



The Cultural Political Economy of rural governance: Regional development in Hesse (Germany)

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ABSTRACT

Rural areas are back on the agenda. In official German policy papers, at least, there is the commitment to address existing regional disparities and the specific problems of rural regions. However, *how* exactly these problems are to be addressed often remains vague and practical political consequences are often not explored. This paper applies the conceptual approach of Cultural Political Economy to analyze different “economic imaginaries” that underline and shape regional policy related to rural areas. Using Critical Discourse Analysis and the case of uneven development in the German state of Hesse, this paper discusses competing economic conceptualizations of regional policy. Through this, we can see that sufficient funding of municipalities and democratization are necessary conditions for realizing progressive alternatives for rural development.

1. Introduction

Uneven geographic development, spatial disparities, and the specific problems that exist in peripheralized rural areas are back on the agenda in many parts of the world (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann, 2013; Rignall and Atia, 2017). While this could sound like good news to scholars of rural studies, a first caveat is that the frequent reason for this re-politicization of the rural is edified by the current electoral successes of far-right and right-wing populist parties, which are often particularly significant in rural areas (Rodríguez-Pose, 2017). On the one hand, the far right and right-wing populists seem to address the problems of rural spaces in their struggle against metropolitan “elites” (Cramer, 2016; Guilluy, 2019; Hochschild, 2016); on the other hand, established parties respond with policy proposals and strategies for rural spaces. Departing from this observation, we argue in this paper that there is a second caveat, which is that after decades of restructuring rural spaces in the name of neoliberalism and austerity, it is very likely that the broad spectrum of policy proposals that circulate right now, many of them progressive in nature, will be narrowed down to ones that are in accordance with established hegemonic positions. This is to be expected, unless new majorities can be organized that are able to bring about fundamental structural changes in rural development.

To elaborate upon this claim, we draw on Cultural Political Economy

(CPE), as this approach allows for a tentative prediction of the course and possible outcome of the re-politicization of peripheralized rural spaces. Theoretically, we argue that rural studies can profit from using CPE; a claim we illustrate with one of the first applications of CPE to the politicization of peripheralized rural spaces (see as an exception Lysgård, 2016). The strengths of CPE are, *first*, that it focusses on the connection between the discursive and structural (in CPE’s terminology: semiotic and extra-semiotic) moments of re-politicization; *second*, it provides methodological guidance on how to systematize different discourses with a range of policy proposals to identify what Sum and Jessop (2013, p. 166 ff.) refer to as “economic imaginaries” that provide an orientation for actors in decision-making and strategy building; and, *third*, CPE offers a convincing model of the course that politicization takes. According to CPE, a wide variety of views and positions can be found at the beginning of a political debate that then confront existing material structures and are gradually adapted to existing hegemonic constellations through selection and retention. Applying this model, we conclude that to turn the good news that rural spaces are back on the agenda into real good news for rural spaces, progressive political majorities need to be organized early on in the re-politicization of peripheralized rural spaces.

We examine the re-politicization of rural areas by looking at current debates on regional structural policy in the German state of Hesse. In

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recent years, there has been a resurgence of political debates about issues such as the economic decline, infrastructural problems, depopulation, and abandonment of rural areas in Germany. Among other indicators, new magazines celebrating rural living have turned out to be surprisingly successful (Baumann, 2018), with bestselling novels set in rural settings (most prominently, Zeh, 2016) and even turned into successful TV movie series. Additionally, popular academic books have been published by big publishing houses (Bätzing, 2020; Henkel, 2018; Krajewski and Wiegandt, 2020), relevant policy papers have been published (ARL, 2020; Fink and Tiemann, 2017), and high-profile political initiatives addressing rural areas have been launched. In 2018, for example, the German Federal Ministry of the Interior was expanded to include a *Heimat* (i.e., homeland) department to deal with “equivalent living conditions”. Also, in 2018, the Federal Cabinet appointed an expert commission on “equivalent living conditions,” and in 2019, “Our Plan for Germany. Equivalent living conditions everywhere” was published by the federal government. According to this plan, “[i]t is a central political goal to create equivalent living conditions in all regions of Germany” (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2019, p. 9).

On the one hand, the political debate is unambiguous: the state must once again take greater care of peripheral rural areas. The prominence of the phrase “equivalent living conditions” in the above-mentioned political initiatives shows how fundamental the positive reference to the goal of “establishing equivalent living conditions” as is noted in article 72 (2) of the German constitution, which was first introduced in 1994. Central concerns in the current debate include the inadequate infrastructure in rural areas, especially with regard to mobile phone coverage, broadband internet, health, and public transport, as well as emigration, the aging of the population, and vacant buildings. To counter these developments, there seems to be a general agreement that the state must intervene. On the other hand, “Our Plan for Germany” has been criticized for barely taking into account the findings of the aforementioned expert commission and that the recommendations for action remain vague and without funding (Baumgart and Priebes, 2019). The political debate appears as a typical example of “talk is cheap” and is not followed by material policies. This criticism fits in with the numerous analyses showing that the structural problems of peripheralized rural areas in Germany are not being adequately addressed in policies despite their prominence in the political discourse (Fink et al., 2019; Kersten et al., 2019). According to this view, peripheralized areas suffer above all from structural underfinancing, often resulting from processes of neoliberalization and the accompanying austerity – especially in the municipalities, the tier of government responsible for the largest share of public investments in Germany (Gornig, 2019). Instead of just handing out strategy papers, the critique claims that policymakers need to take real action. While we support this critique that is widely shared in spatial planning and regional studies, in this paper we go beyond it by using CPE to examine the relationship between talk and policies. Instead of contrasting talk and policies to find that they do not match, we use the example of rural development in the German state of Hesse to study discourses on spatial inequality in order to explain why so little is happening. On the basis of CPE, we argue that given the condensation of neoliberalism and austerity in state apparatuses (Jessop, 2015), as a result of selection, it can be assumed that these discourses are increasingly reduced to a few policies that are compatible with the existing hegemony.

The article is structured as follows. In chapter 2, we present CPE in more detail, focusing on the theoretically determined relationship between talk and policies and the model of politicization. Before applying this model to the debates in Hesse (chapter 4), we outline the situation of peripheralized rural areas in Hesse and show how rural policies are structurally characterized by neoliberal responsabilization and austerity (chapter 3). Chapter 5 provides conclusions and discusses what kind of political coalitions would be necessary to move from the current talk to policies that would be able to change these structures in a progressive way.

