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On the links between climate scepticism and right-wing populism (RWP): an explanatory approach based on cultural political economy (CPE)

Tobias Haas

Research Institute for Sustainability – Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS), Potsdam, Germany

ABSTRACT

Various analyses show that right-wing populist parties (RWP) tend to be sceptical of climate science and policy. This points to a blank space in the dominant analyses of populism: their blindness towards society-nature relations. This paper aims to develop an approach grounded in Cultural Political Economy (CPE) that can be used to decipher the mediation of RWP within the context of economic, political, and cultural developments as well as society-nature relations. Against this background, the argument is developed that RWP is concerned not only with countering migration and processes of societal liberalisation, but also with defending an existing way of life that is firmly rooted in the destructive appropriation of nature. As a current of right-wing politics, RWP defends the imperial mode of living by expressing scepticism towards the existence of anthropogenic climate change. The paper contributes to a better understanding of the political economy of RWP by linking the dimensions of social domination with the appropriation of nature.

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1. Introduction

Right-wing populism (RWP) has been on the rise in large parts of the world in recent decades. Cas Mudde (2004) already identified a ‘populist zeitgeist’ in the early 2000s. In recent years, this has found expression in a strengthening of RWP, which has been reflected in election results in many countries. The rise of RWP has triggered intense debate in the academic field. As a first axis of differentiation, we can distinguish between supply-oriented explanatory approaches, which analyse the ideologies, strategies, and practices of RWP actors, and demand-oriented approaches, which focus on the worldviews, desires, and interests of voters and supporters. The second axis of differentiation concerns the question of whether the strengthening of RWP is driven more by economic, political, or cultural developments (Harder and Opratko 2021, p. 2). While some authors locate the breeding ground of RWP primarily in the economic sphere (Manow 2018, Rodrik 2018), others place it more within the cultural sphere (Zürn and De Wilde 2016, Merkel 2017, Norris and Inglehart 2019), or blame the rise of right-wing formations on the turning away of communist and social democratic parties from their core electorates (Eribon 2018). Nancy Fraser (2016), for example, argues that developments in recent decades have been marked by ‘progressive neoliberalism’. According to Fraser, this is based on a type of pact between social forces that push for economic liberalisation and

CONTACT Tobias Haas  tobias.haas@rifs-potsdam.de  Research Institute for Sustainability – Helmholtz Center Potsdam, Berlinerstr. 130, Potsdam 14467, Germany

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progressive left groups. While the former have achieved far-reaching economic liberalisation in recent decades, the Left has focused increasingly on questions of identity politics (cultural aspects) without opposing economic liberalisation. Without going deeper into the debate about the various explanatory approaches at this point, it is worth noting that society–nature relations have largely been ignored in the debate on populism (Sommer et al. 2021) until recently (Lockwood 2018, Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021).

This long-standing neglect of the relationship between RWP and society–nature relations is surprising, since the empirical findings are clear: a characteristic of most RWP parties, which are understood in this paper as part of a broader radical right-wing current (Varga and Buzogány 2021, Forchtner and Lubarda 2022), is the denial or scepticism of anthropogenic climate change and climate policy measures (McCarthy 2019, Schaller and Carius 2019). Schaller and Carius (2019) examine the positioning and voting behaviour of RWP parties in Europe. They show that there are different positions, ranging from recognition to consistent scepticism of climate change, but that a sceptical orientation predominates. They distil four main arguments put forward by RWP: First, that climate policy is economically harmful; Second, that it is socially unjust; Third, that climate policy is harmful to the environment (especially the expansion of wind energy); Fourth, that it is not worthwhile. The incorporation of climate scepticism within present day RWP is remarkable, since environmental concern is by no means a left-wing issue per se, and a long history of right-wing environmentalism exists. In most cases, the combination of environmental protection and *Heimatschutz* (a romanticised, nationalistic notion of homeland protection) is central to right-wing ecology (Forchtner 2020).

Against the background of the above-mentioned research gap, Matthew Lockwood (2018) outlines how linkages between RWP and climate scepticism might be explored. Building on a careful review of the literature on populism, he distinguishes, following the second axis of differentiation, between two different explanatory approaches: On the one hand, a structuralist approach that primarily attributes the recent growth of right-wing populism to political and economic developments (Lockwood 2018, pp. 7–10). Other explanatory approaches locate the strengthening of RWP primarily within the ideological sphere. Proponents of this line identify a new social cleavage that runs between nationalist communitarians and liberal cosmopolitans (Lockwood 2018, pp. 10–14). Lockwood argues that this ideological explanation is more plausible, since climate change has become a core element of liberal cosmopolitanism: ‘Although it is not the primary target of current populist concern in most cases, climate change is the cosmopolitan issue par excellence.’ (Lockwood 2018, p. 12)

While Lockwood undoubtedly has the merit of having systematically reviewed the literature and pointed out the connection between RWP and climate scepticism, his juxtaposition of structuralist and ideological explanations reproduces a central weakness of research on populism: The preoccupation with determining the central explanatory factor causes most approaches to lose sight of the articulation of economic, political, and cultural developments. This is mirrored in Lockwood’s (2018, p. 3) conclusion:

[...] whilst the structuralist approach struggles to account for a number of phenomena associated with the presence of RWP, ideological explanations are more persuasive in drawing links between climate scepticism and nationalism, authoritarianism and anti-elitism, so that climate change features as a kind of ‘collateral damage’.

