

## Research Article

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# On the Need to Rethink the Way We Understand Growth: Media Evidence on Economic Growth as an Empty Signifier

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that economic growth is an empty signifier and, on this basis, calls for a different approach to economic growth. It is based on an analysis of Czech and Slovak alternative and mainstream media, as well as interviews with journalists and columnists writing for these media. The article demonstrates that economic growth, as a media term, lacks clarity, is generally perceived positively, constitutes a systemic limit, and is surrounded by emotionally charged narratives and a chain of equivalences. Additionally, economic growth unites opposing forces in society and integrates incompatible discursive elements. It is sedimented into objectivity, reinforced by a lack of knowledge about economic growth, the constraints of news and interview genres, and the subordination of critique to the expectations of readers, editors, and the ideological positioning of centrist media institutions. However, the dominance of economic growth is questioned in the interviews. According to the respondents, reactivation is possible by including sources critical of growth in news or opinion sections or by selecting topics that conflict with the growth agenda.

**Keywords:** economic growth; empty signifier; Laclau; sedimentation; reactivation; media

## 1 Introduction

Using a novel approach combining Laclau's discourse theory and empirical research of Czech and Slovak media space, this article demonstrates that it is plausible to

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consider economic growth an empty signifier despite its clear textbook definition. An empty signifier consists of several features filled by economic growth: in the media, the meaning of economic growth is not fixed but instead carries a broader positive connotation beyond merely an increase in production over time; the emptiness or vagueness of this term enables different social actors to imagine different things and promises under it; economic growth also signifies the limit of a system of signification, which in turn leads to the construction of beatific and horrific fantasmatic narratives around it; furthermore, economic growth establishes a chain of equivalences, uniting incompatible elements and opposing political forces. In sum, economic growth meets the definitional criteria of an empty signifier, and this research confirms that economic growth is an empty signifier.

Why does it matter that economic growth might be an empty signifier? Economic growth has attracted considerable criticism, especially from the degrowth movement (Hickel 2020; Kallis 2018; Latouche 2009). One of the most important critiques concerns the ecological sustainability of economic growth. Despite recent national decoupling of economic growth from carbon emissions, this critique remains relevant because the decoupling is not fast enough, is not occurring at the global level, and does not extend to the material footprint (Vogel and Hickel 2023). In other words, part of the scientific community argues that continuously increasing GDP is not feasible. Therefore, economic growth both as a topic and a concept deserves our attention. This paper addresses the question of meaning of economic growth.

So what is economic growth? In professional literature, there is a clear definition of economic growth: “Economic growth is the increased capacity of an economy to produce goods and services, comparing one period of time to another” (Alfano 2019). However, the term *economic growth* is commonly used without the need for a definition or an explanation in professional discourse and media.

This paper is based on the idea that there may be a lack of knowledge and clarity about how economic growth is defined among media consumers (and producers), which could lead to an understanding by them, which is very different than the definition stated above. It could simply mean a better life. A lack of knowledge and clarity raises the question of whether economic growth is an empty signifier and how one should address it.

The aim of this paper is to insert the argument that economic growth is an empty signifier into the degrowth debate, therefore I begin with an a set of rather conventional definitions of economic growth in the literature on degrowth. The aim is not to discuss these definitions, but merely to show the content of the debate in this particular regard. Here are few examples: “According to the degrowth-movement, economic growth is a [...] concept only describing an increase in Gross Domestic

Product (GDP)” as opposed to being “associated with an increase in wealth” (Parrique 2022a).

Hickel explaining degrowth states that “when people say “growth” they normally mean growth in GDP” and “when economists and politicians talk about growth, they *really* mean an increase in materials and energy” (Hickel 2021, 1016). The debate on the definition of economic growth is probably the deepest in an oft-cited article by Hickel and Kallis who discuss the issue of value, but at the end of the article return to empirical studies that are implicitly based on the aforementioned textbook definition as “our only reliable guide to the green growth/decoupling question” (Hickel and Kallis 2020, 482–483).

Thus, one might argue that economic growth is within the academic sector of the degrowth movement generally used in a rather conventional way, which is close to the basic definition and does not include the meanings found by this research. It is not my aim to criticize this debate. I find the debate useful on its own merits and empirical findings in degrowth research highlight the relevance of the conventional approach to economic growth. Thanks to this research based on the basic definition of economic growth we know about the connection between climate change and economic growth.

Still, within the degrowth movement, economic growth is also understood in less conventional ways as an “ideology” (Latouche 2022; Parrique 2022b), “an idea” (Schmelzer et al. 2022; Victor 2008, 4), a “paradigm” (Dale 2012), a “cult” (Latouche 2006, 316) or simply “growthism” (Daly 2019), but this perspective either serves as a starting point for historical accounts (Barry 2020; Borowy and Schmelzer 2017; Schmelzer 2016), is occasionally scattered around in books on degrowth (Jackson 2016; Latouche 2009, see Haapanen and Tapio 2016), is part of a larger whole dealing critically with economic growth (Parrique 2022b) or focuses exclusively on the ideological element of economic growth (Latouche 2006, 2022). These approaches are useful starting points for a discussion on the meaning of economic growth, but do not engage in an empirical research that would move the debate further. This is the research gap that the present paper seeks to address.

