Bachelor Thesis

The Utopian Vision of a Sustainable Transition: A Critical Discourse Theoretical Perspective on the EUs Circular Economy discourse after the EU Green Deal

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i. Abstract

The Circular Economy is widely promoted as the much-needed paradigm shift or sustainable transition, which is able to solve the multiple global crises of our time, like climate change and increasing resource exploitation, while ensuring economic growth and prosperity for everyone. However, the concept remains rather vague and contested, making it a so-called Empty Signifier, which is at risk of being instrumentalized by hegemonic discourses. As the European Commission entitles itself as the global frontrunner in the promotion of the concept, it is important to understand and critically reflect on the way the EU shapes and influences this policy discourse as a highly influential and powerful actor. Hence, this thesis wants to reveal in which way the Circular Economy discourse by the EU after the EU Green Deal is built on problematizations and what implications this has for the implementation of this sustainable transition, using the "*What's the problem represented to be?"* approach by Bacchi (2009). As the analysis showed, the policy discourse is mainly built on ecological modernization, a socio-technical imaginary, the silencing of scientific facts and counter-discourses and an overall high degree of depoliticization, which does not allow for much contestation of the taken-for-granted economic status quo.

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1 Background, Introduction and Research Question

Looking at the urging socio-ecological problems and challenges of our time and their far-reaching consequences, like the irreversible impacts of climate change and growing societal inequality (Geissdorfer et al., 2016), there is an increasing demand for a paradigm shift away from a wasteful linear economic model among policy-makers, businesses and scholars (Markard et al., 2012), entitled by Merli et al. (2018) as a "take-make-dispose linear pattern of production and consumption" (p. 1). The concept of Circular Economy, in this regard, has gained extreme popularity, as the keyword search for "Circular Economy" by Calisto Friant et al. (2020) vividly showed, and appears to be the most promising solution to tackle these various issues (Calisto Friant et al., 2020; Korhonen et al., 2017). It is often referred to as "the necessary transition" (Lazarevic & Valve, 2017), while the European Commission (EU), as one of the global frontrunners in the promotion of Circular Economy, labels the concept as an "irreversible, global mega trend" (Calisto Friant et al., 2021, p. 1).

Although the concept is already widely encouraged by numerous stakeholders and agreed on as the future of sustainable transitions by many governments worldwide, its definition and scope are still rather vague and highly contested, as there is no common theoretical framework (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Korhonen et al., 2018). Because of the many actors who try to influence the common understanding of Circular Economy with regard to their own interest, the concept is at "risk of lacking systemic validity, critical social relevance and its claims and propositions might be unachievable on a relevant scale to effectively address the socio-ecological challenges" (Calisto Friant et al., 2020, p. 2). As a consequence of the large number of conflicting understandings of CE, its objectives are at risk of being unimplementable and to remain in their contested state. Scholars like Kirchherr et al. (2017) already addressed this issue and tried to improve the transparency and coherence of various CE concepts by summarizing 114 definitions. Following this Korhonen et al. (2018) suggest the following definition of CE:

> an economy constructed from societal production-consumption systems that maximizes the service produced from the linear nature-society-nature material and energy throughput flow. [...] [It] limits the throughput flow to a level that nature tolerates and utilises ecosystem cycles in economic cycles by respecting their natural reproduction rates (Korhonen et al., 2018, p. 39).

The EU, as one of the most influential and powerful actors in CE, who emphasizes the concept as one of the core components of the EU Green Deal under the leadership of Ursula von der

Leyen (2019-now), chose within numerous conflicting understandings to view it as a "transition towards a regenerative growth model that gives back to the planet more than it takes" (European Commission, 2020a, 2). Therefore, the vision of CE as a universal solution to several complex challenges is shared, although its consequences and impacts, for example in terms of rebound effects (Millar et al., 2019) are only sparsely explored. In the light of the far-reaching consequences of climate change, resource exploitation and biodiversity loss on the one hand and the EUs highly influential position to tackle these issues on a global scale on the other hand, it is important to understand its Circular Economy discourse in the way it is constructed and built on problematizations, power and contested knowledges. Until now, no critical analysis of the new policies presented by the Von der Leyen Commission (2019-now), which followed the implementation of first action plan *Closing the Loop – An EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy (2015),* has been conducted. The thesis will therefore fill an important research gap on a very recent phenomenon and contribute to the understanding of the EU Circular Economy policy discourse and its implications for the implementation of it.

From a theoretical and conceptual perspective, the thesis will mainly build on an interpretive and poststructural understanding of discourse and policy as discourse, Foucauldian perspectives on power, knowledge, depoliticization and subjectification and Laclau and Mouffe's theory of Empty Signifiers. Moreover, theoretical insights from critical perspectives on the governance of sustainable transitions and a genealogical perspective on the European Circular Economy discourse will serve as a grounding for the analysis. As a methodological framework the "*What's the problem represented to be?"* approach (WPR), developed by Bacchi (2009) will be used, as this method is, compared to other methods of discourse analysis, especially suitable to critically analyze problem representations and constructed knowledges in policy documents.

Therefore, to explore this field of policy analysis through a critical discourse theoretical lens and fill the research gap, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question using the WPR approach by Bacchi (2009):

In which way is the Circular Economy discourse of the European Commission since the EU Green Deal built on problematizations and what implications does this have for the implementation of this sustainable transition?

As the WPR approach already provides six sub-questions for the analysis, which will lead to the answers to the main research questions, it is not necessary to further split the aim of the

thesis up. The following section will elaborate further on the theoretical backgrounds and concepts on which the thesis will be grounded. Before, the structure of the thesis will be shortly explained.

Following this chapter on the *Background, Introduction and Research Question (1)* of the thesis, the *Theory and Concepts (2)* used in this thesis will be presented. More specifically, this chapter contains units on *Discourse and Discourse Theory (2.1)*, explanations on *Power, Depoliticization and Subjectification (2.1.1)* and *Policy as Discourse (2.1.2)*, the *Governance of Sustainable Transitions (2.2)*, *Circular Economy as an Empty Signifier (2.2.1)*, followed by a *Genealogical Perspective on Circularity in the EU (2.2.2).* Chapter 3 will then continue with the *Research Design, Textual Data and Data Analysis (3)*, including the presentation of the *WPR Approach (3.1)*, a section on *Coding (3.1.1)*, the selection of *Textual Data for WPR (3.1.2)*, and the *Limitations of the Research Design (3.1.3)*. The *WPR analysis (4)* will then start with a unit on *Problem Representations (4.1)*, followed by the *Underlying Presuppositions and Assumptions (4.2)* of the EU Circular Economy discourse, the *Context of the Policy (4.3)*, *Unproblematized Aspects and Effects of the Problem Representation (4.4)* and a *Reflexive Perspective (4.5)*, ending with a final *Conclusion and Outlook (5)* on the topic.