While it is doubtful that structuralist interpretations can properly be reduced to a single approach, Lockwood’s contribution fails to explain how structural and ideological developments are linked. Various approaches in the tradition of critical political economy, such as the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach developed by Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop (2013), or in the tradition of cultural studies that was essentially developed by Stuart Hall (1988), take up precisely this problem: cultural and ideological issues are always in articulation with political and economic developments (Biskamp 2019, Harder and Opratko 2021). A distinction between structuralist and ideological explanations therefore raises analytical problems. For, as Lockwood (2018, p. 15) acknowledges, it is precisely a matter of analysing how structuralist and ideological developments are articulated with one another.

In this paper I present an explanatory approach that aims to render the interactions of political-economic development dynamics and cultural aspects accessible to analysis in order to grasp the tendency towards climate scepticism within RWP.¹ I propose that a CPE perspective in combination with Stuart Hall's (1988) considerations on authoritarian populism (AP) can be applied to locate the seedbed(s) of present-day AP and its affinity for climate change scepticism. As CPE and AP-approaches do not consider the metabolism between society and nature on a conceptual level, these approaches are complemented with approaches from political ecology, such as the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen 2021). This makes it possible to relate the articulation of cultural, political, and economic developments to society-nature relations (Pichler et al. 2017).

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers an overview of the core concepts of populism, RWP, and the link between RWP and climate scepticism. Building on this, Section 3 outlines core features of a CPE perspective and the articulation of economic, political, and cultural developments. In doing so, I refer to Stuart Hall's concept of AP, which he developed in the 1970s and 1980s in order to understand Thatcherism. Section 4 shows how these considerations, in combination with approaches from political ecology, are helpful to understand the empirically observable tendency of recent RWP (as part of the far right) toward different forms of climate scepticism. This is illustrated by some examples from the USA and the European context as well as conceptual approaches such as the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen 2021) and 'petro-masculinities' (Daggett 2018). In the concluding section I summarise a CPE-based framing of RWP and outline the need for further research.

2. Populism, right-wing populism, and climate scepticism

The concept of populism attempts to grasp various political constellations that have occurred in different historical and spatial contexts. Classic examples of populist movements include Narodism in Russia, Poujadism in France, and Peronism in Argentina (Mudde 2004, pp. 548–51, Taggart 2004, pp. 270–1). The common denominator of these social phenomena is the juxtaposition of 'the people' in opposition to elites. Ordinary people are mostly portrayed by populists as being righteous and endowed with common sense, whereas elites are portrayed as corrupt and their actions as being directed against the interests of the people. Mudde (2004, p. 543) defines populism as:

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

Pierre Ostiguy (2020, p. 41) criticises that the juxtaposition of 'people versus elite' does not go far enough because RWP is consistently characterised by a double front: opposing both 'the elite', but also a 'nefarious minority' that may take on various (and changing) forms. In the case of RWP in Europe and North America, for example, Muslim immigrants and climate activists loom large as central enemy images. Accordingly, populism is often understood as a thin-centred ideology that needs to be articulated in conjunction with a host ideology with a deeper socio-analytical foundation (Loew and Faas 2019). This leads to the distinction between left- and right-wing populism as central subcategories.

Some authors argue that populism is a common strategy in the struggle to win majorities within the context of liberal democracy. For Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, populism is a way of constructing the political (Laclau 2012, Mouffe 2018). However, Sum and Jessop criticise this understanding of populism as purely discursive and lacking a solid political-economic foundation. Laclau and Mouffe, they argue, 'abandon any critical and effective account of the relations between semiosis and structuration in a social world beyond discourse.' (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 132) Other authors argue that emerging populist movements express a crisis of democracy and flourish in contexts characterised by gaps in democratic representation, i.e. contexts in which established parties and interest groups are unable to represent society at large without recourse to populist claims

of interpretation (Mudde 2004, McCarthy 2019). Taggart (2004, p. 274) goes so far as to declare scepticism towards the institutions of representative democracy as a central defining characteristic of populism. Other authors point to the naturalisation of social inequalities along axes such as race or gender as a defining feature of RWP alongside the juxtaposition of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’ and ‘nefarious minorities’ (Ekberg et al. 2022, p. 70). In sum, RWP takes up societal issues and brings them into a context of meaning via semiotic practices that naturalise social inequalities and power relations.