Some of these more ideational treatments of economic growth are very close to my analysis as they contemplate about the “words that come to mind when you read the word “growth”” (Schmelzer et al. 2022) and criticize the connection between economic growth on the one hand and wellbeing, progress or jobs on the other hand (Haapanen and Tapio 2016). However, none of them considers that it might be fruitful to have as a starting point for research (or debate) on growth the idea that what economic growth is might be unclear or that it might even be an empty signifier.

This article challenges the idea that economic growth is perceived by non-professionals on the basis of its definition. It is the first one to argue that economic

growth is an empty signifier using a pioneering approach, combining the Laclauian perspective (see below) and analyses of the way journalists and external columnists write and speak about economic growth.

The choice of Laclau's discourse theory over other similar approaches, such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (see, e.g., Farkas 2023), stems from Laclau's conceptualization of empty signifiers. This conceptualization is well-developed, CDA, on the other hand, is analytically focused on different linguistic tools. Although CDA does engage with the "local meanings" of words and examines their vagueness (e.g., van Dijk 2009, 69–71), it is not specifically concerned with vague terms that mark the limits of the system of signification (Wodak and Meyer 2009).

The lack of clarity surrounding the meaning of economic growth forms the basis for this paper's central research question: (1) whether economic growth functions as an empty signifier. I argue that this is indeed the case, and the paper will demonstrate that economic growth fulfills the definitional criteria of an empty signifier (see below). If economic growth is an empty signifier, more robust empirical research is needed to address the following questions: (2) What is the dominant meaning of economic growth, (3) how does it become dominant, and (4) how might it be changed?

The main finding of this paper regarding the third question is that economic growth becomes sedimented as an objective presence due to several factors: a lack of knowledge about economic growth among journalists; adherence to genres such as news and interviews, which constrain critical engagement with the concept; and journalists' expectations that readers, editors, and mainstream media uphold certain ideological boundaries that must be respected. Concerning the fourth question, overcoming the sedimentation of economic growth is possible through quoting respected sources in news reporting, publishing opinion columns, or selecting topics that challenge the dominant economic growth agenda.

The next section provides a more detailed explanation of the concept of empty signifier, sedimentation and reactivation. Section three reviews relevant literature from closest disciplinary fields. Section four argues that it is useful to combine the Czech and Slovak media landscapes in order to analyze the local meaning of economic growth. It also outlines the methods employed in the analysis. Section five argues that economic growth functions as an empty signifier by demonstrating how it fulfills the definitional criteria established by Laclau and others. This section also examines how economic growth becomes sedimented as an objective reality and how such sedimentation can be challenged through the process of reactivation. Final section discusses the results.

## 2 Theory: Empty Signifiers, Sedimentation and Reactivation

Empty signifiers are crucial to the functioning of hegemony, as they enable the legitimation of the dominance of particular forces within a society through language. Certain signifiers (e.g., spoken or written words) appear neutral, unquestionable, or universally valid, and this apparent neutrality allows them to mask and naturalize the particular content they acquire within specific discourses. Laclau offers examples of empty signifiers such as order, unity, liberation, and revolution. These words signify something that is absent or lacking (e.g., order is invoked because order is perceived as lacking), and thus, as Laclau (2007, 44) notes, “various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack.” In this way, social struggles between groups are transformed into meta-struggles over the meaning of words, and the dominant group is the one capable of (temporarily and partially) fixing the meanings of empty signifiers, thereby stabilizing its dominance.

The first criterion of an empty signifier is its universality, which entails a lack of precise content. The terms suggested by Laclau illustrate this feature well. For instance, when someone claims that we need a revolution, they might refer to very different events: the revolution of 1917, the revolution of 1989, or even a solar revolution. The term revolution can thus be filled with a variety of meanings and functions as an empty signifier that awaits (partial) fixation by the dominant social force. Although empty signifiers can have many meanings, their reach is universal. In other words, the very function of emptiness is to enable universality. Only a vague, undefined notion can promise everything to everyone, just as a revolution is often portrayed as being for the benefit of all, or order is presented as guaranteeing equality before the law or economic growth is allegedly good for all. The success of empty signifiers lies in their capacity to allow everyone to imagine that their own specific vision or interest is encompassed within a general, inclusive term.

This leads to the second feature of empty signifiers: they carry a positive connotation. Order, which is the primary example used by Laclau, represents “an absence, an unfulfilled reality” (Laclau 2007, 44). In situations of radical disorganization of the social fabric, “people need an order” (Laclau 2007, 44). In other words, order is desired and so is economic growth. Various political forces compete to fill this lack precisely because filling it appears necessary and desirable. There is a general positive connotation of order and a general negative connotation of disorder just as economic growth is mostly positively connoted and its opposite is perceived negatively (e.g., in the media).