2 Theory and Concepts

The theory and concepts section will now discuss several theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks from established researchers and literature, which are relevant to answer the research question of the thesis. Following this, the section will start with an introduction on discourses and discourse theory, further specified by explaining the concepts of power, depoliticization and subjectification and the theory on policy as discourse. The section will then elaborate on the governance of sustainable transitions, the concept of Circular Economy as an Empty Signifier, ending with a historical perspective on the development of a Circular Economy within the EU.

2.1 Discourses and Discourse Theory

Through a poststructural lens, discourse is widely agreed on as constituting knowledge and reality through language. Therefore, there is a strong analytical focus on linguistic aspects and rhetoric patterns within discourses. However, from a Foucauldian perspective discourse is rather seen as a practice instead of a language, which produces knowledge and in the case of policy, problematizations (Chapter 2.1.2), which is why this perspective rather seeks to

understand the mechanisms behind those practices, instead of linguistic patterns. Following this, the making of meaning is what discourse "brings into the complex relations which constitute social life" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 3) from a dialectical point of view. As discourses are thus defined as "socially produced forms of knowledge" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 35) or "[clusters] of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action" (Wodak, 2015, p. 5), knowledge and reality are in this regard not seen as universal truths, but as constructs, which are widely accepted as the truth (Hajer & Veersteg, 2005).

One important concept in discourse theory is the one of power. Often mistakenly used synonymously, discourse and power do not have the same meaning, but are inextricably linked to each other, as "discourse can be 'internalised' in power and vice-versa" (Fairclough, 2010, 4). Fairclough (2010) explains this nexus with the example of state power, as governments legitimize and maintain their power through discourse. However, they also make use of other forms of power, such as violence, which is why the two concepts must be distinguished from another. Following this critical theoretical perspective on discourse, critical discourse analysis, from which the WPR approach derives, seeks to "[de-mystify] ideologies and power through the systematic […] investigation of semiotic data" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 3), as "we can only arrive at an understanding of it [discourse] by analysing sets of relations" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 3). The concepts of power, depoliticization and subjectification will be further discussed in the next section, as they are essential concepts in understanding discourse and policy as discourse.

In which way knowledges and meanings are shaped by discourses and how discourses are understood through their relations, becomes especially visible through the example of Circular Economy, as the concept was originally sharply contrasting the prevalent neoliberal economic model. But as it gained more popularity, the concept became subject to several disciplines or "discursive formations" (Foucault, 2002) and transformed to become a neoliberal idea itself, which will be discussed in further detail in chapter 2.2.2.

2.1.1 Power, Depoliticization, Subjectification

Power is one of the key concepts in critical discourse theory and interpretative approaches. Mostly the concept is understood as a form of domination of one entity over another (Bacchi/Goodwin, 2011) and in general negatively connotated. However, the concept is too wide to narrow it down on one definition, as there are many different forms of power relations. Still, one possible notion of power might for example be "the (in)capacity of actors to mobilise

means to achieve ends" (Avelino 2021, p. 440). According to Foucault, there is a wide range of power relations reaching from fluid/shifting ones to states of domination (Foucault, 2002), which can cause serious harm. Avelino (2021) in this regard, summed up a total of seven different power contestations with references to their theoretical origins, such as the theories of Lukes, Arendt, Gramsci, or Foucault. Following the Foucauldian perspective, power is seen as a productive entity as "power produces […] reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him (sic) belong to this production" (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 204-205). Therefore, power is also closely related to knowledge, as the construction of knowledge is a powerful act itself "not only in terms of mobilizing knowledge, but also in terms of influencing how other actors mobilize all sorts of resources" (Avelino, 2021, p. 439). She argues that this is especially relevant in sustainable transitions as for example "defining a 'transition' […] and […] assessing that one form of change is 'more' or 'less' transformative than another, may have serious power consequences" (Avelino, 2021, pp. 439-440). Such forms of power and knowledge are especially at risk of being abused.

Depoliticization is another important phenomenon which derives from the political sphere and is important to critically analyze. It comes from an understanding, that recognizes "the political" as "a discourse in which the existence of power, conflict, and contingency is recognized" (Kenis et al., 2016, p. 570), which then makes depoliticization the "'loss' of 'the political'" (Kenis et al., 2016, p. 570). More precisely, the phenomenon of depoliticization contains "all counter-strategies, which seek to conceal the contingency of social reality, disclose discursive struggle by silencing alternative voices or channel dislocations in a way that fundamental social structures remain untouched" (Methmann et al., 2013, p. 13). Following Mouffe (2005), today's society is criticized as post-political, because it has developed a "kind of consensus thinking and a technical and managerial attitude" (Kenis et al., 2016, pp. 570-571), also understood as the technocratization, which fails to recognize power imbalances in decision-making and silences or ignores counter-discourses and conflicts, which is a crucial component of successful sustainable transitions and democracy itself. Moreover, democratization is especially dominant in the field of environmental and sustainability policy discourses, as Swyngedouw (2013) argues, which makes it an important aspect to keep in mind during the analysis of the Circular Economy discourse.

Lastly, this chapter will elaborate on the mechanism of subjectification, as it is an important concept in poststructural policy analysis. Policies, in this regard "play significant roles in subjectification processes, shaping ways for people to be that can be harmful and limiting" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 50), which moreover emphasizes in which way power is exercised as a productive force, as already mentioned above. Subjectification can therefore be defined as "the production, or making, of provisional "subjects" of particular kinds through policy practices" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 49). Governments make use of this practice by promoting a particular kind of desired behavior, although their influence on subjects is limited, as individuals still follow their own will and might develop forms of protest. An example for subjectification from the context of sustainable transitions can be the production of moral subjects with a high level of individual responsibility, as "governmentality practices in sustainability matters often focus on forms of sustainable consumption" (Kenis & Mathijs, 2012; Kenis & Lievens, 2015 in Kenis et al., 2016, p. 576).

2.1.2 Policy as Discourse

Policy analysis has become one of the most common methods to gain knowledge about or contribute to the work of governments and related organizations and is an important area of research, as policies affect and regulate every part of society and our daily lives (Brown, 1998). Policies through a theoretical lens, tend to be viewed as "objective entities – the results of decisions made by rational authorities" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 7) within the established positivist research tradition, which simply follow the purpose to organize or solve existing societal problems. Their ontology thus rather remains static and unquestioned among the majority of scholars. A more critical and interpretive perspective towards policies and policymaking, which derives from the greater focus on language and discourse in the 1960-70s of interpretive social scientists, like Berger and Luckmann (1966) or Foucault (2002), rather tends to view subjects (policymakers) as interwoven with their creations (policies). This implies that the policymaker as well as policy cannot be seen as objective and rational entities, but rather as influenced by constructed knowledges and meanings.