2. Cultural Political Economy and the analysis of rural development

CPE has only rarely been utilized in rural studies; we are only aware of one study on rural areas in Norway (Lysegård, 2016) and two studies in Germany on Bavarian regional policy (Dudek and Kallert, 2017; Dudek, 2021). Using the example of rural areas in Norway, Lysegård (2016) shows that the cultural policies of rural communities are not only influenced by neoliberal policies but are also embedded in understandings of “heritage and tradition based on ideas of participation, mobilization and social coherence” (ibid., p. 1). The German studies (Dudek, 2021; Dudek and Kallert, 2017; Kallert and Dudek, 2019) show the extent to which Bavarian structural policies have led to austerity and, consequently, a deepening of regional disparities in the federal state of Bavaria due to the paradigms of equal opportunities and competitiveness. Other applications of CPE to geographic and spatial studies have focused on the production of competitiveness (Bristow, 2010; González, 2011), aspects of financialization (Ayhan, 2019; Keenan, 2020), and mostly urban issues (Dannestam, 2008; Grubbauer, 2013; Oosterlynck and González, 2013). As CPE has seldomly been referenced in rural studies, we present the approach in some length in two steps. We begin by outlining how the relationship between talk and policies is theorized, also positioning CPE in the context of traditions of critical theory (chapter 2.1). We then introduce the model of politicization processes mentioned earlier and use it to illustrate the concept of economic imaginaries (chapter 2.2), which is central to the empirical component of this paper.

2.1. Talk and policies in Cultural Political Economy

CPE can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a further development of the materialist regulation school and, on the other hand, as a critique of that school’s structuralist perspective that tends to neglect cultural aspects (Jones, 2008). CPE regards itself as “an emerging post-disciplinary approach that highlights the contribution of the cultural turn (a concern with semiosis or meaning-making) to the analysis of the articulation between the economic and the political and their embedding in broader sets of social relations” (Jessop, 2010, p. 336). The starting point is the concept of “hegemony” in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci (2011 [1929–1935]), which refers to how consensus is established in capitalist societies. Understood as “a particular practice of consolidating social forces and condensing them into political power on a mass basis” (Thomas, 2009, p. 194), in this tradition, hegemony determines the ways in which discursive or semiotic elements are arranged strategically in order to guarantee that, as Marx and Engels (1976, p. 59) put it, “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” Where, for example, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985, p. 36) aim at “eliminating the essentialist presuppositions” of the Gramscian term (and political thinking more generally), this ends up reducing it in a certain way so that discourses are organized without any reference to the material whatsoever. Materialist understandings of hegemony, in contrast, focus on the ways in which discourse is related to economic, political, and social structures (Hall et al., 1978; Thomas, 2009). Theoretically, this requires combining theories of discourse (Fairclough and Wodak, 2003; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) with materialist theories of the state that focus on the ways in which the determined interests of classes, class fractions, and social groups are inscribed selectively into the state apparatus (Jessop, 1999; Poulantzas, 1978). Methodologically, such a take on hegemony calls for a turn to the concrete developments and their specific histories and geographies (Ekers et al., 2013).

CPE examines the production of hegemony in discursive, cultural, and material dimensions (Jessop, 2010, 2013). Accordingly, translating different economic, political, and social interests into policies not only depends on material resources, but discursive ones as well. In particular, the ability to articulate interests in a specific way is crucial for political strategies (Sum and Jessop, 2015). This follows from the necessity to

reduce complexity. A first important mechanism in this process, according to CPE, is the selective generation of meaning through semiosis. Since the world cannot be comprehended in all its complexity, actors must selectively focus on certain aspects. These are, thus, granted special significance in the system of signification. This selective perception depends heavily on the existing systems of meaning of the actors involved (Jessop, 2010). As a second mechanism of complexity reduction, structuration plays an important role. This is understood as enabling routines and strategies in potentially contingent settings by limiting connections and sequences of social activities. Structuring must be both flexible and open to innovation in order to respond to changing environmental conditions. The two forms of complexity reduction together transform “meaningless and unstructured complexity into meaningful and structured complexity” (Jessop, 2010, p. 338). Complexity reduction structures all social interactions, as everything actors do takes place within established systems of signification. Therefore, and in accordance with the tradition of discourse theories, all social practice is semiotic. However, social practice cannot be reduced to semiotics. In all actions, extra-semiotic properties of social structures such as regulations or institutions are also relevant (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008), which reflects the materialist tradition of CPE.

2.2. A model of politicization and “economic imaginaries”

With reference to evolutionary theories, CPE proposes a model of politicization that distinguishes between three phases: “contingent emergence (variation), subsequent privileging (selection), and ongoing realization (retention) of specific discursive and material practices” (Jessop, 2010, p. 340; see Fig. 1). The starting point is a crisis of interpretation or a construal that is subject to discussions in the political sphere. In our case, this starting point is the crisis of peripheralized rural areas. During the first phase of variation, semiosis plays a more important role than materiality in a still unstructured complexity: numerous ideas and visions circulate in order to describe and deal with the crisis. In the dispute between the representatives of the different positions, politicization occurs. In the second phase, selection, the ideas are confronted with realities in the form in which these are inscribed in structures such as state apparatuses, institutions, laws, and hegemonic discourses. Not every interpretation or construal, for instance, on the causes and consequences of unequal geographical development, can resonate equally well with these existing structures. Only the ones that

can, will eventually become the basis of shared social interpretations and institutionalization. Therefore, in political discourse, the numerous construals are reduced to just a few. In the third phase, retention, the dispute is reduced to the question of which of the few remaining ideas and visions will prevail and materialize in policies. In this phase, existing materialities such as access to government apparatuses; the media; and financial, human, and organizational resources become crucial. The initially unstructured complexity is consolidated and ordered into a structured complexity through the interaction of semiotic and extra-semiotic factors. In the retention phase, the construals that have prevailed become institutionalized in new technologies, habitus, political projects, laws and regulations, planning, etc. (Jessop, 2013).