However, as Laclau emphasizes, not every vague signifier is an empty signifier. A signifier may refer to multiple meanings and remain ambiguous or equivocal without necessarily being empty. In other words, there are many ambiguous words, which are not empty signifiers. For a signifier to become (tendentially) empty, it must signify the limit of a system, which constitutes the third feature of an empty signifier. Beyond this limit lies a threat to the system itself – a threat Laclau (1990, 38) describes as “pure” because of its absolute nature. Economic growth signifies this limit as the lack of economic growth is perceived as a catastrophe evoking images from the Great Depression.

Every system contains limits, but since these are limits of a system of signification, they cannot be directly signified within the system. Signification happens within a system and cannot represent what lies beyond it. Therefore, these limits must be expressed differently. According to Laclau (2007, 37, *italics in original*), the limit is signified through “the *interruption or breakdown* of the system of signification”.

The fourth feature of empty signifiers relates to this interruption or breakdown, which is enacted when the empty signifier unites other signifiers through a chain of equivalences, thus establishing a difference not within the system, but between the system and its outside or negativity. It is as if an additional signifier-signified connection is created – one that bridges the inside and outside of the system. In this sense, a particular empty signifier is defined as the opposite of the system’s negativity. Importantly, a chain of equivalences does not imply sameness, similarity, or causality among the elements it connects. Rather, it constitutes an abstract unity of elements that are linked solely through their shared opposition to what lies outside the system.

For example, all possible different forms of order become expressions of order in general. They are rendered equivalent as various forms of order, thus turning order into an empty signifier. Like any other signifier, order is defined through its difference from another signifier – disorder – but here this difference marks the limit of the system. The system is presumed to be orderly, while what lies beyond it is conceived as disorder. Thus, the function of an empty signifier is to create and signify the limit of a system, while simultaneously indicating what threatens the system – disorder. Similarly, an economic system has its limit, which lies between economic growth and contraction. Economic contraction poses a threat to the system.

This threat represents another key feature of empty signifiers and is often articulated through fantasmatic narratives. Such narratives are not necessarily false or fabricated; rather, their defining feature is that they “structure a subject’s ‘lived reality’ by concealing the radical contingency of social relations” (Howarth 2013, 205). In other words, fantasmatic narratives work to exclude alternative visions of society by demonizing those alternatives and glorifying the dominant

option. These narratives have both a beatific and a horrific dimension, each infused with affective elements that provide emotional investment and identification. As Howarth and Glynos (2007, 147) put it, such narratives present “a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome” and “foretell disaster if the obstacle proves too threatening or insurmountable”. Thus, the beatific fantasy envisions the achievement of complete order, while the horrific dimension projects the fear of life in disorder.

Moreover, “fantasies seek directly to conjure up – or at least presuppose – an impossible union between incompatible elements” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147). For example, people may be ascribed contradictory characteristics, as often seen in racial stereotypes, such as being both irrational or unintelligent and cunning at the same time (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 148). Economic growth can be perceived as positive and at the same time as unsustainable. Similarly, diverse political actors may be grouped together under an abstract collective identity, such as humankind (Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2021). Opposing groups, e.g., political parties can all support economic growth. One can thus expect a connection between fantasmatic narratives and empty signifiers within discourses that unite opposing elements, creating a beatific dimension of the fantasmatic narrative that appears free of contradictions. All these elements are summed up in Table 1.

Empty signifiers are also closely linked to the processes of sedimentation and reactivation. Sedimentation refers to “a practice of routinization and forgetting of origins” (Laclau 1990, 34). Through sedimentation, “the system of possible

**Table 1:** Features of an empty signifier. Source: Author.

Features of an empty signifier	Explanation
1. Universality (emptiness)	Empty signifiers lack precise content and hold a variety of meanings, making them universally appealing. (4.5)
2. Positive connotation and desire	Empty signifiers have a positive connotation, and whatever they denote is desired by people. (4.1, 4.2)
3. Limit (and threat)	The opposite of what an empty signifier denotes is feared, thereby creating a limit of a system. (4.2)
4. Chain of equivalences	An empty signifier unites other signifiers in relation to itself through their opposition to the system’s negativity. (4.3)
5. Fantasmatic narratives	Empty signifiers serve as central elements in broader affective narratives, offering either a beatific or a horrific fantasy.(4.2)
6. Union between incompatible elements	Empty signifiers can unify contradictory features, allowing them to transcend contradictions and also bring together actors from opposing ideological camps. (4.4)

alternatives tends to vanish,” and “the instituted tends to assume the form of a mere objective presence” (Laclau 1990, 34). In other words, meanings and practices that were originally contingent and contested come to appear natural, fixed, and unquestionable. However, this process of sedimentation can be disrupted through what Laclau (following Husserl) calls reactivation. Reactivation entails “rediscovering, through the emergence of new antagonism, the contingent nature of so-called ‘objectivity’” (ibid., 34–35). Once the original radical contingency has been forgotten and sedimented into objectivity, reactivation makes it possible to politicize these origins and reveal the contingent and constructed nature of the social. Through reactivation, it becomes possible to revisit and explore societal alternatives that had been obscured or erased through sedimentation.