As already stated above (2.1), knowledge cannot be universal, but is always dependent on external factors, like time, place, different understandings, and power relations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Bacchi, 2009). Therefore, a critical perspective on policymaking is not interested in the effectiveness of a policy or if a chosen tool is right or wrong to solve a specific problem, like it is for example in cost-benefit approaches, but rather asks which role certain

(professional) knowledges play "in how we are governed and in producing the kinds of "subjects" we are encouraged to become" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 5). As "discourses shape what can and cannot be thought, delimit the range of policy options and thereby serve as precursors to policy outcomes" (Keller & Poferl, 1998; Litfin, 1994, p. 37 in Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 178), interpreting policy as discourse can reveal how policies are embedded within the different contexts they occur in (Fairclough, 2013) and in which way "heterogenous practices, in particular the knowledge practices, […] produce hierarchical and inegalitarian forms of rule" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 4). Ultimately, the goal of analyzing policy as discourse is to determine the "role of policy in constructing the world via language and discourse" (Goodwin 2011, p. 167).

One key concept in critical policy analysis is the constitution of problems or problematization in policymaking, based on the premise that "the polity becomes a discursive construction, established via the deliberation of shared problems" (Hajer, 2005, pp. 182-183). As already mentioned, the dominant idea of what policy and its purpose is, is to address and solve given societal problems (Simon, 1976). However, before policies can be developed, the concerned policy area needs to be problematized (Osborne, 1997) or, in other words, "to intervene, to institute a policy, "government", including but beyond the state, has to target something as a "problem" that needs fixing" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 16). This assumption builds on Foucault's aspiration to understand how governing takes place by analyzing on "what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking, the accepted practices are based" (Foucault, 1994, p. 456), also understood as "governmentality" (Foucault et al., 1991) or as Bacchi names it: the "problem representation" (Bacchi, 2009). Building on this, society is not governed by the problem solutions presented in policy, but rather by problematizations themselves (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Still, analyzing policy as discourse not only reveals how policy is developed within discourses through problematization, but also what is excluded from the discourse and thus left unproblematic or silenced. It therefore builds on the assumption, that "language, and more broadly discourse, sets limits upon what can be said" (Bacchi, 2000, p. 48). One suitable methodology to analyze policy as discourse, although not the only one, is the WPR approach (*What's the Problem Represented to be?*) developed by Bacchi (2009), which will be used to answer the research question and will be further discussed in the methodology section (3.1).

2.2 The Governance of Sustainable Transitions

In today's world we are confronted with numerous global environmental threats and problems, such as climate change or biodiversity loss, with far-reaching consequences for human life and especially future generations. As a reaction to an increase of such crises, the study field of transitions has emerged, which seeks to understand how societal transformations can occur and be governed towards greater sustainability. Sustainable transition theory reasons the importance to study this field with the argument that such "persistent problems are symptoms of unsustainable societies, and that dealing with these persistent problems […] requires transitions and system innovations" (Avelino, 2011, p. 3). Following this, sustainable transitions are defined as radical and wide-ranging societal shifts away from unsustainable practices towards a sustainable state (Grin et al., 2010; Markard, 2012; Kohler et al., 2019).

Transition studies have their origin in innovation studies and social technology studies (Avelino/Grin, 2017) with its dominant concepts and frameworks being the Multi-Level-Perspective, Technological Innovation Systems, Strategic Niche Management, Transition Management and Transition Governance (Markard et al., 2012). As it is still a rather new field of research, it does not only gain supporters but also faces a lot of criticism. For example, it has been noted that within the Sustainable Transition Research (STR) discourse, new approaches and ideas (counter-discourses) are strictly integrated and adjusted to fit the above-mentioned dominant frameworks in the field. This practice leaves no room to really explore the potential new concepts detached from the established ones (Hopkins et al., 2020). Moreover, as Avelino (2021) states, most researchers of sustainable transitions adopt a very optimistic attitude towards innovation and societal change. In this regard it has been observed that the discourse is dominated by "an underlying notion of change and innovation as drivers for societal improvement, and an (implicit or explicit) belief in human knowledge and agency to change the world for the better" (Avelino, 2021, p. 440).

All in all, most criticism revolves around the general need to adopt a more critical perspective towards the implications and effects of transitions, as this is still mostly missing and might benefit STR in a way that it becomes more differentiated and inclusive (Hopkins et al., 2020). In this regard, there needs to be a special emphasis on power struggles and inequalities that come with transitions, while overcoming the unconditional support of STR concepts (Avelino, 2021). Following the power contestations of well-known social scientists, like Lukes, Giddens or Foucault, transition studies therefore need to ask questions about who is exercising power

and how in social change and innovation, who has the power to decide about what is included or excluded from the political agenda, what the connection between knowledge about transitions and power is and who is (dis)empowered by sustainable transitions (Avelino, 2021, p. 441).

Other researchers, such as Duineveld and Dix (2011) also support a critical Foucauldian perspective on transition studies by emphasizing that his theories on problematization, power and knowledge might support the development of a more reflexive approach to reveal hidden problems in policy. They argue, that by combining a Foucauldian perspective with the concept of reflexive modernization, which describes an analysis "that scrutinizes the intentional and unintentional side effects of modernization" (Duineveld & Dix, 2011, p. 13), actors might be able to "reflect on and confront not only the self-induced problems of modernity, but also the approaches, structures and systems that reproduce them" (Hendriks & Grin, 2007, p. 335).

Within this critical perspective towards sustainable transition research there is also a strong urge to expand the focus on the role of discourse coalitions and lobbies as involved agencies (Metze & Dodge, 2016; Smith et al., 2010), as they shape and influence the sustainable transition discourse with their interests. This focus is much needed because it "makes salient political questions about the interests and sources of power shaping selection environments and generating variations" (Smith et al., 2010, p. 446) and might also give explanations on "how and why […] agents are able to reform the rules in desirable directions, in the context of regimes and niches, thus dealing with the politics essential to transitions" (Smith et al., 2010, p. 445). Avelino (2011) in this regard argues, that the discourses on which Sustainable Transition Research is grounded, such as the sustainability discourse, need to be critically reflected themselves, as they are often blurred and elite driven. Hence, "not only can transition discourse be used by societal actors for 'strategic interpretation'; it can also be used by researchers to influence how sustainability issues are framed" (p. 7).

In this context, another critical voice is concerned with the depoliticization of sustainable transitions, as "transition management tends to represent society in deliberative, market and 'managerial' terms, and thereby contributes to a depoliticised understanding of sustainable change" (Kenis et al., 2016, p. 580). The authors in this regard identified that "acknowledging conflict, contradictory interests and radical forms of pluralism is a condition for avoiding that large parts of citizens become alienated from transition discourses elaborated by enlightened

elites" (Kenis et al., 2016, p. 580) and thus crucial for fighting far-reaching ecological problems and developing a functioning sustainable transition.

Considering the particular case of this thesis, Leipold (2021) has noted, that the EU discourse on Circular Economy, which is an example for a sustainable transition policy, so far has been dominated by a discourse coalition of business- and environmental areas of the European Commission, which prioritizes economic growth, international competitiveness and ecological modernization, which is defined as a "discourse that recognizes the structural character of the environmental problematique but none the less assumes that existing political, economic, and social institutions can internalize the care for the environment" (Hajer, 2005, 25). The next section will therefore elaborate further on the concept of Circular Economy and how it is criticized, before zooming in on the history of the concept within the EU, as this is the particular case of interest of this thesis.