Within these evolutionary processes of variation, selection, and retention, economic imaginaries, i.e. general ideas about the economy, play an important role. They provide an orientation for individual and collective actors in decision-making and strategy building (Jessop, 2010; Sum and Jessop, 2013). Fundamentally, they offer definitions of what constitutes “the economy.” Such conceptual imaginaries can touch on quite different and interwoven aspects, even ones that do not belong to economics in a strict sense, such as notions of justice, fairness, the good life, what it is to be a human being, etc. Especially in unstructured and complex situations – such as crises of municipal budgets or growing spatial disparities – economic imaginaries provide important frames to orient decisions about political strategies (Jessop, 2004). Accordingly, a CPE-inspired analysis of unequal living conditions in Germany needs to identify the problems that policymakers identify in peripheralized rural areas, their assumed causes, and their possible solutions. What economic imaginaries underlie these policies of rural development? Which ideas, utopias, or dystopias are thematized, considered daunting, or desirable? Which issues are prioritized, and which are neglected? The next section explores these questions using the development of rural regions in Hesse (Germany) as an example.

3. Uneven development of rural areas in Germany: the example of Hesse

In the following, we use CPE to analyze the debates concerning the planning and development of rural areas in Hesse. Germany’s spatial planning policy represents a suitable case to study the modification and implementation of policies on the basis of economic imaginaries for two reasons. First, Germany is characterized by a legally binding

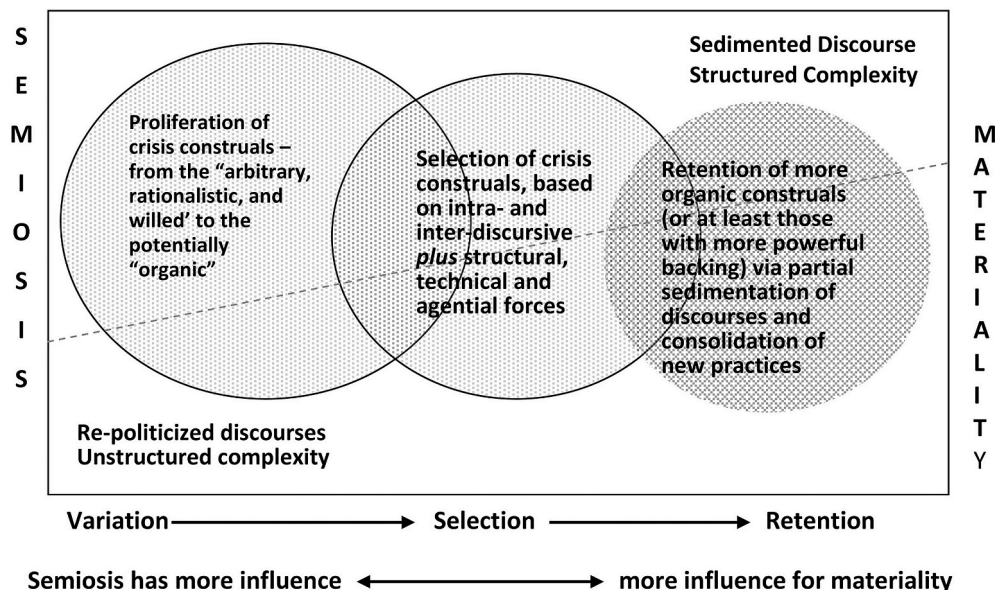


Fig. 1. A model of politicization: Variation, selection, and retention of crisis interpretations (Jessop, 2013, p. 238).

commitment to create “equivalent living conditions in the subspaces” (Federal Office of Justice, 2020: § 1 para. 2). Second, spatial planning has seen a fundamental change towards more competition and less state intervention in Germany since the 1970s. Within this context, the state of Hesse is a case in point of the deepening of regional disparities. It contains both the fast growing Rhine-Main region with the global city Frankfurt at its center, and structurally weak regions in northern and central Hesse. In the following, we provide a brief overview of the changes in Germany’s spatial planning policy (chapter 3.1) and then present our case study of Hesse (chapter 3.2).

3.1. Changes to the federal German spatial planning policy

Federal German spatial planning claims to govern spatial – i.e. both rural and urban – development through nationwide guidelines and spatial development goals. In recent decades, it has been characterized by a profound transformation that can be divided into three phases, similar to other Western European countries (Brenner, 2004). In the first phase, from the end of World War II until the mid-1960s, the central goal was to support Germany’s industrial development through the spatial management of growth (Mießner, 2017, p. 109ff.) following ordoliberal ideas of state intervention to support the market economy. In doing so, Walter Christaller’s (1966 [1933]) theory of central places was transformed into a normative concept by means of which the spatial development process was to be governed. Consequently, German spatial planning sought to concentrate economic growth and facilities of general interest in a nation-wide system of cities and towns that were designated as central places of upper, middle, and lower centrality.

The first economic slowdown in 1966 not only changed the course of German economic and social policy toward Keynesian ideas (Kannan-kulam, 2008), but also changed the focus of spatial planning policy. In this second phase, the state employed measures that can be described as “Spatial Keynesianism” (Brenner, 2004), which aimed to spatially diversify economic development with the goal of strengthening overall economic growth. These policies had spatially compensatory effects (Mießner, 2017, p. 164ff.). For example, due to labor shortages in metropolitan areas, industrial settlements in their surrounding areas and in peripheral areas were supported. During this period, “equivalence of living conditions” was also declared a goal of German spatial planning. It was included in the 1975 Federal Spatial Planning Program after a negotiation process of several years between the federal government and the states (Väth, 1980). The term “equivalence of living conditions” was included in the program as the lowest common denominator and can be characterized as an empty signifier (Mießner, 2017, p. 157ff.). While the equivalence of living conditions was introduced as a central goal of spatial planning, the exact meaning of this term remained imprecise and open to different interpretations. In the course of the 1970s, an opportunity-centered interpretation of the term evolved: equivalence was to be construed in terms of spatial equality of opportunities. In other words, it was not a matter of creating equal living conditions in all subspaces, but of ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens to compete for jobs and other aspects of social participation, especially in the form of public infrastructure.

With the crisis of Fordism at the end of the 1970s, German spatial planning policy entered its third phase. From then on, development was to be spatially concentrated in highly competitive metropolitan areas such as Hamburg, Munich, and Frankfurt (Brenner, 1997). Spatial planning policy finally became part of the “rescaled competition state regime” (Brenner, 2004) in Germany in the 1990s. Endogenous development strategies (ibid., p. 195) and an even more explicit focus on supporting economic growth found their way into regional planning policy (Brenner, 1997). Furthermore, regional policy funding was increasingly restricted to a limited period of time and awarded only for selected projects identified through the framework of competitive calls

for proposals (Heeg, 2001). Since the mid-1990s, equivalent living conditions have been construed less and less in terms of spatial equalization, and the opportunity-centered interpretation has been further strengthened and implemented. This was further intensified after the economic and financial crisis in 2008 (Miessner, 2020).