### 3 Literature Review

Part of the literature to which this research contributes has already been mentioned in the introduction. This paper moves forward the research on economic growth as an ideology (Dale 2012, 2019; Latouche 2006, 2022; Parrique 2022b; Schmelzer et al. 2022; Victor 2008). This paper contributes to this subfield by proposing that economic growth is an empty signifier.

At the same time this paper contributes to empirical research on empty signifiers. Economic growth as an empty signifier is closest to empty signifiers “sustainable development” (Brown 2016; Davidson 2010; Telleria and Garcia-Arias 2021) and “development” (Ziai 2009). The particularity of the contribution to this subfield lies in introducing a concept from the realm of economics, which can be perceived in the public arena as more scientific and more precise than the concepts sustainability and development.

Media analysis of economic growth is another subfield to which this paper contributes. This field focuses on questions such as the political bias of economic news (Larcinese et al. 2011; Lott, Hassett, 2014) or the causal relation between economic performance and the coverage of the economy in the media (Hester, Gibson 2003; Hopkins et al. 2017; Soroka et al. 2015; Vasterman 2005).

Finally, this research builds on and complements analyses of representation of economic growth in the media. Knauß (2015, 2016) documented the rise of the economic growth paradigm in the German serious press from 1918 until the current period and observed a much sparser more critical approach to economic growth in opinion pages compared to the dominant pro-growth stance in the economic section. White (2003) found an abundance of positive economic growth metaphors in the Financial Times, while Lewis and Thomas (2015) identified a dominant positive representation of economic growth in the British and U.S. press. Similarly,



Gustafsson's (2013) analysis demonstrates the perceived naturalness of economic growth through her metaphor analysis.

## 4 Materials and Methods

The research presented in this paper is based on data from a qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012), which serves the methodological needs of Laclau's approach to discourse analysis, in particular his focus on empty signifiers. This method reveals both the dominant "official" meaning of economic growth and its understanding among those who regularly reproduce the discourse of economic growth.

The analyzed corpus consists of articles from mainstream and alternative Czech and Slovak media, with the aim of covering the mainstream–alternative spectrum and including perspectives from both sides of the alternative spectrum, as well as from a specialized economic outlet. The choice to combine Czech and Slovak media is based on the following logic: although there are some differences between the two national media systems, they are sufficiently similar and complementary for the purposes of this research. This similarity and complementarity are considered more significant than their differences and separation, as the goal was to create a comprehensive corpus that serves the broader research aim – analyzing a full range of mainstream and alternative discourses. A corpus focused on economic growth should include alternative (green) left, alternative right, and economic media, and it is also valuable to consider distinctions within the mainstream media based on ownership. Accordingly, the corpus includes the center-right, oligarch-owned daily *MF Today*, the centrist, non-oligarchic Slovak daily *Daily N*, the neoliberal economic weekly *Ekonom*, the non-mainstream leftist online daily *Daily Referendum*, and the alternative conservative monthly *Earth and Age*.

The analyzed periods are April–June 2017, January–March 2018, and July–September 2019, selected because of their "non-eventful" nature to avoid coverage dominated by specific environmental or economic crises (e.g., the summer drought of 2018). This selection allows the analysis to focus on routine reporting and commentary, rather than event-driven coverage. The selected periods were sufficiently large for the purposes of this study, and it was not necessary to include additional time frames. In total, 11,658 articles were included in the original corpus. From this set, articles were selected for analysis if they contained the terms "growth," "boom," and "recovery" (in their various grammatical forms), used in an

economic sense. These terms were chosen to identify articles that engage directly with the discourse of economic growth. This selection resulted in a final analytical corpus of 555 articles (representing 4.8 % of all articles published during the selected periods).

The analysis proceeded through the creation of analytical categories and the subsequent subsumption of text segments under categories that were both deductively and inductively developed. The deductive categories were derived from the features of the concept of empty signifier. For example, in relation to the positive connotation of economic growth as an empty signifier, the deductive categories were based on the basic logical distinctions (Schreier 2012, 86), including positive, neutral, and negative representations of economic growth. Inductive categories then captured the various ways these basic deductive categories were manifested in the texts, such as “economic growth causing positive outcomes”. Further deductive categories such as “the desire for economic growth” or “the chain of equivalences” taken from the concept of empty signifier were used in the qualitative content analysis of the corpus (see section “Results”).

The analysis of texts was complemented by an analysis of semi-structured interviews, typically lasting between 20 and 40 min, conducted via Zoom. The journalists selected for interviews included both authors of articles mentioning economic growth within the analyzed corpus and current staff members of the selected media outlets who cover ecological or economic issues. The sample included internal or external columnists as well as reporters. In total, 20 interviews were conducted, along with one additional interaction via email.

Just as the analysis of journalistic articles, the interviews were focused on how the respondents perceive and understand economic growth and the interview data were also analyzed with the use of qualitative content analysis and interpreted in relation to the conceptual categories of the empty signifier, sedimentation and reactivation concepts, with the aim of identifying how journalists’ perspectives correspond to these categories. Here again, qualitative content analysis was subordinated to the conceptual work based on the concept of empty signifier explained in the theoretical section.

