions indicate the need to consider new geographical fragmentations and processes of social peripheralization as important objects of investigation in postgrowth research.

This article has pointed to the necessity to analytically deal with the specifics of societal cleavages that are laid bare in postgrowth discourses. Up to now the terminological field of politics and activism has been unidimensional: it has focused on the evolutionary idea of pushing society as a whole towards postgrowth. Now it must be recognized that there are antithetical developments, competing avant-gardes and ambiguities involved. It is time to pursue focused analyses of milieus, discourses, and framings to gain important indications of ambiguities and paradoxes of the field that affect the postgrowth debate.

Social studies that work out the ambiguities of postgrowth should not only engage in an abstract preparation of the topic. They should also develop a distinctive sensorium for the spaces involved that give a concrete clue to ambiguity and its consequences. On this basis they can develop enlightening competencies. By informing policy makers and a larger public about the sensitivities of 'their' regional avant-garde fractions, they can easily assume political significance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We created the term 'prevention innovators' following an inspiration given by *Lehmann*. In her book review of *Mau's* study on the East German community of Lütten Klein (*Mau* 2019), *Lehmann* (2019) made use of the terms 'prevention avant-gardes' and 'innovation avant-gardes' ('Beharrungs- als auch Innovationsavantgarden'). While she obviously had two different groups in mind, we 'reunited' them conceptually in order to emphasize the creative and innovative potential that their seemingly 'hindering' agents nevertheless have.

<sup>2</sup> National political leaders literally invited the public to look out for deviants and insistent persons. Chancellor Angela Merkel commented in her speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos on 23 January 2020 that a refusal to engage in dialogue about eco-change 'should result in sanctions by society' (*Gersemann and Zschäpitz* 2020).

<sup>3</sup> On the same occasion, Chancellor Merkel also reported that these groups need to face different profits and costs in line with their locations: urban dwellers will quickly benefit from the transformation while rural dwellers will bear a large share of the costs (*Gersemann and Zschäpitz* 2020).

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