3.2. Uneven development in Hesse

Hesse, one of the 16 federal states of Germany, is centrally located in the western part of the country. It has just under 6.3 million inhabitants and is one of the economically stronger regions in Germany overall. Its GDP per person employed has risen remarkably in recent years, standing at 81,000 Euros and, thus, well above the national average of 73,600 Euros; it is the second of the 16 federal states, trailing only the city-state of Hamburg (Fina and Heider, 2021, p. 17). Behind Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg and ahead of Hamburg, Hesse is one of only four German states that pays into the inter-state fiscal adjustment fund (Federal Ministry of Finance, 2020, p. 22).

Internally, Hesse is characterized by a strong polarization between the Frankfurt/Rhine-Main metropolitan region in the south and the rest of the state. The global city of Frankfurt, one of the centers of continental European financial capital (Keil and Ronneberger, 2010), towers above all other municipalities in economic terms, with its economic power spreading into the region. The 75 municipalities in the Frankfurt-Rhine/Main Regional Association are home to 2.4 million people (FrankfurtRhineMain Regional Association, 2019, p. 4), and the larger metropolitan region has 5.7 million (one million of whom live in neighboring states) (FrankfurtRhineMain Regional Association, 2018, 9). The population density in the regional association is 960 inhabitants per square kilometer (FrankfurtRhineMain Regional Association, 2019, p. 4), compared to only 298 inhabitants in Hesse overall (State Statistical Office of Hesse, 2020, p. 41). Fig. 2 illustrates the uneven geographical development in Hesse using two indicators. The first indicator is the amount of products and services sold in millions of Euros (calculation based on VAT in 2017), which are shown for 422 municipalities. Only in 112 of the municipalities were more than 500 million Euros in productions and services produced. The figure uses absolute figures to illustrate how strongly concentrated the economic power is in the cities and municipalities of the Frankfurt region. Fifty-five percent of all products and services in Hesse originate from the area of the regional association. The second indicator Fig. 2 shows is the income tax per taxable person in 2015. This relative indicator was chosen to illustrate how prosperous the residential population is on average. It is clear that high-income households reside primarily in the cities and towns northwest of Frankfurt, which benefit from suburbanization from Frankfurt and the Hesse state capital, Wiesbaden. Two rural communities, Biebergemünd and Dietzhölztal, also rank in the highest category for this indicator. Both are home to what is colloquially referred to as “hidden champions,” i.e. globally successful industrial companies located outside metropolitan regions.

When considering both indicators shown in the map together, it becomes clear how dominant the global city region of Frankfurt is. The economic differences are almost identical to the degree of urbanization. Various classifications of municipalities according to their degree of urbanity or rurality identify all municipalities outside the metropolitan region (with the exception of the Odenwald District in the southeast) as predominantly rural; only the few cities in central and northern Hesse – Kassel, Fulda, Marburg, Gießen, and Wetzlar – also have urban characteristics, while their neighboring municipalities are clearly rural (Kallert et al., 2020). Second, it is apparent that there are also strong differences between the rural areas. Thus, the disputes about rural areas in Hesse refer, first, to all parts of the state beyond the Frankfurt region and, second, to a spatial area that is also internally diverse.