While some of the analytical categories emerged from the textual analysis, others were informed by the interview data, and both sources were combined to address the main research question. For example, certain vague or unclear conceptualizations of economic growth, which are not directly visible in the published articles, could only be identified through the interviews.

The following section presents the results of my analysis.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Positive Representation of Economic Growth

The most obvious aspect of economic growth as an empty signifier is its positive representation. My research confirms the dominance of the positive representation of economic growth in the studied mainstream media (see literature review), with over 70 % of relevant articles portraying economic growth positively, almost a quarter taking a neutral stance, and only slightly more than 2 % presenting it negatively.

There were various ways in which economic growth was represented positively. One approach was through the use of positively connoted words. Economic growth itself was described as “healthy,” “refreshing,” or simply “pleasant.” Furthermore, economic growth was often directly associated with positively connoted terms. For example, GDP growth was described as the “positive effect” of lower taxes, a period of economic growth was referred to as a “successful period,” OECD economists were “optimistic” about global economic growth, and when an economy grows, it was said to be “doing well,” in a “good condition,” or experiencing a “very good year.” Economic growth was considered “fine,” a “bonus,” something to “enjoy” or be “enthusiastic” about. Simply put, economic growth was portrayed as “a favorable indicator” or “good news.”

The idea that economic growth is inherently positive for a society can also be observed in syntax. A common sentence structure involves placing economic growth in opposition to something negative. For example: “Despite economic growth, every tenth Frenchman is without employment.” Such phrasing implies that economic growth typically leads to employment (i.e., something positive) but is currently failing to do so.

Occasionally, metaphors were used to represent economic growth positively, such as an “economic miracle.” Additionally, the word “growth” sometimes co-occurred with terms like “development” or “progress.” Overall, the positive representation of economic growth was dominant in the analyzed Czech and Slovak mainstream press.

### 5.2 The Fantasmatic Narrative of Economic Growth

As empty signifiers carry a positive connotation, they are also desired. According to the authors of some of the analyzed texts various actors – including states, governments, international organizations, politicians, investors, and voters – “want”

economic growth, consider it a “goal,” are “lured” by it, or are “attuned” to it. Support for economic growth is framed as a “must,” a “necessity,” or a “priority.” Economic growth represents the social consensus on what should be achieved.

However, this desire is not merely a simple aspiration within a system for whatever the system offers. Rather, it is a desire that defines the system’s limits. An empty signifier creates a distinction between the system and its negativity. This becomes evident through the affective dimension of the fantasmatic narrative. Economic growth is not only positively represented and desired; it is also seen as essential to maintaining stability. It “keeps the mechanism going” (Mainstream 7) and “keeps social peace” both at the national level (Mainstream 15, also Alternative right 1; Mainstream 7) and the international level (Mainstream 5; Mainstream 14). Economic growth is so powerful that it takes on a systemic character – one could argue that it is fundamental to the functioning of the system.

The significance of a limit becomes evident when the absence of economic growth is framed as leading to a disastrous future in the fantasmatic narrative. Without economic growth, “it will be a catastrophe” (Mainstream 5). Its absence will result in the “instability of the whole system” (Mainstream 10), and “everything [will fall] apart” (Mainstream 14). Economic growth is deemed necessary; otherwise, there will be “huge problems” (Mainstream 14, also Mainstream 15). The potential absence of economic growth evokes a terrifying future, reinforcing the systemic nature of this empty signifier. While economic growth is universally desired, its lack is perceived as a threat to all.

Thus, the fantasmatic nature of the economic growth narrative becomes fully apparent when economic growth itself is questioned.

### 5.3 A Chain of Equivalences of Economic Growth

The beatific and horrific aspects of the fantasmatic narrative of economic growth are further reinforced by a chain of equivalences, with economic growth as the nodal point. All individual “demands” are unified into a single overarching demand for economic growth, thereby once again signifying the system’s limit. As Laclau and Mouffe state, “[a] chain of equivalences constructs what is beyond the limit as that which it is not” (2001, 144). Economic growth functions as the very foundation of the current system, with other elements referring back to it. This is evident in the causal reasoning frequently found in media discourse.

The most common positive connotation of economic growth is established by portraying it as the cause of, or being linked to, something positive. Thus, economic growth “supports,” “is the reason for,” “is the reflection of,” “can lead to,” “contributes to,” “is behind,” “motivates,” “helps,” “is the sign of,” “gives a chance to,”

“explains,” “gives,” and “brings” benefits such as employment, higher wages, increased consumption, lower debt, budget surpluses, improved public finances, “governmental gifts”, consumer confidence, bank recovery, improved ratings, and even a reduced risk of popular uprisings.

All of these supposedly positive phenomena are sought after by various groups, and all these demands are ultimately unified into a singular demand for economic growth. This process creates a chain of equivalences, where the differences among these elements are minimized in contrast to the fundamental distinction between them – united in economic growth – and their opposite: the absence of economic growth.

The link between economic growth and other positive economic elements operates in both directions. In Czech and Slovak media, the most commonly cited causes of economic growth include household consumption (linked to rising wages), foreign demand, various forms of investment, cheap credit, and neoliberal reforms.