Against this background three aspects must be considered in seeking to determine the connection between RWP and climate scepticism. Firstly, populism as a concept and populist movements in practice must be viewed and interpreted within their specific contexts. While some approaches locate the causes of RWP in economic polarisation during the course of globalisation, others cite cultural (and generational) modernisation processes or shifts within political parties and systems. However, there seems to be agreement that despite all the differences in explanatory approaches in ontological and epistemological terms, they all have a certain plausibility, suggesting that monocausal interpretive approaches are inadequate to grasping this phenomenon. These considerations indicate the need to analyse populism in its specific spatio-temporal contexts. The populism of Narodism had little in common with Peronism, Thatcherism, or Trumpism. In this respect, it is a matter of defining the historical ‘conjuncture’ (Hall 1988, p. 130) within which populist currents form. Mikko Lehtonen (2016, p. 76) refers to the Latin origin of the term conjuncture [*con* (together); *iungo* (join)] and that the concept ‘highlights mutual relations and concepts’ in Hall’s work. According to Harder and Opratko (2021, p. 4) this refers to three core elements of a conjunctural analysis: First, the concept refers neither to abstract social structures nor to concrete events but rather to political-economic and cultural developments on an intermediate level of abstraction. Second, the concept refers to a specific period in which economic, political, and cultural developments are articulated in a specific way. Third, since articulations are always contradictory and contested, conjunctures are also characterised by agency: ‘a conjuncture is determined by the ways in which people and institutions deal with contradictions and conflicts.’ (Harder and Opratko 2021, p. 4)

Secondly, the understanding of populism as a thin-centred ideology refers to the necessity of its articulation with other ideologies. However, since populism cannot be reduced to a purely ideological level but is related to social relations, the question of articulation is twofold: with which ideologies and social interpretations of problems and approaches to solutions is populism articulated, and in what articulation is it related to the material societal context? These questions refer to the conflictual dimension of the political and the location of populist forces within it. Populist forces invariably position themselves within political conflicts, and those strategic calculations come into play in the tangible shaping of political agendas, for example with regard to positioning on climate change and climate policy (Selk and Kemmerzell 2021).

Thirdly, as Lockwood (2018) has rightly pointed out, dominant research on (right-wing) populism has not significantly engaged with the link between RWP and climate scepticism, resulting in a research gap that has increasingly been addressed in recent years. This needs to be further filled by deciphering the complex social and socio-ecological articulations in which RWP forces develop. Therefore, a conjunctural analysis of RWP must consider both social and society–nature relations.

Lockwood (2018) undoubtedly deserves credit for pointing this out; His work was a source of inspiration for several studies on the interplay between RWP and climate scepticism (Ćetković and Hagemann 2020, Huber et al. 2021). However, instead of reproducing the prevailing debate on RWP (i.e. whether economic, cultural, or political factors are decisive; or, as Lockwood (2018) terms them ‘structuralist’ or ‘ideological’ factors), I shall outline an approach that draws on critical political economy and cultural studies to contribute to a deeper understanding of the rise of RWP and its tendency to climate change scepticism.

3. Cultural political economy (CPE) or articulating economic, political, and cultural developments

The field of political economy is interdisciplinary: it examines the relationship between politics and economics. Does economics determine politics or is politics largely autonomous from the economic sphere? This question is addressed by various approaches. One analytical perspective that opposes both deterministic approaches in which the economic sphere governs the political as well as those in which the political sphere is posited as absolute, is the CPE approach, which is not uniform in itself (for an overview of different CPE approaches see Sum and Jessop 2013, pp. 20–2). Jessop understands CPE as:

an emerging post-disciplinary approach that highlights the contribution of the cultural turn (a concern with semiosis and meaning-making) to the analysis of the articulation between the economic and the political and their embedding in a broader set of social relations. (Jessop 2010, p. 336)

The roots of the approach are more broadly located in British International Political Economy. The approach is strongly inter- or even post-disciplinary, eclectic, and interpretative (in contrast to American International Political Economy, which, based on a positivist understanding of science, strongly emphasises the use of quantitative methods to demonstrate causal relationships) (Cohen 2007). Important points of reference for the CPE approach are Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault:

CPE combines concepts taken from Marxist political economy, Gramscian vernacular materialism, and Foucault's insights into disciplinary power. This combination is justified on the grounds that while Marx can explain *why* social structures take their peculiar forms due to underlying economic imperatives, Foucault is able to explain *how* such relations shape individuals' behaviour through mechanisms of social control. Gramsci is then interpreted as providing the conceptual apparatus linking the two. (Sau 2021, p. 7)

Combining different theoretical approaches, the CPE approach proposed by Sum and Jessop enables us to understand culture – that is, the generation of meaning (semiosis) – not as additive but as a co-evolutionary component of political economy (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 22). In that sense, semiosis and structuration are intertwined. Building on this, Sum and Jessop (2013, p. 20) identify the necessity to study 'the variation, selection and retention of semiosis and semiotic practices [...] in specific social struggles. (Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 20). This brief sketch of Sum and Jessop's approach to CPE shows that it aims to unravel the complex articulations between economics, politics, and culture. The social construction of meaning (semiosis) is always mediated by structural factors and vice versa. The CPE approach aims to do justice to the complex mediation between social structures, the social construction of meaning and interests by understanding political economy as culturally mediated and culture as politico-economically mediated. In this perspective, there is little sense in arguing as to whether the roots of RWP lie in the economic, political, or cultural spheres (second axis of differentiation). Rather, it is necessary to interpret the co-evolution of the spheres and actors' strategic semiotic approaches in social conflicts.