Uneven development in Hesse

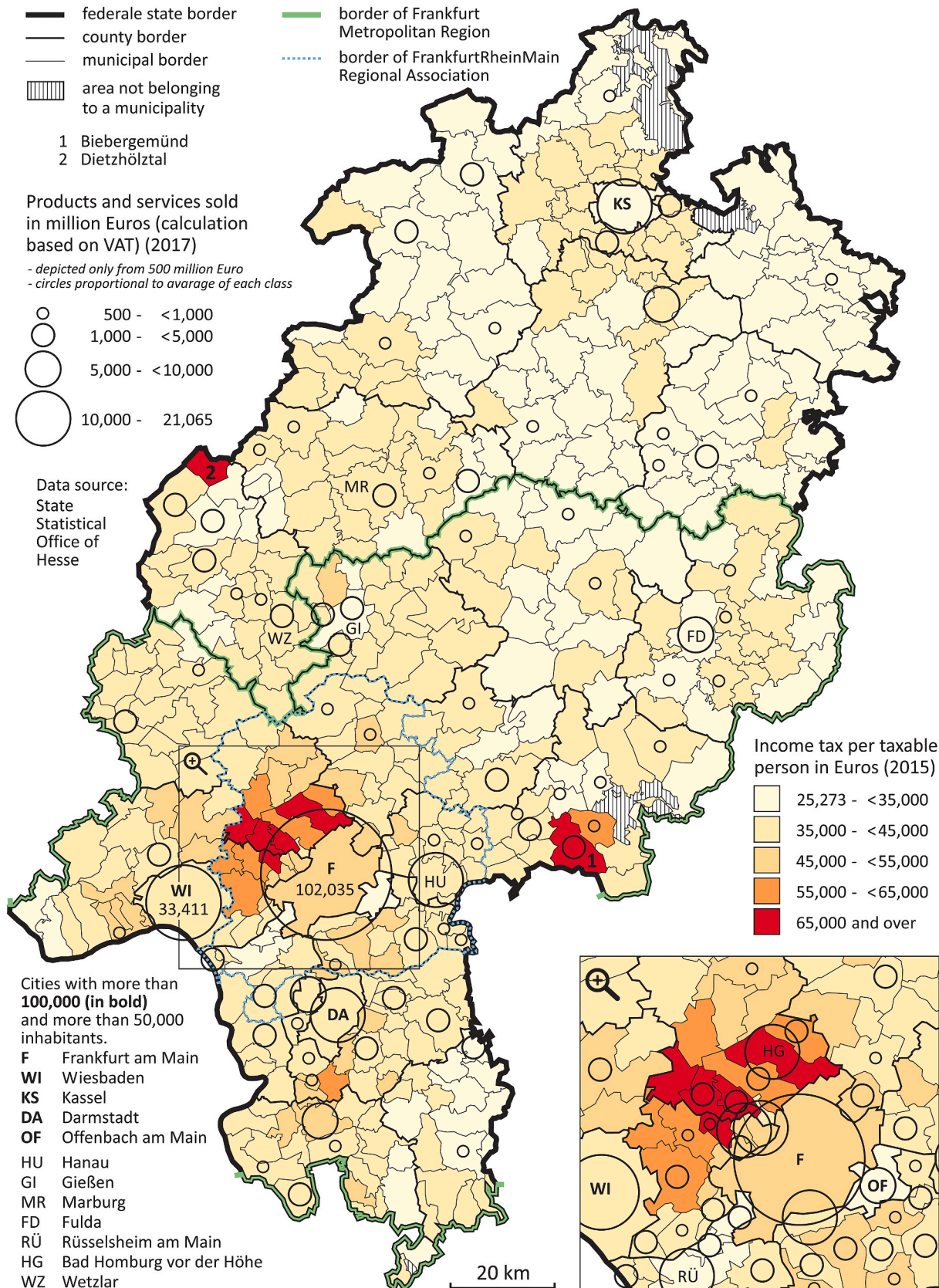


Fig. 2. Uneven development in Hesse, map by Department of Human Geography, Goethe University Frankfurt.

4. Economic imaginaries of rural development in Hesse

Methodologically, CPE provides “a toolkit” (Jessop and Scherrer, 2015, p. 8). To identify the economic imaginaries of rural development in Hesse, we follow Kutter and Jessop (2015), who use Critical Discourse Analysis as a starting point for an analytical approach within the framework of CPE. Accordingly, we conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010) of 104 documents published by the following institutions between 2018 and 2020, utilizing MAXQDA for the analysis:

- Trade Unions: Press releases and working papers from the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), the national United Services Union (ver.di), and the Hesse Education and Science Workers’ Union (GEW);
- Hessian Court of Audit: Municipal Report 2019 and presentations made available online;
- Municipal Organizations¹: Press releases from the Hessian Association of Towns and Municipalities and the Hessian County Association (the two organizations that represent rural municipalities);
- Hessian State Government: Coalition agreement between the conservative party CDU and Green Party *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* for the current legislative period, press releases, government statements, and guidelines for budget consolidations of the so-called *Schutzschirm* municipalities (i.e. heavily indebted municipalities);
- Federal Government: Guiding principles for spatial development, “Our Plan for Germany. Equal Living Conditions Everywhere;” and
- Political Parties Represented in the Hessian State Parliament: Election programs of the AfD, *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*, CDU, DIE LINKE, FDP, and SPD for the Hessian state election in 2018.

First, we identified “social wrongs” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 235), i.e. problems of rural development that are mentioned in these documents. We then identified causes and solution strategies, i.e. “causal stories,” (Stone 1989) that were put forward by various actors related to problems of rural, unequal development and aggregated them into thematic bundles. These thematic bundles covered several dimensions: provision of (public) services (especially health, education, mobility, and technical infrastructure); municipal budgets; equivalent living conditions; inter-municipal competition/cooperation; and voluntary work. Finally, we reconstructed three different economic imaginaries that underlie both the social wrongs and proposed solutions for rural areas. We did this by aggregating similar positions within the thematic bundles of the discourse into economic imaginaries that “operate across many sites and scales and connect local hegemonies into a more encompassing hegemonic project” (Sum and Jessop, 2015, p. 32). These economic imaginaries, whose fundamentals are applied to aspects of the economy, provide guidance for policy and decision-making across rural development issues. In a final step, the various actors were assigned to the three imaginaries. While the clear-cut identification of actors with imaginaries required some simplification – actors who argue based on two or even all three imaginaries were assigned to the one they predominantly draw upon – it results in a solid mapping of the relevant forces in three groups.

In addition, we conducted nine semi-structured expert interviews in the first half of 2020 with individuals who are active in local politics and civil society in rural areas. We talked to stakeholders who are either politically active in structurally weak rural communities under austerity pressure – the mayors of Alsfeld and Löhnberg, a city council of Alsfeld,

¹ These organizations of self-governing municipalities (individual cities, towns, and villages, as well as counties consisting of several municipalities) are important players in political processes in Germany. Their common interests often stand in contrast to those of both the federal government and the federal states. Fighting for them together is usually more important than party affiliation.

and a county council of Vogelsberg County – or who actively shape their environment through volunteer work (Volunteer Center Alsfeld), political education and outreach (Rosa-Luxemburg-Club Vogelsberg; a consultant against right-wing extremism in Hesse), new approaches to health care (the Future Affairs Commissioner of Hersfeld-Rotenburg County), and in cooperative projects (village store Schönstadt). We spoke with them about the current political challenges and problems facing their rural communities, as well as their coping strategies for dealing with these problems. The interviews were partially transcribed and analyzed according to Mayring’s (2004) Qualitative Content Analysis.

In the following, the central findings of our empirical analyses on the problems and solution strategies in rural areas are presented in order to elaborate the specific construals of the crisis and to describe their discursive and material negotiation in the evolutionary phases of variation, selection, and retention. Altogether, three different economic imaginaries for the development of rural areas in Hesse can be identified: (1) the activating, opportunity-fixated economic imaginary; (2) the austeritarian, competition-fixated economic imaginary; and (3) the Keynesian, welfare state-oriented economic imaginary. These imaginaries each characterize specific positions and approaches to the disparities existing in the countryside. On the basis of these imaginaries, their respective representatives struggle to agree on what is the right regional policy approach to disparities in rural areas of Hesse.

4.1. Activating, opportunity-fixated economic imaginary

The activating, opportunity-fixated economic imaginary comprises the idea of an activating state that focuses on providing incentives (primarily through subsidies) under market-based conditions. This imaginary aims to create the conditions for all citizens to have equal opportunities to participate in the market and competition. This is represented, to a large extent, by the Hessian state government – currently consisting of the conservative *Christlich-Demokratische Union* (CDU) and Green *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* – along with municipal organizations and the federal government. Characteristic, are the narratives of equal opportunities, generational justice, and an emphasis on local economic development.