Just as economic growth is portrayed as the cause of positive outcomes, a lack of economic growth is framed as the cause of negative consequences. Similarly, negative conditions are presented as both the result of low economic growth and the reason for economic decline.

## 5.4 The Unity of Incompatible Elements in Economic Growth

The discourse of economic growth unites not only humankind as a whole but also actors who oppose each other in other political spheres. When it comes to economic growth, however, they find common ground. The question is not whether to achieve economic growth, but how. It is universally regarded as desirable by these actors. Economic growth thus “gives symbolic unity to disparate struggles” (Laclau 2005, 216).

This unity is evident not only among, for example, social democratic and conservative parties worldwide but also in the media. It is unsurprising that mainstream media most often represent economic growth in a positive or neutral way. However, even in the alternative media I analyzed – both left- and right-wing – positive or neutral representations of economic growth remain prevalent. The alternative media, therefore, exist on both sides of the limit of the system of signification. In other words, as economic growth has become the limit of social discourse, the alternative media simultaneously reproduce the dominant pro-growth paradigm (which remains within the limit) and, at times, challenge it by taking a critical stance toward growth.

The unity of seemingly incompatible elements is also apparent in interviews. Economic growth was criticized by respondents from the mainstream for “having an

influence on nature” (Mainstream 12) and even “destroying the environment” (Mainstream 13). Economic growth is thus not free of contradictions. However, as an empty signifier, it manages to circumvent these contradictions by referring to other signifiers, such as green growth, which in mainstream discourse preserves economic growth in the face of the climate crisis.

In several instances, awareness of issues related to economic growth led respondents to distinguish between sustainable and unsustainable growth (Mainstream 5; Mainstream 9, also Alternative right 2; Mainstream 13). As one interviewee noted, “Sustainable economic growth should not have those negative elements [harming the environment, increasing inequalities]” (Mainstream 9). Another stated, “When I am writing about growth [and] I do not write [that growth should be sustainable], I always have it in mind” (Mainstream 5).

Just as development continues under the label of sustainable development, so does economic growth persist as green growth. Just as development remains a necessity, so does economic growth. According to mainstream discourse, without economic growth, “you would accelerate climate change because you would have to go back to those primitive forms of growth such as forest clearing” (Mainstream 1, also Mainstream 5). A similar argument applies to food production. While international documents on sustainable development promise a world free of hunger, a Slovak centrist economic journalist does not see “another alternative for how to feed the population if there were no growth” (Mainstream 3).

These supporters of economic growth acknowledged the existence of a problem but believed that the solution to ecological sustainability lies in more economic growth – albeit in a sustainable or green form. A slightly more critical respondent from the pro-growth camp estimated that economic growth would continue for another 10–15 years before “there will have to be a correction” (Mainstream 3). However, by correction, he meant green growth, thereby once again resolving the contradictions of economic growth within its own framework.

## 5.5 The Emptiness of Economic Growth

Finally, an empty signifier should be empty, equivocal, or ambiguous while simultaneously signifying a limit. So what makes economic growth an empty or ambiguous term?

Interviews suggest that journalists may lack a clear understanding of what economic growth actually is. One respondent admitted to not knowing the economic definition of growth (Mainstream 8), another was unsure whether he had ever considered how he perceives economic growth (Mainstream 4), and yet another

described economic growth as a terminus technicus – an “imaginary value” that one neither understands nor can explain (Mainstream 15).

This lack of clarity is also evident in the most contradictory response. One interviewee stated: “I am persuaded that growth is a positive thing [...] but sometimes I am not certain, when in the name of growth [...] nature is destroyed [...] At the end of the day, if I were to choose, I would prefer economic growth, but I do not know whether that is good or bad” (Mainstream 14).

If the interviews suggest a general lack of knowledge or uncertainty about what economic growth means, then who defines its meaning? In the Czech and Slovak mainstream media, it appears that the perception of the non-expert reader becomes the primary determinant of that meaning. Here, economic growth is not necessarily understood as an increase in production over time but it could be understood in terms of personal financial or general well-being. Economic growth is perceived as “good” in a broad sense. As one respondent explained, “from the journalistic point of view, it is something through which I tell people whether they will be doing better or worse” (Mainstream 11). Another journalist noted that what matters is not an official definition but rather “how the reader understands it [...] and for the large majority of people, economic growth means how much they earn” (Mainstream 4). In this way, the meaning of economic growth, as defined by economists, is complemented – or even replaced – by a much broader public perception. This generalization transforms economic growth from a specific economic concept into an empty signifier.

In summary, a lack of knowledge or uncertainty about economic growth – combined with its previously analyzed features – contributes to its role as an empty signifier.

## 5.6 Sedimentation

Since the moment of sedimentation (Laclau 1990, 34), a lack of knowledge has contributed to further concealing the origins of economic growth. Economic growth has assumed the form of a mere objective presence (*ibid.*). There is no need for a belief in economic growth that requires an understanding of what it actually entails. Simply put, GDP growth is seen as “a standard figure” based “on the authority of the Czech Statistical Office [...] Philosophical pondering about that figure does not belong to mere reporting” (Mainstream 10).