Stuart Hall (1988), the founder of cultural studies, draws on a number of theorists and schools of thought that also influence Sum's and Jessop's CPE approach. However, Hall's analysis is informed by a post-colonial perspective and a stronger emphasis on cultural aspects. His central theoretical point of reference was Antonio Gramsci, who dealt intensively with processes of hegemony formation, i.e. the universalisation of particular interests in political struggles. As the quotation above suggests, Gramsci's thinking on hegemony mediates between a political-economic analysis inspired by Marx and an analysis of processes of subjectivation oriented towards Foucault. Hall coined the concept of authoritarian populism (AP) while trying to understand the rise of Thatcherism in 1970s and '80s Britain. According to Hall, the historical conjuncture in which Thatcherism emerged was characterised by three developments: First, Britain's declining role in the global economy within the context of mounting crises towards the end of the Fordist era (rising unemployment, inflation, social unrest, etc.); second, the electorate's turn away from the British Labour Party and the social democratic model; and third, the intensification of conflicts in the context of the Cold War (Hall 1988, pp. 123–7).

Against this background, Thatcherism popularised an authoritarian, populist counter-concept of society based on individualism, competition, and elements of authoritarian statism. Hall classifies Thatcherism as populist because it succeeded in constructing opposition between ‘common people’ and the ‘social democratic elites’ while at the same time presenting itself as representing the interests of the people. In this respect, the concept stands as a blueprint for analysis of the historical conjuncture in Britain, in which a form of AP spread by strategically taking up economic, political, and cultural developments and crises-dynamics, and by articulating them by juxtaposing the interests of the people versus those of social democratic elites.²

However, Hall’s analysis has largely left unanswered the extent to which the discourses of AP have actually caught on in broad sections of society (Jessop et al. 1984). This points to the tension along the first axis of populism analyses, between supply-side and demand-side explanations and the problem of subjectification. Individuals’ worldviews are essentially formed through social institutions in mediation with personal experiences: ‘[...] what narratives they [individuals] decide to embrace is very difficult to predict, as each individual (even those within the same economic group) would find different narratives more or less appealing depending on their personal views and experiences.’ (Sau 2021, p. 12)

In summary, an analytical perspective based on CPE enables an understanding of the intertwining and interaction of economic, political, and cultural developments. Accordingly, we can assume that – depending on the respective historically concrete conjuncture and strategic capabilities of different actors – populist forces may form, flourish, consolidate, or disintegrate. The exact interrelationships, however, require explanation and, according to the argument put forward here, can be deciphered by attempting an analysis of the complex modes of articulation within social reality rather than by monocausal explanatory approaches. Regarding CPE and Hall’s concept of AP: It is important to note that while these provide important starting points for better understanding today’s RWP as part of the political right, they do not (or only rudimentarily) consider the complex articulations between society and nature. In this respect, they themselves leave an important gap that needs to be filled in order to explain the connection between RWP and climate scepticism.

4. Contours of a cultural political economy of right-wing populism and climate scepticism

While the CPE approach takes particular aim at the articulation between economic, political, and cultural developments, it fails at the conceptual level to take into account the metabolism between society and nature. There is an extensive literature on this issue in the research field of political ecology, which employs differing emphases in defining this relationship (Robbins 2020). In essence, however, approaches in the tradition of political ecology aim to understand society and nature not as dualistic, as opposed to each other, but to determine the forms of social appropriation of nature. Nature is not something external to social conditions: ‘Society not only acts upon its environment, it also reacts to this (changed) environment in a mutual, reiterative relationship’ (Pichler et al. 2017, p. 33). With this understanding of society–nature relations, the analytical perspective of the CPE approach can be expanded. Accordingly, social structures as well as ideologies and culture are always constituted in mediation with the societal appropriation of nature. We can therefore assume that political, economic, and cultural developments are articulated with each other and that these, in turn, are shaped by society–nature relations. In this respect, the challenge for a conjunctural analysis in Hall’s sense is to interpret the economic, political, and cultural breeding ground of RWP and its tendency towards climate scepticism in mediation with society–nature relations.

4.1 Conjunctural analysis of climate change and climate mitigation

For all the differences in the interpretation of the rise of RWP, especially along the second axis of analysis (economic versus cultural explanatory factors), there is broad agreement that the political–economic upheavals and social modernisation processes of recent decades form the seedbed

for contemporary RWP. Ending in the 1970s, the era of Fordism was characterised in the US and Western Europe by very high rates of economic growth, rising wages, the expansion of welfare state services, and relatively strong trade unions and social democratic parties. One may add that regional inequalities, especially between urban and rural areas, were comparatively small in most countries. However, this so-called ‘golden age of capitalism’ (Hobsbawm 1994) was also characterised by the perpetuation of global inequalities, patriarchal and racist relations, as well as an increasingly intensive appropriation and destruction of nature (Pichler et al. 2017). The labour footprint of the fossil industries grew considerably throughout this period, which saw the emergence in the Global North of a way of living based on the consumption of natural resources on a vast scale (and underpinned by cheap labour from the Global South).

Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2021) term this the ‘imperial mode of living’, in which the unequal and immense appropriation of nature and labour is inscribed through the everyday practices of large parts of the population in the Global North: ‘It is deeply embedded in political institutions, the economy, culture and mentalities; in the ways in which people see themselves in the world; in the interests of relevant political and social actors; and in the practices of everyday lives.’ (Brand and Wissen 2021, p. 65) Therefore, the forms of domination of nature are always mediated through social relations and, accordingly, the extraction of fossil energy sources is a central basis for the mode of living in the Global North (and growing parts of the Global South). The concept refers to the mediating of structuration and semiosis via institutions and everyday practices as well as the social appropriation of nature. This ‘imperial mode of living’ is riddled with inequalities, including class, race (Newell 2005), and gender (Daggett 2018).

Against this backdrop, the struggles of the labour and new social movements of the 1970s and ‘80s precipitated ruptures in many countries that were accompanied by processes of both economic and cultural liberalisation. These have been paralleled by increasing social inequality—even within the Western world—and a decline in the influence of trade union and social democratic forces, whereas political and economic elites have successfully pushed forward the process of globalisation (van der Pijl 1989). Processes of economic liberalisation and social polarisation, reflected spatially in a growing urban–rural divide, have been paralleled by shifts in the political system: Social democratic parties in particular have turned their backs on Keynesian policy approaches and their traditional blue collar voter base at the latest during the so-called New Labour-phase, adopting more liberal economic and social policies. This, in turn, has fuelled disenchantment with political decision-making processes, especially among marginalised sections of the population (Crouch 2019). Linked to these changes are processes of social modernisation, triggered at least partly by various feminist and anti-racist movements. Anti-discrimination and equality policies introduced in many countries have been perceived by some as unjust, especially against a backdrop of growing social inequality. In her ethnographic study on Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016) used the image of a queue (towards achieving the ‘American Dream’). Many of her interviewees felt as if they were waiting in line for social advancement but that other groups (e.g. People of colour, migrants, women, etc.) were always given preference. She describes the perceived reality of her interviewees as follows:

Strangers stand ahead of you in the line, making you anxious, resentful and afraid. A president aligns with the line cutters, making you feel distrustful, betrayed. A person ahead of you in line insults you as an ignorant redneck, making you feel humiliated and mad. Economically, culturally, demographically, politically, you are suddenly a stranger in your own land. (Hochschild 2016, p. 222)

This perceived reality corresponds with numerous aspects of Fraser’s (2016) concept of ‘progressive neoliberalism’, which is characterised by economic and societal liberalisation processes. These liberalisation processes are mediated by the intensification of the crisis of society–nature relations, which has been discussed in past decades especially in terms of climate change or in the academic context with the concept of the Anthropocene (Pichler et al. 2017). As early as the 1980s, scientific evidence was accumulating that the rampant consumption of fossil fuels would likely lead to catastrophic

global climate change. These scientific findings challenged oil companies such as ExxonMobil whose business model is focused on the extraction of fossil energy. Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes (2017, p. 1) conducted a seminal study of Exxon's internal scientific debate on climate change and public communications relating to it since the 1980s. They note that the company's scientific publications express little doubt about the validity of anthropogenic climate change, but the more public and broadly based the communication becomes, the more doubts the company sows.

Many of the lines of argumentation deployed in climate sceptical rhetoric associated with RWP parties and movements can be traced back to the discursive strategies developed in this period with the aim of muddying the waters of debate. In other words, they significantly predate many contemporary RWP parties or at least existed before they turned to populism. The establishment of climate sceptic networks was driven by both the defence of economic interests associated with fossil extractivism and an associated way of life/cultural practices.³ As Supran and Oreskes (2017) point out, the main protagonists within these networks were also staunchly right-wing anti-communists who saw any form of climate policy regulation as a serious threat to the (supposedly) free capitalist order.

A more recent contribution to the origins of climate scepticism comes from Franta (2022). He points out that organisations such as the American Petroleum Institute (API) have not been satisfied with sowing doubt about climate change. Instead, API developed a dual strategy that harnessed economic expertise, mainly from the consulting firm Charles River Associates, to discredit impending climate policy measures.⁴ These efforts targeted both the Clinton Administration's consideration of a carbon tax and the Kyoto Agreement of 1997. Numerous branches of industry took part in these disinformation campaigns in which (supposed) scientific expertise was brought into play against possible climate policy measures. This offensive was particularly intense in the run-up to the Kyoto Protocol and after its adoption:

Charles River Associates [released] another report, funded by the American Automobile Manufacturers Association, describing the proposed climate treaty as the 'single most expensive environmental measure ever adopted by the U.S. government' and claiming a treaty would reduce household income by \$4,250 by 2030. (Franta 2022, p. 10)

According to Franta (2022), campaigns to cast doubt on climate change, together with criticism aimed at the supposedly high costs of an ambitious climate policy (asserted under mostly unrealistic assumptions), have effectively frustrated efforts to pursue decisive climate action in the USA over the last three decades. All of this suggests that powerful coalitions of climate sceptical actors had already formed in the USA long before Donald Trump was elected US president. The protagonists and funders of these coalitions often espouse a right-wing worldview, as exemplified by the Koch brothers, who are key financiers of right-wing, climate sceptical networks (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021, p. 441).