The state is seen as an authority that improves the competitive conditions of municipalities primarily through temporary and project-based funding and, thus, provides support for the endogenous development of rural areas. It promotes equal opportunities for unequal municipalities. However, this action is limited by the commitment to the so-called “debt brake” for public budgets in non-crisis times that has been in force at the federal state level since 2020. This prioritizes debt reduction and budget balancing, as well as limits the allocation of financial resources by the state of Hesse to its municipalities. The primary means of balancing municipal budgets includes using expenditure restrictions by means of “guided spending discipline” (Hessian Ministry of the Interior and Sports – *Hessisches Ministerium des Innern und für Sport*, 2019) implemented by the Hessian government, with reference to “generation-just budget management” (ibid.). Revenue increases stemming from fees, charges, and taxes at the municipal level are also demanded by the Hessian government, but tax increases at the state and federal level are rejected for reasons of competitiveness. Services of general interest, such as hospitals, should be economically self-sustaining and, together with other infrastructures, are seen as location factors in the competition for companies and residents. However, in the event of market failure, for example in sparsely populated rural areas, the state sees itself as responsible for providing guarantees.

The activating momentum of this imaginary is also reflected in the aggressive promotion of volunteer work, especially in the social sphere, as compensation for, and a supplement to, public tasks that have been hampered by austerity policies. For example, the Hessian government also refers to volunteer work as the “glue which holds the community together” (Hessian State Chancellery, 2018), while the Hessian

[Association of Towns and Municipalities \(2020\)](#) awards a symbolic Euro to municipalities that “attract their citizens to take on social tasks in an exemplary manner.” The activating, opportunity-fixated economic imaginary is hegemonic in the Hessian discourse on regional policy and dominant in the policies of the Hessian government. It is well-inscribed into the Hessian state apparatus. This imaginary is present in all areas of the Hessian structural policy examined and forms a powerful orientation for policies for rural areas, for example, it is expressed in a temporary funding policy that focuses on activation. This conceptual imaginary interprets equality in the classical liberal sense as equality of opportunity, which is to be established through state activation in the tradition of the social market economy. Structural reasons for spatial and social inequalities are neither addressed, nor systematically dealt with.

4.2. Austerity and competition-fixated economic imaginary

The austerity and competition-fixated economic imaginary is represented, in particular, by the Hessian Court of Auditors, the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), and the liberal party *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP). It is characterized above all by the neoliberal demand for a “lean” state that is reduced to only those tasks declared to be crucial. In terms of austerity policy, municipal budget problems are interpreted primarily in terms of expenditures, using classic neoliberal instruments. For example, the [Hessian Court of Audit \(2019, p. 117\)](#) conducted a detailed benchmarking of all municipal expenditures in order to point at negative deviations, for example, looking at the costs of cleaning and facility management in public buildings such as schools on the basis of net floor space in all municipalities. In general, budget consolidation is the primary goal and any surplus in the budget is to be used for debt reduction (*ibid.*). The rigorous rejection of new public debt, in combination with the reduction of old debt, implies a further withdrawal of the public sector from services of general interest and the provision of infrastructure. Budget balancing is advocated as a “justice of the generations” policy, regardless of specific spatial circumstances, and special solutions for sparsely populated rural areas with additional infrastructural costs are rarely found. In this imaginary, economically strong municipalities should also not be burdened by “performance-hostile” levies such as the Hessian solidarity levy. The Hessian solidarity levy is paid by the economically strong municipalities and benefits the financially weak municipalities, from the economically abundant municipalities to financially weak and often rural municipalities ([FDP Hessen, 2018, p. 39](#)). Competition is considered indispensable “to achieve optimal economic results,” and state economic activity must be strictly limited in accordance with the principles of competition ([AfD Hessen, 2018, p. 51](#)). A policy of equivalent living conditions in the sense of a balanced regional and structural policy is very narrowly limited by this imaginary. The austerity and competition-fixated economic imaginary challenges Hessian state policy, at least in part, by framing and, thus, justifying inequality as the natural result of competition, to the disadvantage of poorer parts of the state and population groups. In particular, the focus on balancing municipal budgets without (re)borrowing, and the redefinition of austerity policies generationally, finds resonance in policy of the Hessian government only.

4.3. Keynesian, welfare state-oriented economic imaginary

The Keynesian, welfare state-oriented economic imaginary stands for a state that intervenes more strongly in social policy than in the other two competing imaginaries. The state is supposed to generate economic growth by means of redistributive taxes and having an active structural and regional policy. In the discourse in Hesse, this imaginary is particularly manifest among trade unions, the left party, *DIE LINKE*, and, to some extent, the social democratic party, *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland* (SPD). It involves an expansion of the public sector to provide services of general interest and infrastructure in all regions – and,

thus, is largely independent of market rationalities or always focusing on “where the market fails” ([German Trade Union Confederation Hesse-Thuringia, 2018](#)). In this respect, the argument is also made for the support of rural areas, where infrastructure is often more expensive than in agglomerations and market solutions fail as they are not profitable. As a result, public investment is seen in creating jobs close to home, even in peripheral regions; stopping depopulation; and increasing opportunities for the population living there to participate in society. The “debt brake” for public budgets – with the exception of the SPD, which agrees with the concept in principle – is rejected because it makes necessary investments more difficult and particularly affects the socially disadvantaged. According to this position, too little revenue for local authorities has had a particularly negative impact on investment spending, which ultimately results in ailing infrastructure and an investment backlog. However, proponents of this imaginary argue that the reasons for this are to be found in the policy of tax cuts and the “debt brake,” and not in the expansive spending practices of the municipalities, as claimed in the competing imaginaries. This imaginary is, following Keynesian ideas, driven by both revenue and spending. It focuses on an increase in municipal revenues via higher taxation of assets and profits in order to be able to finance additional expenditures. This imaginary includes addressing the reasons for uneven development by referring to structural transformation and competitive losers and a rejection of financial self-responsibility for municipal (budgetary) difficulties. In many ways, the Keynesian, welfare-state-oriented imaginary recalls earlier phases of German regional planning policy by addressing inequalities beyond the lack of equal opportunities for the purpose of economic growth and, thereby, justifying support for rural areas. After being on the defensive during the times of neoliberalization, this position currently challenges the hegemonic activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary. The spatial disparities and unequal living conditions in many rural areas of Hesse are increasingly addressed as problematic in the dominant discourse and, as a consequence, more public investment in infrastructure is demanded despite “debt brakes” and budget discipline.