2.2.1 Circular Economy as an Empty Signifier

Although the concept of Circular Economy gained a massive increase in attention of scholars, governments, and businesses in the last decade, it already emerged in the 1970s with its focus on waste management and reduction. When introducing the origin of the concept, many scholars (Geissdoerfer, 2017; Ghisellini, 2016) refer to the analysis of Pearce and Turner (1990), who investigated how "natural resources influence the economy by providing inputs for production and consumption as well as serving as a sink for outputs in the form of waste" (Geissdoerfer, 2017, p. 759) and therefore describing the functioning of the dominant linear economic model.

Since then, the once ambitious idea of a Circular Economy as a contrasting model to our linear economy became subject of several discourses, including neoliberal and hegemonic discourses, which filled the concept with their own ideas, leaving the meaning of it diffuse, depoliticized and empty, as Corvellec et al. (2020) point out. Hence, a critical perspective on the concept reveals, that it fits into Laclau and Mouffe's (2001), poststructuralist theory of Empty Signifiers, defined as "[representing] the entire discursive chain of signifiers connected to them and [being] completely void of any meaning particular to themselves" (Jacobs, 2018, p. 305). Its only definition happens to be the distinction from the remaining antagonist or heterogeneous structure, which is defined through the assumption that "meaning can only be achieved if some things are left meaningless. For a structure of moments to be meaningful, some elements have to be excluded from this structure" (Jacobs, 2018, p. 306). Certain aspects are therefore simply

excluded from the discourse and thus remain unproblematized. Following this, “due to its lack of specific content, it is able to incorporate diverse agents within the planning process, including traditional antagonists, under the pretense that they are all working on the same issue” (Brown, 2016, p. 116-117).

Especially in the context of knowledge and power, Empty Signifiers “are devoid of inherent content [and thus allow] its meaning to be contested, and those who speak the hegemonic language are better able to temporarily fix its meaning” (Brown, 2016, p. 117), meaning that such concepts are likely to be instrumentalized by elites with respect to their own interests. The emptiness of Circular Economy becomes especially visible by looking at the historical development and common definitions of the concept.

Calisto Friant et al. (2020) divide the development of the Circular Economy into three major periods from Circularity 1.0 starting around 1945 to Circularity 3.2., which includes the most common understandings of the present. Whereas the first two periods focused on technological solutions to improve waste management, the third period presents “integrated socio-economic approaches to resources, consumption and waste” (Calisto Friant et al., 2020, Fig. 3), including reformist perspectives, transformational patterns and a more diverse set of concepts including ideas from the Global South. As Kirchherr et al. (2017) points out, today there are over 114 different definitions originating from those first ideas among all kinds of stakeholders, which makes it difficult to capture the key components of Circular Economy. Still, many definitions agree on the facts that a Circular Economy operates on all levels from micro to macro and that the responsibility for a successful transition is shared among all stakeholders. Prieto-Sandoval et al. (2018) suggest that all concepts should include four basic pillars, namely a product life cycle where resources and energy ideally stay within the circle and the use of resources is reduced to a minimum, the inclusion of all levels and the close connection to the goal of sustainable development and societal innovations. However, the discourse around Circular Economy so far remains “focused on the economy, excludes social dimensions, and simplifies its environmental consequences” (Corvellec et al., 2022, p. 428) and is therefore still viewed critically as part of “socio-technical imaginaries” (Kovacik et al., 2020, p. 32), which heavily rely on undeveloped innovations and technologies.

The next section will go into further detail on how the concept of Circular Economy has been developed within the European Commission as this case is the research focus of the thesis.

2.2.2 A Genealogical Perspective on Circularity in the EU

In order to understand and analyze today's Circular Economy discourse and policy of the European Commission, it is important to take a closer look at the history and context of the concept within the EU. As Bacchi (2009) points out, "it is important to consider the web of policies, both historical and contemporary, surrounding an issue […] because what you deduce about the specific case you study will reflect the circumstances reflecting it" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 21). The strategy of genealogy as developed by Foucault in this regard describes a historical perspective on established knowledges and practices, in order to discover their "'moment of arising', the 'entry of forces', and the 'endlessly repeated play of dominations'" (Foucault, 1977, pp. 148-150 in Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 46).

Circular Economy first occurred in Europe within the member states Germany and Sweden at the end of the 1990s, where it surprisingly did not emerge from sustainability researchers or civil society, but as a product of legislation with its focus on waste management (Kovacic et al., 2020). At EU level, the topic became relevant after the report *Towards a Circular Economy* from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation in 2013, which had a huge impact on policymaking in this regard. Moreover, the concept emerged during a time period, where the EU still recovered from the financial crisis in 2008-2009, which extensively influenced the framing of it, as it promised economic growth, global competitiveness, and the creation of new jobs. The environmental concerns which the concept originally aimed to tackle where pushed into the background due to these promises of economic growth, as they were just not weighted equally important at that time (Kovacic et al., 2020). In 2014, the first legislative act on the concept has been developed (*Towards a Circular Economy - A Zero Waste Programme for Europe, 2014*) as a joined product of the until that point highly contradicting visions of the environmental and the economical agency of the EU, focusing mainly on waste management. This can be noted as the starting point for a shift of the Circular Economy discourse "from a problem of trade-offs and difficult choices to a language of "win-win" and opportunities for synergy" (Kovacic et al., 2020, p. 31).

With the election of Jean-Claude Juncker as the new president of the European Commission in 2015, the expectations and hopes on a Circular Economy grew more ambitious with the first Action Plan *Closing the Loop – An EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy (2015).* Within this plan the concept has for the first time been described as a transitional process "where the value of products, materials and resources is maintained in the economy for as long as possible,

and the generation of waste minimised" (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). Central features of the plan were promises of security in different policy areas and the overarching notion of new innovations, which are promised to solve the multiple societal problems mentioned in it. All in all, the Commission put lots of effort into convincing various stakeholders of the benefits of the concept, although there is until this point a lack of implementation exceeding waste management. For example, Calisto Friant et al. (2020) discovered a "dichotomy between words and actions, with a discourse that is rather holistic, while policies focus on "end of pipe" solutions and do not address the many socio-ecological implications of a circularity transition" (p. 1). However, with the first action plan under Juncker being widely celebrated as a success, because all objectives have been implemented, a new era of the Circular Economy started with the election of Ursula von der Leyen as the new president of the European Commission and the publishing of the European Green Deal in 2019.

The starting point of this analysis of the Circular Economy discourse under Von der Leyen is thus built on "contested knowledges, […] systemic complexity and unpredictability […], conflicts of interest […], and a variety of static and dynamic historical contingencies that induce institutional and political constraints on governance" (Kovacic et al., 2020, pp. 128-129), leaving the question open, if the discourse is continued like this or if there is a change towards a more holistic understanding and implementation of the concept.