However, the reality of climate change—and of suitably ambitious climate policies—threatens to undermine not just fossil capital and the ideological foundations of its most influential proponents, it is also perceived as a threat in regions whose economic and cultural identities are grounded in industries that will have no future in their current form if the Paris Agreement should be fulfilled. This is why climate change, as well as discussions about possible approaches to mitigate it, pose a threat to right-wing populist forces (though not exclusive to them) in their authoritarian image of society, which would seek to aggressively perpetuate existing inequalities and associated ways of living.

4.2. Conceptual approaches and empirical evidence

Timothy Mitchell's (2011) concept of 'carbon democracy' offers a cue to understanding the dynamics at play in populations vulnerable to unjust transition policies. Mitchell's analysis of labour struggles in the coal and oil sector show that the ever-increasing exploitation of coal boosted productivity and

stimulated economic growth while also providing the terrain for political and labour struggles through which sections of the population won new socio-economic rights. Workers in the coal industry in particular were often able to achieve comparatively high wages and thus an increasing standard of living. One might add that the coal industry's (predominantly male) labour force played a pivotal role in shaping the identity of entire regions. However, this form of carbon democracy was largely exclusive to the US and Western Europe (Daggett 2018). The establishment of carbon democracy was also accompanied by specific regional developments. The link between economic prosperity, jobs, and the formation of a regional identity based on fossil energy extraction comes to the fore in Hochschild's (2016) study on Tea Party supporters in Louisiana. Despite the severe environmental degradation caused by oil and gas extraction as well as various chemical plants located in the state, Hochschild's interlocutors largely opposed stricter environmental regulation in favour of maintaining the status quo of the fossil development model. One reason for this is a deep mistrust in political institutions generally and the conviction that wealth and carbon intensive modes of living can be maintained in the comparatively poor state solely through forms of fossil extractivism.

Sophie Bose et al. (2019) draw a similar conclusion from their interviews with coal workers in the Lusatia lignite mining area of Germany, south-east of Berlin. Coal mining was massively expanded in Lusatia in the 1950s and 60s with the (re)industrialisation of the then German Democratic Republic (GDR). The region experienced a surge in industrialisation during this period and its labour force defined post-war Lusatian identity. The economic decline of coal (roughly 7,000 people are still employed in the coal industry in Lusatia today, down from about 80,000 in 1990) corresponds with a cultural devaluation (Haas 2020). Against a backdrop of mounting pressure to secure a deal for a coal phase-out in Germany (driven largely by climate policy motives), Bose et al. (2019) find that many workers perceive their work and their region as devalued and feel denounced as 'climate sinners'; many consider themselves as residing in a kind of protective fortress, and that their livelihoods are endangered. The interview responses reveal that these feelings of devaluation combine with fears of job losses and are exacerbated by a lack of similarly well-paid employment opportunities covered by collective bargaining agreements. Bose et al. (2019, p. 103) conclude:

All in all, the interviewees give the impression that they are in a wagon-train that has to be defended against a variety of attacks from outside. Inside the circle of wagons, agreement and solidarity largely prevailed. Outside, incomprehension, incompetence and ignorance were rampant. The hard service to society that lignite miners perform every day is not appreciated by society. The opposite is the case. For all the useful work they do, they are repaid with social disdain. This mismatch is hard to bear for the workers and employees we interviewed. (Author's translation)

This perception of inhabiting a hostile environment has been actively promoted by actors such as the association 'Pro-Lusatian Lignite' [Pro Lausitzer Braunkohle]. In 2015, for example, in the run-up to a protest by the climate action group 'Ende Gelände,' the association claimed in a press release that 'green ideologues want to wipe out Lusatia' (quoted from Haas 2020, p. 161, author's translation).

The only party in Germany to consistently oppose proposals for a coal phase-out is the climate-denialist RWP party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). As the study did not systematically examine voting behaviour among mining employees, their level of support for the AfD is unclear (this again points to the tension on the first research axis of RWP, between the supply and demand dimension in explaining right-wing populism). The example of Lusatia indicates that climate scepticism and RWP are linked to both economic (threat of job losses, deindustrialisation, etc.) and cultural developments (experiences of devaluation of one's own work and regional identity) (Haas 2020).

