

‘Grey’ Democracy for a Green Future?
Untangling the Politics of Growth in Post-War Western Europe

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Every time when democracy is considered to be in crisis, a desired state of democracy is embellished with a set of references to an idealized democratic past. Current debates about the alleged deplorable state of democracy are no exception to this. The post-war period is increasingly deployed to render an imaginary of Western Europe’s ‘Golden Age’ of democracy. Such an imaginary includes, for instance, depictions of a well-functioning welfare state, the yields of a natural coalition between industrial growth and democracy, the celebration of an alleged mono-cultural or mono-ethnic *demos*, the ‘genuine’ redistributive capacities of the state, or the centrality of blossoming people’s parties in consensual politics. As Colin Crouch puts it in his landmark book *Post-Democracy*, “In most of Western Europe and North America, we had our democratic moment around the midpoint of the twentieth century: slightly before the Second World War in North America and Scandinavia; soon after it for many others.”

What seems to get lost in this imaginary of post-war democracy is that it occurred during a highly idiosyncratic episode in human history. Environmental historians have termed the years after 1945 the “Great Acceleration” in order to articulate how “the human enterprise suddenly accelerated after the end of the Second World War,” as “population doubled in just over 50 years” and “the global economy increased by more than 15-fold.” The conditions of the post-war decades—the very conditions said to underpin stable, consolidated democracies—were anything but stable, let alone sustainable.

This project has two aims. First, it wants to decentre today’s understanding of post-war democracy in Western Europe by re-contextualizing its institutional and social practices on the intersection of democratic institution-building and the imperative of industrial growth. Second, it will critically engage with references to post-war Western Democracy in contemporary discourse about democratic reform in the age of climate change.