3 Research Design and Methodology

The following section outlines the methodological approach of the thesis, including an elaboration on the WPR approach, its questions of analysis and a short note on coding, as well as an explanation of the chosen textual data and some limitation of the research design.

3.1 Method of Analysis: WPR Approach

To answer the research question and the sub-questions, the thesis will use the methodological framework developed and presented by Bacchi (2009), which is called "*What's the problem represented to be?".* Building on the theory of seeing and treating policy as a product of discourse (Chapter 2.1.2), Bacchi's methodological framework is, compared to other methods of discourse analysis, an especially suitable approach to critically analyze "the discursive aspects of policy, including how problems are represented in policy and how policy subjects are constituted through problem representations" (Goodwin, 2011, p. 167), as the focus is less on linguistic patterns. Moreover, this choice of method is also very suitable in the light of Empty Signifiers, as discussed in the theory section. The WPR approach enables the researcher to

reveal in which way Empty Signifiers, like the vague concept of the Circular Economy, are instrumentalized, framed and thus filled with a certain meaning by elites and also opens up and opportunity to shed light on silenced aspects of the discourse.

It has its origin in the four scientific traditions of "social construction theory, post-structuralism (including post-structuralist discourse psychology), feminist body theory and governmentality studies" (Goodwin, 2011, p. 171) and works backwards starting from the policy solution to reveal the problematization behind it, guided by a total of six questions. As Circular Economy is presented and widely supported as a broad and universal solution to a wide range of societal problems, such as climate change and overconsumption, the WPR approach is especially useful to reveal in which way this policy is defined by "commonly accepted categories and governing practices" (Bacchi/Goodwin, 2016, p. 13). The following table will visualize the six questions of the WPR framework and their analytical goals:

Questions	**Goals/Description**
1. What is the problem represented to be in a specific policy?	Identifying the problem representation(s) within policy papers
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?	Identifying concepts, meanings, patterns, and constructs behind the problem representation(s)
3. How has this representation of the problem come about?	Emphasizing on the implicit notions of power and knowledge, which made the particular problem representation(s) possible
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?	Reflecting on and prioritizing unmentioned and silenced aspects, which offer to view the "problem" from another perspective
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?	Shedding light on discursive, subjectification and lived effects of the problem representation
6. How/where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated	Understanding how problem representations can become dominant and exploring the necessity to contest

	and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?	possibly harmful problem representations; counter-discourses

Table 1: WPR framework (Bacchi 2009)

Due to the limited time and scope of the thesis, the last question, which focuses on counter-discourses, will not be asked, as extensively elaborating on alternative discourses would go beyond the scope of the paper and the research question. However, notions of counter-discourses will be mentioned in the context of the other questions, for example when explaining unproblematized aspects of the problem representations.

The last step of the analysis, which is an important part of any interpretive or critical approach and derives from Critical Discourse Theory, is the one of reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). With its main premise being that the researcher is a subject located "within historically and culturally entrenched forms of knowledge" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 24), it is necessary to critically reflect on one's own interpretations and findings, as they contribute to another discourse themselves (Fairclough, 2013). This also becomes a relevant aspect in the context of problematizations and Foucault's "commitment to problematizing 'even what we are ourselves'" (Foucault, 2001, p. 1431 in Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 24), as the critical analysis of problem representations create new problem representations themselves. The analysis will therefore end with a short chapter on reflexivity.

In order to perform the analysis systematically and in an organized manner by asking the chosen five of the six questions from the WPR framework, the program Atlas.ti will be used as a tool to code the relevant sections according to their significance to answer the specific questions of the framework. The codebook will be attached to the data appendix of the thesis.

3.2 Textual Data Selection and Research Limitations

As already mentioned before, in the understanding of Critical Discourse Theory, the researcher is embedded in and influenced by the societal context surrounding him, which is why choosing textual data for the analysis "itself is an interpretive exercise […] [as] your choices will reflect your particular interests and/or topical concerns" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 20). Keeping this in mind, the textual data has been chosen accordingly to the methodological framework, as the WPR approach (Bacchi, 2009) offers some broad guidelines for the data selection, which build on Foucault's understanding of so-called practical texts. These comprise of all texts that offer guidelines, rules, or advice on behavior in any way (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), which thus can

for example be interviews, media statements, legislative acts or, as in the case of this thesis, publications on the new Circular Economy strategy of the Von der Leyen Commission.

Since the announcement within the EU Green Deal in 2019 that the EU will further pursue a sustainable transition towards a Circular Economy, two main publications have been released, which outline the strategy and goals of the European Commission under Von der Leyen within the EU and on a global scale: *The New Circular Economy Action Plan – For a cleaner and more competitive Europe (2020)* and *Leading the way to a global Circular Economy (2020)*. These papers have been chosen for the analysis because they sum up the European Commission's understanding and procedure towards a Circular Economy, present their goals and plans in terms of EU external policymaking and moreover illustrate in which way this understanding is communicated to the public, which mirrors wide parts of the EU's discourse on the concept. The documents have been retrieved from the official website of the European Commission under the sub-topic of the New Circular Economy Action Plan.

Being a subjective researcher influenced by external factors there are some limitations to the research, which must be acknowledged, especially within the research field of critical and interpretive analysis. For example, as already mentioned above, the selection of textual data is already an interpretive act and therefore a limitation, as another researcher might choose other data, which leads to different results. The fact, that the researcher is not limited by the methodological framework and is able to choose an "almost endless variety of texts" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 20) also contributes to this. Moreover, the personal way of thinking influences the interpretation of certain aspects, as another researcher might interpret textual data and highlight certain aspects of it from another perspective due to the circumstances surrounding him.

Due to the fact that Circular Economy is itself, as an Empty Signifier, a vague and contested concept (Chapter 2.2.1) and statements in policy publications often remain as broad and unspecified promises, the possibilities to interpret the textual data in different ways are even wider. As this is a common problem in CDA, the thesis will follow Wodak's (2015) suggestion to "work on a basis of a variety of different data, methods, theories, and background information" (p. 2), although the incorporation of a variety of data is restricted because of the limitations of time and scope. Another limitation of the research design is the fact, that the Circular Economy discourse under Von der Leyen is a very recent one, which implies, that there is only little data available, which could be analyzed. Still, this thesis will try to ensure the validity and reliability of the interpretive results as effectively as possible by closely working

with different theoretical and conceptual perspectives and including a reflexive part in the analysis.

4 Analysis

After introducing the relevant theories, concepts, and the methodological framework, in the following section the chosen textual data will be analyzed and interpreted accordingly to the chosen five of the six questions of the WPR approach. The first section will start with an identification of the problem representations, followed by the underlying assumptions and the context of the policy. The analysis will then elaborate on unproblematized aspects and the effects of the problem representations, ending with a chapter on reflexivity and discussion. As the different questions and categories are closely connected to each other, topical overlapping may occur, when a certain aspect is relevant with regard to different dimensions. Because of this, the unproblematized aspects and the effects of the problem representation will be merged into one chapter.