A study by Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg (2020) of farmers' protests in the Netherlands in 2019 also points to similar correlations. He argues that the political economy of the agricultural sector has been undergoing profound changes, with a process of industrial concentration spanning decades and an

increasing focus on farming products for export. This puts farmers under immense pressure to constantly expand their farms and increase output. More than 75% of farmers surveyed agree with the statement that they were better off twenty years ago, and even more perceive rural areas as suffering a deep crisis (Van der Ploeg 2020, p. 592). At the same time, the farmers' association has been arguing for decades that the existing agricultural model should be renewed, despite various problems (nitrate inputs, climate change, etc.). In this respect, van der Ploeg characterises the farmers' protests as:

regressively populist in as much as it does not provide a transparent analysis of the problems that need to be addressed. It just draws on, and further galvanises, generalised feelings of grievance and neglect. An important ingredient that helped to shape this feeling of neglect (and being endangered) was the occupation of an intensive pig producing farm by animal-welfare activists. (Van der Ploeg 2020, p. 598)

All three examples outlined above indicate that there is a tendency to close ranks among groups that are under pressure and experience symbolic and/or material devaluation. This establishes a breeding ground for RWP patterns of interpretation, in that 'others' or 'nefarious minorities' are chosen as enemy images, and recourse is made to a real or supposedly better past. Selk and Kemmerzell (2021, p. 2) associate RWP with 'retrogradism' due to its reference to a supposedly good past. What the examples from Louisiana, Lusatia, and the Netherlands also show is that there is a strong difference between urban and rural areas, which has often been investigated in critical geography as 'uneven development' (Smith 1984). The political economy of uneven development is associated with cultural developments (and in the case of rural populations, with experiences of devaluation). This also plays an important role for RWP, as shown, for example, by Marc Edelman (2021, p. 506) in his analysis of rural areas in the USA, which he calls 'zones "sacrificed" to capital'. Edelman argues that in the phase of neoliberalism, the division between urban and rural areas has greatly increased and that it would be far too simplistic to attribute the comparatively high support for Trump in rural areas only to racist attitudes; rather, it is important to take seriously issues of unequal development and experiences of loss and suffering in the sacrificed zones.

Economic, political, and cultural developments (including experiences of devaluation) are in turn mediated by an escalating crisis of society–nature relations. The extraction and consumption of fossil raw materials play a key role in this crisis, but have also underpinned economic prosperity (and forms of carbon democracy), an 'imperial mode of living' and strongly shaped cultural identity in regions such as Louisiana and Lusatia. These paths of fossil development are perceived to be threatened by the envisaged mitigation of climate change.

The 'danger' posed by climate policy also has a gender component as Cara Daggett (2018) shows with her work on the concept of 'petro-masculinities'. Based on a psycho-political perspective, she argues that certain forms of masculinity are based on dominance over and devaluation of women and nature (which is associated as feminine). In this respect, there is a close connection between petro-masculinities and climate scepticism in order to maintain the existing patriarchal order in connection with the domination of nature: '[...] burning fossil fuels can come to function as a knowingly violent experience, a reassertion of white masculine power on an unruly planet that is perceived to be increasingly in need of violent, authoritarian order' (Daggett 2018, p. 34).

This consideration corresponds with studies at the micro level (corresponding with the first axis of differentiation), for example in the USA (McCright and Dunlap 2011) and Norway (Krange et al. 2019), which conclude that it is predominantly older, white males who deny climate change and accordingly reject climate policy measures. At the same time, this group enjoys the greatest social privileges available through the 'imperial mode of living' (although this group is by no means homogeneous in terms of both ideology and social status). In this respect, there seems to be a correlation between the possession of social privileges and the tendency to deny climate change. A similar argument is put forward by Eversberg (2020), who distinguishes ten sustainability policy camps in Germany on the basis of environmental attitudes. Concerning the group termed *Anti-Ecological Externalisers*, Eversberg concludes that (2020, p. 252):

Some parts of the population cannot and will not be convinced of supporting social-ecological change any time in the foreseeable future. This is strikingly evident for the syndrome described here as Anti-Ecological Externalisation. For the overwhelmingly male people holding such views, the principle of externalising the costs of one's own lifestyle to other parts of the world, the environment and one's children is not just a 'dirty secret' of affluent life [...]. Rather, it finds emphatic support. Attitudes of this type do not merely discount concerns of ecological sustainability and global justice, but rather seem to define themselves in open opposition to these causes.

What can we learn from the disputes outlined above about climate policy orientations and RWP orientations in the context of the historical conjuncture in the twenty-first century? The establishment of a 'counter-science' (or, more precisely: the pseudo-scientific doubting of climate change and climate policy measures) has, as Supran and Oreskes (2017) and Franta (2022) show, been driven substantially by economic interests aimed at securing fossil capitalism. The efforts of the 'Merchants of Doubt' (Oreskes and Conway 2010) form an important foundation for RWP's climate scepticism, and there are close links between climate sceptical think tanks and RWP parties (Plehwe 2014). Nevertheless, these are not capital interests per se. Rather, from a CPE-perspective, these interests are constituted through political and cultural practices, conflicts, and normative ideas about the future of society; a future in which, in the view of right-wing populists, fossil extractivism, and existing social inequalities persist. Against the backdrop of the fragility and inherently crisis-prone path of fossil capitalism (the threats of which are only outlined here) and the spatial inequalities deepened by neoliberal development, RWP climate scepticism offers a strategic orientation that seeks to stabilise existing inequalities, thereby resonating with economic, political, as well as cultural developments.