The issue at hand is that “mere reporting” can have a political impact through the chain of equivalences and the general positive connotation of economic growth reinforced over the past decades. Mere reporting strengthens this connotation in the minds of readers.

It is not only the general lack of knowledge about economic growth that contributes to its sedimentation; specific journalistic genres also enable the reproduction of the economic growth paradigm. When asked about the discrepancy between their critique of economic growth in interviews and their positive representation of it in published articles, several respondents explained that they were reporting news, not writing opinion pieces. “I reflect or describe some situation [...] I am trying to limit my input as much as possible [...] if I were writing a blog [...] I would spit out all the doubts I have about the concept of economic growth” (Mainstream 15, also Mainstream 10). Another respondent stated, “I don’t know where to put [criticism of economic growth] in order to [make it an organic part] of the text” (Alternative left 1). A strong critic of economic growth who had previously written critical opinion columns for the leftist mainstream newspaper *Pravda* but now reports for the centrist *Daily N* explained, “It is just a way of reporting” (Mainstream 2).

These statements highlight the power of the news genre in shaping discourse around economic growth. A critique of economic growth does not align with the supposedly neutral nature of news reporting. Instead, the positivity associated with economic growth is rendered non-normative through the structure of news.

It is not only news reporting that creates limits on what can be said. The dominant discourse also influences the genre of interviews. A respondent from the non-mainstream left, who writes about domestic politics, occasionally used the term economic growth in a neutral or positive way despite personally holding strong anti-growth views. In one case, he was interviewing a mainstream politician before an election about his party’s program, which included economic growth. He explained: “If I cast doubt on a paradigm from the outset of the interview, then we would ideologically trench ourselves and would not get anywhere [...] it is not part of the debate” (Alternative left 1).

Reporting or interviewing from within the dominant discourse may reproduce its key tenets. Simply put: “You are within the limits of a debate that does not include the topic [of degrowth], and you are writing for people who do not know about it” (Alternative left 1). Thus, even a media outlet critical of economic growth adheres to the dominant discourse when reporting and doing interviews with mainstream actors.

Beyond news and interviews, editorial pressures further reinforce the dominant discourse. Both readers and editors create constraints on how economic growth can be discussed. A journalist covering economic and European news, often with an ecological focus, for the centrist *Daily N* stated that he would likely struggle to continue publishing his work if he surpassed “the level of acceptability for the common consumer of this news or for the editor” (Mainstream 2). A journalist from the Czech mainstream media similarly explained, “I cannot do anything about this [contradiction between the impossibility of never-ending growth and ‘growth’



meaning that people are doing well] from my position in my medium because their first needs to emerge a broader awareness among my readers in order for them to be capable of absorbing this information and also in order not to have the editor correct it" (Mainstream 11).

Even in the non-mainstream left, concerns about reader expectations play a role: "If we suddenly changed from day to day and became at once a purely degrowth medium [...] if such a transition were too quick and 'radical,' it could theoretically harm our newspaper" (Alternative left 3). In other words, there is a (self-imposed) institutional pressure based on assumptions about the discursive limits of a given medium.

Two mainstream journalists were even openly critical of their own media outlets and the influence these outlets had on them. One admitted, "If I were to be completely frank, but this will not get into my texts, I would see there the problem of too much emphasis on growth because I think that the planet really has limited resources [...] but after all, if I have to somehow honor [...] the policy of our company, I cannot write against the market economy or against capitalism, and the person who will negate economic growth will get on this thin line. [...] I assume the position of our medium, from which, if I do not want to lie to myself, I cannot completely break out" (Mainstream 14). Another put it even more bluntly: "We cannot write [that eternal growth is not possible] yet in the mainstream [...] We are a reactionary medium" (Mainstream 11).

In sum, economic growth is continuously sedimented into an objectivity. This process is reinforced through the discursive reproduction of economic growth due to a lack of knowledge, journalistic genres that limit what can be said, and the subordination of any potential critique to the perceived expectations of readers, editors, and the ideological constraints of centrist media institutions.

## 5.7 Reactivation

The process of sedimentation can be altered through what Laclau calls reactivation. As discussed in the theoretical section, "reactivation involves rediscovering, through the emergence of new antagonism, the contingent nature of so-called 'objectivity'" (Laclau 1990, 34–35). In simpler terms, reactivation reveals the political nature of the social order, demonstrating that it can be transformed.

So, what can be done? How can the media engage in reactivation? How can they begin to expose the contingent nature of the supposed objectivity of economic growth – an objectivity they themselves uphold? In other words, how could more critical reporting on economic growth be achieved, according to journalists?

In general, “It is more strategic to bring these topics to the public space in a slow and gradual way” (Alternative left 3). Another respondent suggested, “Maybe given the current talk about the green economy, even though that is a bit of greenwashing, gradually more and more people will get used to the idea [that economic growth is unsustainable]” (Mainstream 11). Thus, one approach to shifting the discourse is to gradually introduce critiques of economic growth into mainstream media.