4.1 Problem Representations

The main issues or problems which need to be tackled by Circular Economy policy presented in the publications, are the problematizations of increasing global consumption, the extensive use of resources and the rising amounts of waste because of this, especially in the areas of electronics, infrastructure, plastics and packaging, textiles, construction, and sustenance (European Commission, 2020a). The current situation, which is problematized, is described as built on "linear, highly resource depleting systems with high emissions, waste generation, and high impacts on ecosystems and natural capital" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 4). The main goal of the New Circular Economy Action Plan is therefore

> the transition towards a regenerative growth model that gives back to the planet more than it takes, advance towards keeping its resource consumption within planetary boundaries, and therefore strive to reduce its consumption footprint and double its circular material use rate in the coming decade (European Commission, 2020a. p. 5).

However, economic growth strongly relies on resource use and consumption and remains unquestioned as the superior goal and of the same importance as combatting climate change, which becomes especially visible in the context of expanding Circular Economy on a global scale:

> Scaling up the circular economy from front-runners to the mainstream economic players will make a decisive contribution to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and decoupling economic growth from resource use, while ensuring the long-term competitiveness of the EU and leaving no one behind (European Commission, 2020a, p. 4).

Climate change, biodiversity loss and resource scarcity are thus especially presented as a threat to economic growth, competitiveness, and security within the EU, which is why the concept of decoupling is introduced as the main solution to the problematization of reducing resource extraction, meeting climate goals and secure economic growth at the same time. This also reveals a lot about the presuppositions and assumptions underlying the European Circular Economy discourse, as decoupling is a highly questioned concept, because it is a phenomenon "typical of the neoliberal ideology" (Giampietro, 2019, p. 154), meaning that the economy is able to grow without using more resources and causing environmental impacts. As this is relevant on several levels, the notion of decoupled economic growth will be further discussed in next section, as well as in chapter *4.4 (Unproblematized Aspects).*

Another problem representation, which is closely connected to the one presented above and is highly visible throughout the whole textual data, is the problematization of efficiency and management, or more specifically, the lack of it, which can be solved through an increase in innovations, digitalization, and the use of technology and which also sheds light on its underlying presuppositions and assumptions. This is for example emphasized in the context of the connection of Circular Economy to the policy strategy Horizon 2020, which is advertised as

> [supporting] the development of indicators and data, novel materials and products […], circular business models, and new production and recycling technologies, including exploring the potential of chemical recycling, keeping in mind the role of digital tools to achieve circular objectives (European Commission, 2020a, p. 21).

Moreover, the publication emphasizes that

> innovative models based on a closer relationship with customers, mass customisation, the sharing and collaborative economy, and powered by digital technologies, such as the internet of things, big data, blockchain and artificial intelligence, will not only accelerate circularity but also the dematerialisation of our economy and make Europe less dependent on primary materials (European Commission, 2020a, p. 4).

In this context the need to extract resources, especially minerals, is framed as crucial and thus the decreasing availability of critical minerals for green technological innovations problematized, as the action plan states:

> Their [the minerals] extraction and further processing will be key to deliver the clean technology, mobility and digital solutions necessary for the transition of all industrial sectors towards climate neutrality and a circular economy. Given the size of the demand, their extraction will continue to play a key role (European Commission, 2020b, p. 10).

As these excerpts from the publications show, the problem representations widely revolve around threats towards the growth of the European economy, which demand an efficiency improvement guided by technological and digital solutions. Within the context of dealing with far-reaching problems, such as climate change and biodiversity loss the European Commission therefore states, that "more efficient resource use will become an increasingly important factor for competitiveness and sustainable growth, for instance extending the lifetime of products so that the value of materials and their use in the economic system are maximized" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 10).

Besides the strong focus on technologies and innovations, a reoccurring emphasis is on the necessity to include all actors, namely "economic actors, consumers, citizens and civil society organisations" (European Commission, 2020a, p. 5) and their responsibility to contribute to a successful transition towards a Circular Economy. In this context a lack of available information and transparency for individual consumers to make sustainable choices is problematized. Supporting "business and consumer information through eco-labelling, environmental standards and certification" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 35) in order to enhance consumer participation and awareness, is thus highly prioritized as a crucial step towards a sustainable transition and framed as "empowering consumers and public buyers" (European Commission, 2020a, p. 8). Following this, unsustainable individual consumer choices are problematized as a burden to reduce resource exploitation and the carbon footprint.

4.2 Underlying Presuppositions and Assumptions

During the analysis, several presuppositions and assumptions underlying the problematizations represented in the Circular Economy discourse have been identified. The most dominant one is the representation of climate change and resource scarcity being problems, which can be solved through new technologies, innovations, and more efficiency. The EU's strong belief in "new

business models, resource-efficient production and uptake of clean technologies" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 30), which have not been developed yet, is strongly in line with the notions of the socio-technical imaginary, meaning that there is a focus "on the futuristic orientation of policy narratives, especially those in which future, hitherto undeveloped, technology is expected to play a major role" (Kovacic et al., 2020, p. 32).

This unquestioned support for technologies and innovations as drivers of environmental policy, which already has been identified as a common notion in the sustainable transition discourses (Avelino, 2021), goes hand in hand with the dominant neoliberal idea of endless economic growth, which underlies the Circular Economy discourse of the Von der Leyen presidency and is justified by the concept of decoupling. In line with ecological modernization, growth is assumed as a desirable state and of great importance, as long as it is achieved sustainably or "green". An example, which emphasizes this can be found in the context of global water access, as a basic human need to survive and economic growth are mentioned in the same sentence: "Without energy and water, basic human needs cannot be met to produce food for a rapidly growing global population and achieve economic growth" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 14). Sustainable growth itself is therefore not problematized at all, but rather presents Circular Economy in a light of various benefits and chances to increase wealth, "create income and jobs, reduce poverty and inequality, and strengthen the ecological foundations of their economies" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 27).

This presentation of Circular Economy as a universal solution to numerous problems and the possibilities of economic growth going along with it, is deeply rooted in a process of depoliticization, as possible conflicts of interests, power struggles and the complex social reality are simply not given attention to. By including multiple complex problem dimensions, which are promised to be solved by the Circular Economy, contradicting and antagonistic opinions are silenced, while fundamental constructs, such as the neoliberal idea of growth, can continue to remain unquestioned within the concept. This is especially fostered by the win-win discourse of the EU, which is continued from the previous legislative period and appears throughout the whole textual data: "This plan aims also at ensuring that the circular economy works for people, regions and cities, fully contributes to climate neutrality and harnesses the potential of research, innovation and digitalization" (European Commission, 2020a, p. 5). All in all, with presenting excessive resource exploitation and climate change as problems of poor efficiency and management, lack of green technologies and innovations and a weak consumer awareness, the

EU circumvents the necessity to question neoliberalism and economic growth themselves on a systemic scale.