5. Discussion: The incomplete re-politicization of Hessian structural and regional policy

The struggle between economic imaginaries of regional policy for rural areas, given the strong disparities in Hesse (see chapter 3.2), indicates a re-politicization of structural and regional policy in the past five years. The extent to which this re-politicization has already sedimented with recourse to the CPE and the evolutionary course of variation, selection, and retention will be discussed below, as will the embeddedness of the identified economic imaginaries in social power relations.

The problem of creating equivalent living conditions in Hesse is interpreted differently in the three economic imaginaries. Whereas for the austerity and competition-fixated imaginary, equivalent living conditions are to be achieved through competition in as many areas of life as possible without state intervention, the activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary sees equality of opportunity as necessary for equivalent living conditions, for which activation and endogenous development are the mainstays. For the Keynesian, welfare state-oriented imaginary, equivalent living conditions must be achieved by means of active structural and regional policies in order to generate economic growth even in structurally weak, rural regions.

The Conservative-Green government is currently dominated by the activating, opportunity-fixated economic imaginary. This is being challenged by the other two imaginaries. On the one hand, the AfD and the FDP refer to the austerity and competition-fixated imaginary and put the Hessian government under pressure with corresponding demands for strict spending discipline. On the other hand, the dominant activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary is challenged by the municipalities and by trade unions, *DIE LINKE*, and SPD with tendencies toward left-wing Keynesian and welfare state-oriented approaches that call for a more

active structural and regional policy with higher public spending.

The re-politicization of regional and structural policy is also evident in the fact that rural areas and the relatively poor living conditions there due to structural weakness and inadequate infrastructure provision (see the maps in Kallert et al., 2020, p. 36ff.; Fina and Heider 2021) are increasingly being addressed and problematized by various political actors – often under the empty signifier of equivalent living conditions. Especially in uncertain times of crisis with strategic disorientation due to unstructured complexity, there are various discursive interpretations and proposals for material solutions (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008, p. 1158f.). This opening of the discourse on rural areas is accompanied by a re-politicization. Due to the low influence of material factors in this phase still, different crisis construals can make their mark. These construals compete with each other to establish interpretations and approaches to the problems of rural areas in Hesse. The discursive scope in Hesse ranges between strict austerity with a focus on public debt reduction to extensive public investment at the expense of new public debt and higher taxes. However, the discourses and narratives that advocate an endogenous development model within the framework of the activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary and the high priority to balance municipal budgets emerge stronger from this phase of variation with different approaches to solutions. Following this causal story, public debt reduction and budget balancing are interpreted as generationally equitable because today's public debt would burden future generations. This one-sided interpretation of intergenerational equity, thus, prevails over other construals, according to which debt-financed investments in infrastructure such as schools, renewable energies, and bike paths are generationally fair precisely because future generations also participate in the repayment, while benefiting from the goods and services.

In the selection of crisis construals, the activating, opportunity-fixated economic imaginary benefits from the high “interpretative power” (Heinrich and Jessop, 2015, p. 278) of the Hessian state government, the leading municipal organizations, and the federal government with regard to the crisis interpretations and solutions they represent. Governmental and knowledge apparatuses and, thus high media visibility, strengthen this interpretative power compared to competing economic imaginaries and “contribute to the selection and retention of specific approaches to crisis management” (Kutter and Jessop, 2015, p. 75). In this context, the Hessian state government uses its “interpretative authority” to translate its crisis interpretations into concrete policies (Heinrich and Jessop, 2015, p. 278). At the same time, the Hessian state government reacts to certain criticisms from the competing economic imaginaries and integrates them partially into their policies, especially regarding failing health care, lack of up-to-date digital infrastructure, over-indebted municipal budgets, and inadequate public transport connections in rural areas. Integrating demands for better infrastructure is easy since modern infrastructures are a decisive location factor for economic development and can be framed as creating equal opportunities. The Hessian government, thereby, succeeds in integrating the demands of other economic imaginaries to a limited extent and, thus, shows itself to be flexible in its structuring of regional policy and, at least partially, open to innovative responses to changing conditions (Jessop, 2010). However, the policies continue to operate within an economic imaginary that focuses primarily on creating equal opportunities and activation without committing to additional basic funding levels for local authorities.

The Hessian government's ideas and interpretations of intergenerational justice shape and structure the policy on public debt. For example, with the partial public debt relief of financially weak municipalities in Hesse, a demand of the Keynesian, welfare state-oriented imaginary is taken up. However, in return for receiving this financial aid, an austerity policy is demanded from the municipalities at the expense of the municipalities, their citizens, and their businesses. This budgetary discipline restricts the municipalities' room to maneuver for investments and services of general interest and, therefore, requires accepting further

increasing disparities between prosperous centers and the (mostly) rural periphery. This construal of the cause of municipal debt and its treatment must also be viewed in the context of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) and financialization. Municipalities depend on having a good credit rating in order to finance their expenditures and investments; doubts about the repayment of municipal loans increase the cost of further borrowing and have to be avoided. Given the high level of debt, coupled with the low fiscal power of many municipalities in Hesse, municipal debt relief assures lending banks that their municipal loans will be repaid. These structural forces, together with the semiosis, therefore, promote the selection and retention of a construal based on budget consolidation and austerity.

Accordingly, the Hessian government is hardly retreating from its austerity policy and is allocating far too little of its own funds to the municipalities, even though the public budgets recently gained funds due to the strong economy and low interest rates. The government's additional financial support to the municipalities mostly take the form of discontinuous project funds that are not only insufficient in quantitative terms, but also burden the municipalities with additional bureaucracy and planning uncertainty, according to interviews with the mayors of the small towns of Alsfeld and Löhnberg. Many municipalities receive no funding or only insufficient funding and, thus, turn out to be losers in the competition, which can further exacerbate the socio-spatial gap. Hence, the focus on unsteady project funding instead of adequate basic funding reveals another level of competition between municipalities for funding, in which the activating character of Hessian regional policy is expressed.