5. Conclusions and further research needs

This paper set out to explore the link between RWP and climate scepticism against the background of the critique of approaches to understanding RWP, such as that proposed by Lockwood (2018), that prioritise either economic/structural or cultural/ideological explanations (for a critique, see also Harder and Opratko [2021]). Drawing on approaches from CPE and Stuart Hall, I argue that economic, political, and cultural developments are in constant articulation with each other. Furthermore, as research on political ecology shows, social relations are mediated by the appropriation of nature. Therefore, power relations are inscribed into society–nature relations along the axes of class, race, and gender (among others). Also of particular relevance to the rise of RWP are spatial inequalities constituted through uneven development. The post-disciplinary analytical perspective outlined here, which draws on CPE and Hall's concept of AP in combination with various approaches from the research field of political ecology (such as the concept of the 'imperial mode of living'), makes it possible to define the historical conjuncture in which RWP and climate scepticism can emerge. RWP, as a manifestation of various right-wing currents, is essentially geared towards stabilising existing power relations (economic, political, and cultural as well as regarding society–nature relations) by seeking to discredit climate science and associated policy initiatives.

However, further research is necessary in order to gain a more profound understanding of the incubation and societal context of RWP: Firstly, there is a need for in-depth case studies that precisely determine the concrete socio-spatial context(s), i.e. the historical conjuncture of RWP. We must also decipher the connection between the supply and demand dimensions of RWP (along the first axis of the analysis); what interpretative offers does RWP make and how do these interact with individuals' worldviews? This is particularly important given the flourishing of conspiracy narratives in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the links identified between climate scepticism and protests against pandemic containment measures (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021, pp. 518–9).

Secondly, it is important to better understand the heterogeneity of right-wing populist approaches to climate change and climate policy. For example, de Nadal (2022) shows that within the French Rassemblement National, an orientation has prevailed that does not deny climate change but calls for a more localised development path. Atkins (2022) shows that right-wing

actors in the UK link decarbonisation policies to a cost-of-living crisis. This points to a constellation of conflicts similar to that seen in the yellow-west protests in France, which occurred in 2018 in response to Prime Minister Emanuel Macron's plans to increase fuel taxes (after having abolished property tax the year before). The protests indicate that forms of 'austerity ecology' (Schaupp 2021, p. 442, author's translation), i.e. reducing greenhouse gas emissions by making fossil fuels more expensive, which disproportionately affect low-income households, are mediated with socio-spatial polarisations that have economic, cultural, and spatial dimensions, thereby revealing the deep entrenchment of the 'imperial mode of living' in everyday practices. The challenge is to analyse the right-wing populist interpretations and strategic approaches against the background of concrete climate policy initiatives, which will gain in importance in view of relatively ambitious decarbonisation targets adopted under the Paris Agreement. At the same time, research should focus on those target groups that are addressed by right-wing populist interpretations (low-income groups, workers in fossil fuel industries, privileged conservative men, etc). The analytical perspective developed here provides a promising starting point for such research as it does not develop an additive understanding of cultural, political, and economic developments but tries to decipher the complex modes of articulation with everyday life and the social appropriation of nature.

Thirdly, and this aspect is often neglected in sustainability research: in view of the multiple crises facing the Anthropocene, it is also important to intensify research on counterstrategies against RWP mobilisation and explore their potentials. John M. Meyer (2008) shows that discourses from the environmental justice movement in the U.S. contain populist elements, but that they tie in with environment-related experiences of injustice. Therefore, 'green populism' can be an important element in generating widespread support for progressive environmental policy (Davies 2020).

In any case it is necessary to interpret the historical conjuncture and the terrain of struggle; we therefore require an analytical perspective that can grasp the complex modes of articulation between social and society–nature relations. The crisis in international climate policy did not originate with the rise of RWP: it was already unable to adequately address global climate change (Stevenson 2021).

Notes

1. Lockwood (2018, pp. 3–7) shows that RWP in the USA is much more consistently climate sceptical than in Europe, where the picture is somewhat more heterogeneous. Nevertheless, it is important to analyse the dynamics of right-wing populist and climate-sceptical currents. For example, the German political party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland / Alternative for Germany) was by no means climate-sceptical at its inception but has since veered very consistently in this direction.
2. Jessop et al. (1984) have accused Hall of pursuing a culturalist approach in his explanation of AP and of neglecting important political–economic dynamics. However, this controversy about the breeding ground of AP in Britain at the end of the Fordist era is of secondary importance for the present contribution.
3. At this point, it is worth recalling the famous quote by then U.S. President George Bush at the 1992 Rio Summit on Environment and Development: "The American way of life is not up for negotiation. Period."
4. This seems to resonate with Forchtner and Lubarda's analysis of the communication strategies employed by the radical right in the European Parliament, according to which: For many of these actors, it is less the doubt concerning anthropogenic climate change that is decisive but rather the wish to 'voice scepticism towards existing scientific/decision-making processes and, especially, policy responses.' (Forchtner and Lubarda 2022, p. 3)

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