4.3 Context of the Policy

The Circular Economy discourse of the Von der Leyen Commission strongly builds on the policy of the previous presidency (e.g., *Closing the Loop – An EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy*) and is embedded in and justified by several other established EU policies and international agreements. The publication dealing with the EU external Circular Economy plans in this regard states, that their concept

> is a key contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, and other commonly agreed international targets under e.g. the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (European Commission, 2020b, p. 4).

The discourse is thus part of a wider Circular Economy discourse coalition, formed for example by the European Green Deal and the Agenda 2030, and strongly builds on mutual recognition. These policies and agreements have in common a similar perspective on sustainable development and sustainability itself, which are unquestionably connected to the goal of economic growth, as already elaborated above. For example, the notion of sustainable development is used to justify resource exploitation outside of the EU: "The extractive sector, if carefully managed, presents significant opportunities for advancing sustainable development, particularly in low-income countries" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 10). With referring to the Circular Economy's contribution to reaching the global Sustainable Development Goals several times, the EU is able to back up its policy with the notion of a higher purpose reaching beyond EU borders:

> The EU, through its external financing instruments, helps partner countries manage their resources more sustainably and adopt sustainable consumption and production practices, in line with SDG 12. This brings multiple benefits, contributes to most EU development goals and its global strategy policy priorities, and to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development objectives (European Commission, 2020b, p. 39).

The European Commission's Circular Economy policies are moreover influenced and justified by several powerful economic institutions, like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as becomes clear in the following statement:

> The importance of the circular economy for climate action is acknowledged by science and policy, e.g. in reports by the OECD, the IRP and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and Materials Economics and in the Commission's long-term strategic vision on greenhouse gas emissions reduction (European Commission, 2020b, p. 28).

Secured by a wide network of powerful global actors, the European Commission finds itself in a superior power position, emphasizing their extensive knowledge and resources, in the international Circular Economy discourse and seeks to spread their dominant ideas and interests further:

> The Action Plan also confirms that the EU will continue to lead the way to a circular economy at the global level and use its influence, expertise and financial resources to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, in the EU and beyond (European Commission, 2020b, p. 4).

Although it is often mentioned that Circular Economy policies should be implemented with respect to "(i) local socioeconomic and cultural factors; (ii) cultural conditions, and environmental factors" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 14), it remains non-negotiable, that the concept is without any alternatives and should be somehow implemented in a European sense. In this regard it is stated that "the European Green [Deal's] ambition to promote a just transition in Europe that leaves no one behind is fully relevant to the advancement of a circular economy in third countries" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 31). However, the notion of including everyone in the transitional process remains rather unspecified and is mostly referred to in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Circular Economy's potential to build new jobs. Hence, SDG 8 is emphasized in the publication as "[promoting] sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 27). All in all, it becomes visible in the publications that the EU places itself as an international front-runner and role model, which other countries should follow and adapt to: "The Commission will […] build a stronger partnership with Africa to maximise the benefits of the green transition and the circular economy" (European Commission, 2020a, p. 22).

4.4 Unproblematized Aspects and Effects of the Problem Representation

This section of the analysis focuses on the aspects of the problem representations, which remain unproblematized or have been silenced and how the problems can be thought about in a different way. Again, it is noted that the selection of unproblematized aspects, which have been identified

through the analysis of the textual data, is a subjective act and thus not complete, as another researcher might emphasize other unproblematized aspects.

The most dominant aspect, which has been identified before as unquestioned and thus unproblematized, is the belief in the thriving of economic growth independent from resource exploitation and with positive benefits for the climate and biodiversity, also defined as decoupling. Going along with this is the unquestioned hope in technologies and innovation to solve the numerous complex problems listed in the publications, defined as a socio-technical imaginary (Kovacic et al., 2020). Both ideologies are framed within a win-win-discourse, which constructs the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and ending global resources not as dangerous threats towards the survival of humanity, but full of economic opportunities and chances. This becomes already visible through the fact that a whole chapter in the New Circular Economy Action Plan is dedicated to "opportunities for different actors" (European Commission, 2020b, 3). Another example is a statement of the European Commission, which announces that the EU will "generate extra value and unlock economic opportunities" (European Commission, 2020a, 9) of becoming climate neutral.

In addition to this, scientific facts are ignored, and possible negative effects of technologies and innovations downplayed. Although one chapter elaborates on the knowledge gaps of the concept, it is still fully supported as an unquestionable and universal solution by the dominant discourse coalition. For example, in the chapter on knowledge gaps it says:

> At present, there is little detailed analysis on the impact of the circular economy on different sectors, countries and markets resulting from changing trade and investment patterns, volumes, and interdependencies; nor on the resultant social and environmental consequences (European Commission, 2020b, p. 44).

The concepts on which the Circular Economy policy of the EU is based, like decoupling and circularity, are highly contested within the scientific community, however this is not acknowledged in the textual data. "From a biophysical point of view, a "closed loop" is an impossibility" (Kovacic et al., 2020, p. 61), however it remains as the guiding framework for the Circular Economy in the EU. As already stated, this is further induced through downplaying possible consequences of the Circular Economy. For example, extensive resource exploitation and new waste streams that will follow the rise of new technologies and innovations are downplayed as solvable simply through better management and cooperation networks:

> A growing attention is being paid to emerging waste streams due to new technologies such as solar panels, batteries, turbines, etc. Cooperation with industrialised countries can be reinforced to prevent landfilling and reduce the lifecycle impact of new green technologies (European Commission, 2020b, 13).

Another important unproblematized aspect arises from the emphasis on the shared responsibility of all actors from businesses to individuals and the claim that nobody is left behind in this sustainable transition, which has been identified before and goes along with the win-win-discourse constructed by the EU. This image of a sustainable transition, which fully manages to balance out ecological, social, and economic demands resembles a utopian vision of elite agents and fails to acknowledge the complexity of socio-cultural aspects and conflicts of interest. As Avelino (2020), Hopkins et al. (2020) and Kovacic et al. (2020) emphasized, this way of constructing the discourse around Circular Economy leads to an alienation of large groups of society, as inequalities and socio-ecological impacts of this sustainable transitions remain as marginalized topics, which ultimately leads to a depoliticization of the discourse. For example, the recognition of gender-based inequalities only occurs one time in the context of access to water, where the EU promises to set up joint entities to ensure "equitable, effective and gender-inclusive water use (with parallel pollution reduction)" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 15). However, this is not further specified.

In addition to this, the EU pays special attention to the responsibility of all societal actors to tackle the problematized issues, such as climate change, but fails to further differentiate this responsibility among the actors. In this regard, individual consumerism seems to be of equal importance as the pollution of businesses and industry. Moreover, different levels of consumerism among individuals are not addressed and the problematization of unsustainable consumption can be overcome by simply "empowering consumers and providing them with cost-saving opportunities" (European Commission, 2020a, p. 8) as well as "[ensuring] that consumers receive trustworthy and relevant information on products" (European Commission, 2020a, p. 8). Therefore, consumers just need more sustainable opportunities and more information on sustainable consumption to solve the issue of resource exploitation, which is an oversimplification of the problem.