The example of poor mobile network services in many rural areas of Hesse illustrates the selection of a policy based on activation. The construal made by the Keynesian, welfare state-oriented imaginary of responding to the gaps in mobile networks coverage with the public provision of this digital infrastructure cannot prevail due to a lack of support. Instead, the state government of Hesse responds to the market failure with a subsidy program that focuses on activation and equal opportunity, with incentives for private investment: “Hesse emphasizes the importance of activating market forces in a non-discriminatory and competitive manner” (State Government of Hesse, 2018). Although 50 million Euros in funding was allocated for a publicity-driven ten-point plan developed with tech companies, this has so far only provided slightly improved network coverage in rural areas. In the selection phase, material factors such as EU competition law and prospects for returns on private capital investment become more influential and facilitated the selection and, finally, retention of a policy that seeks to achieve equivalent living conditions primarily through activation.

The Hessian state government focuses strongly on special programs that promote certain domains such as digital infrastructure, health, and mobility. However, the government's own contribution is limited, and the scope of this contribution does not do justice to the lack of infrastructure and services in the municipalities. In addition, volunteer work is promoted in rural areas, but this does little to conceal the lack of public infrastructure. Many residents of rural areas, such as an active member of the Alsfeld Volunteer Center we interviewed, have long been asking themselves, in view of the increasing emphasis on the importance of civic engagement for rural development: “Aren't we doing what would actually be a public responsibility?” Despite the Hessian government's increased attention to rural areas, underfunding, public debt, and investment backlogs remain central problems that cannot be solved with a project-oriented funding policy, special programs, and volunteer work.

The Hessian state government has succeeded in implementing and institutionalizing its construal of the crisis in rural areas because most of it is already inscribed in the relevant materialities, be it laws and regulations, the neoliberally restructured relationship between public and private capital, or high levels of public municipal debt, a result of several decades of austerity. At the same time, the Hessian government has discursively taken up demands and issues from other economic imaginaries without altering its general course. In the process of selection,

these demands have been modified to fit with the activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary and, more generally, the existing hegemony of neoliberalism, competition, austerity, and the privatization of public goods. As a result, the discourse around the problems of rural areas in Hesse is already sedimenting again after a short phase of re-politicization without the spatial disparities in Hesse being decisively reduced (see Fig. 2).

In summary, current regional policy in Hesse is neither able nor willing to adequately reduce spatial inequalities. So far, the only changes made have been symbolic in nature and do not constitute a fundamental turnaround that would overcome neoliberal competition and austerity at the municipal level. In this context, it would be important for the development of an alternative regional policy, first of all, to unmask and reinterpret the understanding of intergenerational justice that dominates the activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary. This would mean that investments in infrastructure and services of general interest, especially in structurally weak rural regions, should not be seen as a burden for future generations (who have to pay the loans), but as a contribution to spatial and social cohesion, the costs of which are spread over several decades and generations. Likewise, a critique of the current project-based funding logic in the area of municipal finance is necessary and needs to be countered with proposals for adequate and long-term funding of municipalities that expands the scope to also promote and strengthen civil society and progressive actors.

CPE offers a novel contribution to the study of regional policies by showing how semiotic and extra-semiotic factors operate in uneven spatial development. Therefore, CPE provides gainful insights by avoiding both a solely culturalist or solely structuralist point of view, and instead discusses the interdependent and co-constitutive roles of discourse and materiality. CPE represents a potentially open and comprehensive approach to understanding these processes and the tension between structure and (social) agency. Fundamentally, this requires understanding political economic structural conditions and constraints, as well as actors, their strategies, and discourses in order to trace the evolution of hegemonic configurations. A CPE-inspired analysis, as presented in this paper, could be extended to other regional contexts and policy issues in rural areas. With the help of CPE, for example, a differentiated view of civic engagement in rural areas between solidarity and neoliberal embrace can be developed.

The results of our study indicate that civic engagement is interpreted as strengthening progressive actors in rural areas, while at the same time replacing public services. Another example of the ways CPE could be used to examine the consequences of the Corona pandemic at the local scale and the policy answers within different economic imaginaries given the closure of many hospitals in rural areas due to their lack of profitability. In particular, the elaboration of the power relations between the economic imaginaries paves the way for alternative policies to address unequal spatial development.

6. Conclusion: CPE, regional policies, and the need for progressive alternatives

Our analysis aimed to demonstrate the potential of a CPE-inspired investigation using the example of the uneven development of rural areas in Hesse, Germany. By drawing on CPE, it is possible to track which discourses around spatial inequality are present in the re-politicized period in the context of the current crisis of municipal budgets and unequal living conditions. At the same time, it is possible to trace which specific construals have prevailed and become the basis for regional policies. This article has shown how the competing economic imaginaries from the political right and left are able to introduce issues such as inadequate infrastructure into the discourse. However, the Hessian state government was able to prevail with its solutions that are oriented toward the activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary and are compatible with the existing hegemony of neoliberalism and austerity. In the course of these evolutionary mechanisms, not only semiotic

(“talk”) but also increasingly material factors play a role: policies that follow re-politicization are pre-structured by opportunity equity and activation, competitiveness, and economic growth. As a result, the fundamental problems of rural areas persist.

Therefore, there is a need for more advanced approaches to rural development, such as progressive ruralism (Pezzoli et al., 2011), which would have to build on two key elements as prerequisites for social and spatial justice: sufficient and stable public budgets and the democratization of municipalities. However, the development of progressive ruralism requires broad alliances of municipalities, civil society, and political actors, as well as concrete projects to challenge the hegemonic activating, opportunity-fixated imaginary. The starting point for such a progressive ruralism would be, for example, demands for a “right to the village” (Barraclough 2013) that argues that decisions affecting rural areas should be made by residents of these areas. Solidarity projects such as cooperatives developed from below, which want to escape the logic of profit making should be promoted. The concept of the urban commons (Harvey 2013), used by social movements to oppose the commodification of resources, land, and services of general interest could also be a fundamental component of progressive ruralism. Applying the concept of the commons would push an understanding of health care, education, mobility, and childcare as goods that should be generally accessible in rural areas. We also consider relevant the concept of municipalism (Bookchin 1986), the gradual but radical democratization of society, in which alternative institutions at the local scale gradually replace the existing state institutions. Following such considerations, it could be a central demand to roll back all territorial reforms that involve a loss of local democracy (Douglas 2016), in order to shape democratic decision-making processes in such a way that those directly affected by these decisions will be more strongly involved again. This and further concretizations have the potential to politicize rural developments again and to provide struggles for equal living conditions a common perspective.

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Author statement

All persons who meet authorship criteria are listed as authors, and all authors certify that they have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content, including participation in the concept, design, analysis, writing, or revision of the manuscript.

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