One mainstream journalist envisioned a scenario in which reporting could take a negative stance on economic growth – specifically, if growth were linked to the reopening of a brown coal mine and the resulting electricity production. “That would be a story to sell [...] but it would have to be well researched, and I am afraid that Slovak media do not have the manpower for that” (Mainstream 7).

However, another respondent argued that such critiques cannot start in the news: “First, you need to have public visionaries who will talk about it in the opinion section” (Mainstream 11). Once that foundation is established, a journalist could “quote at the end of the article some at least a bit known, respected economist [...] but only briefly, and it would not be the main thing the article says” (ibid.). Another possibility is to feature a “relevant voice [...] and you will put him there as a critic” (Alternative left 1). The challenge, however, is that “reporting is based on citations, and when there is no organization that [...] would cast doubt on growth as such, then it is difficult to get it into that genre” (ibid.). A potential “way out” would be to write about a governmental plan that “counts on economic growth and its greening [...] and show why it is not enough” (ibid.). This perspective challenges the idea that critiques of economic growth must remain confined to opinion pages; instead, such critiques could be incorporated into regular reporting – provided that respected institutions employ ecological economists who challenge the growth paradigm.

Finally, in centrist media, the approach could involve framing economic growth in a way that highlights the absence of equality and sustainability. One journalist explained that he does this by carefully selecting topics (e.g., ecology, redistribution) and structuring his arguments accordingly (Mainstream 2). For example, an article about gas as a transition fuel should not focus solely on profitability but also consider its compatibility with environmental sustainability. Likewise, an argument advocating for the highest possible growth need not be presented as the most relevant or important viewpoint (ibid.). Thus, while journalistic genres impose certain constraints, they can be partially overcome through strategic agenda-setting.

It is important to note, however, that this approach does not directly introduce degrowth into the news. Instead, it involves introducing topics that could indirectly lead to questioning economic growth. Degrowth itself remains beyond the limits of what can be said in mainstream news reporting.

Overall, journalists see several ways to introduce a critique of economic growth: quoting a respected source critical of economic growth in news reporting; publishing

critiques in opinion sections to gradually shift public discourse; selecting topics and framing news in ways that challenge the economic growth agenda.

## 6 Discussion

This article has shown that economic growth is an empty signifier. The meaning of economic growth is not fixed by its textbook definition but instead at least in the media carries a broader positive connotation beyond merely an increase in production over time. This is consistent with the extant literature on the representation of economic growth in the media (Gustafsson 2013; Knauß 2015, 2016; Lewis and Thomas 2015; White 2003).

Such a positive representation moves the meaning of economic growth from its textbook definition to an improvement in wellbeing in a much more general sense. This finding is corroborated by a 2002 survey of 339 respondents in the Detroit Metropolitan Area, which included an open-ended question about the meaning of economic growth. The most common responses were improvements in the standard of living (31.9 %), jobs (23.6 %), increase in the nation's production, GNP, economic strength (18 %), economic stability (8.9 %), and improvements in public welfare (8.7 %). Only 5.7 % associated economic growth with negative elements such as pollution, waste, and increased inequality.

Economic growth also signifies the limit of a system of signification, leading to the construction of both beatific and horrific fantasmatic narratives around it. It also establishes a chain of equivalences, uniting incompatible elements and opposing political forces.

Interviews with journalists and external columnists also reveal how economic growth becomes sedimented into an objective presence and how it might be reactivated. Sedimentation occurs through the discursive reproduction of economic growth, reinforced by a lack of knowledge about the concept, by journalistic genres that restrict what can be said, and by the subordination of critique to the expectations of readers, editors, and the ideological positioning of centrist media institutions.

Even the non-mainstream left medium, which is rather critical of economic growth may be compelled to adhere to the established rules of formation (Foucault 2002) of the economic growth discourse in order to participate in it on its non-opinion pages. This is consistent with an analysis of the German media (Knauß 2015, 2016), which found that critiques of economic growth were largely confined to opinion pages.

A lack of clarity in the understanding of economic growth expressed by some of the journalists is corroborated by a survey data on economic growth and the

environment. Some respondents who agreed with stopping economic growth also favored high positive GDP growth rates in a separate question (Drews et al. 2018, 269). Others simultaneously agreed with contradictory statements, such as economic growth harms the environment and a country needs economic growth to protect the environment. According to this meta-analysis, “the fraction of respondents who do not have stable opinions is significant” (ibid, 267).

From a policy perspective, such non-knowledge can be just as powerful as knowledge (McGoey 2012, 3), enabling a potentially negative phenomenon to take on a predominantly positive meaning and contributing to its sedimentation in public discourse.

Regarding reactivation, respondents emphasized the need for a gradual approach, beginning with public intellectuals and economists questioning economic growth before journalists could critically report on it. Another way was to select topics that would enable a challenge to economic growth.

A potential limitation of this research is that it was conducted prior to major crises such as COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the energy crisis. In general, crises unrelated to climate change tend to ignore controversies surrounding economic growth. On the contrary, they may even reinforce the desire for a return to the so-called good old days of strong economic growth. Future research could focus on the European energy crisis and how the alleged link to declining competitiveness, may have further strengthened economic discourses that prioritize increased investment and productivity while sidelining ecological concerns.

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