Moreover, different social realities and inequalities, such as financial abilities to live sustainably or the access to sustainable alternatives, are not sufficiently acknowledged. Instead of viewing consumers as individuals embedded in complex socio-cultural realities, the EU "represent[s]

society in deliberative, market and 'managerial' terms" (Kenis et al., 2016, p. 580) and individuals as economic entities, which are able to make rational sustainable choices. Thus the "complex combinations of routines and habits, shared cultural meanings and understandings, and available infrastructures (Mylan et al., 2016; Welch et al., 2017 in Kovacic et al., 2020, p. 99), which are connected to consumerism, are not problematized. Another effect of this discourse is the construction of desired subjects, in this case by building oppositions between the sustainable or moral consumer and the unsustainable consumer, which applies pressure on individuals to adapt to these behavioral norms and often occurs in sustainable transition discourses (Kenis et al., 2016). This is moreover an example of how the EU uses its power as a productive force (Bacchi/Goodwin, 2016), as this way of employing the policy discourse seeks to "enhance the participation of consumers in the circular economy" (European Commission, 2020a, p. 8).

All in all, with the way of problem representation identified within the analysis, European policy on Circular Economy under Von der Leyen (2019-now) continues to be "built by depoliticising environmental governance and reducing sustainability to technocratic management." (Kovacic et al., 2020, p. 135), efficiency and moral consumerism, which does not allow much contestation of the taken-for-granted knowledges and constructs, which produced these socio-environmental problems in the first place.

4.5 Reflexive Perspective on the Results

As already pointed out in previous chapters, in interpretive and critical research approaches, the researcher itself is in a subjective position and is embedded in his own work, which is why a reflexive perspective on one's own findings and interpretations is a necessary step of the analysis. As Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) define it: "Given one's location within historically and culturally entrenched forms of knowledge, we need ways to subject our own thinking to critical scrutiny" (p. 24). Moreover, any form of interpretation or criticism of a discourse contributes to another discourse, or in this case, creates another problematization.

Following this, several new problematizations have been produced throughout the analysis, not only through revealing certain problem representations, but also through what has been left unproblematized in the EU Circular Economy strategy. One of them is the problematization of the unquestioned technocratic belief in solving multiple far-reaching crises with innovations and technology, while ensuring that economic growth remains the highest goal. This has been problematized, because it oversimplifies these crises and might even enhance them and hence,

is not able to solve or ease any of them. Going along with this is the problematization of the EU ignoring scientific facts, like the possible reverse effects of decoupling or rebound effects in general, which further hinders the Circular Economy from improving or stopping issues, like climate change. Lastly, it has been problematized that the EU focuses on individual responsibility to tackle those crises and creates moral subjects in terms of sustainable consumption, because this leaves the different levels of responsibility among all actors and the widely varying social realities of individuals unnoticed.

Following these new problematizations, there is an urge for the EU Circular Economy strategy and policy to strongly rely on scientific facts, distance itself from economic growth as the ultimate premise of a sustainable transition and to shift its focus towards the socio-ecological dimension of such a transition, which can again be criticized as a utopian vision, as this is hardly implementable without a whole paradigm shift of our global neoliberal system away from ecological modernization and the socio-technical imaginary. Still, it visualizes the potential of the concept if it would incorporate important silenced aspects and counter-discourses in its strategy.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

In conclusion, this thesis has tried to reveal how problems are represented within the Circular Economy discourse of the European Commission under Von der Leyen since the publishing of the EU Green Deal by analyzing the presidency's two main strategic publications on the Circular Economy, one focusing on EU internal policymaking and the other one on external affairs. Additionally, the thesis tried to carve out certain presuppositions and assumptions, which underlie this discourse, the context of power and knowledge in which this policy has been developed, what has been silenced or left unproblematized in it and what kind of effects this problem representation produces, using the WPR framework developed by Bacchi (2009) as the method of analysis and building on the theoretical background of critically interpreting policy as discourse and Foucauldian perspectives on knowledge, power, depoliticization and subjectification. In addition to this, critical perspectives on the governance of sustainable transitions, the Circular Economy as an Empty Signifier, as defined by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) and the genealogy of the concept within the EU have served as a theoretical basis for the analysis. Ultimately, the thesis now wants to answer its main research question: *In which way is the Circular Economy discourse of the European Commission since the EU Green Deal*

built on problematizations and what implications does this have for the implementation of this sustainable transition?

With regard to answering the first part of the research questions, the new Circular Economy policy by the Von der Leyen Commission is built on several problematizations, which have been identified through the analysis. The most dominant problem representations within the strategies result of the framing of far-reaching global crises, like rising resource scarcity, rising inequality, biodiversity loss and climate change as threats mainly for the continuity of economic growth, which can all be solved through the development and application of new technologies and innovations as well as the improvement of efficacy in certain sectors. Drawing from the theory, this problem representation strongly complies with an underlying notion of ecological modernization, as there remains an unquestioned belief in solving multiple complex socio-ecological crises without really changing the status quo, meaning that endless economic growth in a neoliberal global system remains as the ultimate goal and uncontested truth. This goes along with the socio-technical imaginary, which has been identified as a dominant belief underlying the policy strategies. Silenced or unproblematized remain in this context scientific facts, which criticize this construction of a Circular Economy, like possible rebound effects or the contested state of decoupling, which plays a huge role in the execution of the EU strategy.

Besides representing these global issues like economic and technological problems, the problem representation of the EU Commission furthermore focusses on individual consumption as a main driver of for example climate change, which can thus be solved through more sustainable or responsible consumption, leaving different levels of responsibility among stakeholders unacknowledged. Following this problem representation, it has been identified that the EU distracts the overall attention from the most important drivers of these crises, like the industrial and business sector and fails to incorporate the complex social realities of individuals in its strategies, but rather aims for the creation of rational, responsible, and sustainable subjects.

The analysis has moreover shown that the policy context in which the Circular Economy discourse of the Von der Leyen Commission has been developed, is located in a strong discourse coalition of highly influential and powerful international organizations, like the UN with its Sustainable Development Goals or the OECD. Within this discourse coalition of elites, the EU is able to maintain its powerful position as the self-appointed global leader and its ideas and interests in the Circular Economy, as these organizations share similar beliefs, for example

in green growth and mutually approve the importance of their strategies and instruments. This especially visualizes the strong connection between power positions and constructed knowledges or taken-for-granted truths and moreover shows in which way this power-knowledge-nexus is able to shape and influence discourses on environmental policy. Moreover, this analysis serves as an example on how an Empty Signifier, like the vague concept of the Circular Economy, is instrumentalized by such elites and develops from an ambitious counter-idea to the linear economic model into a hegemonic and neoliberal idea itself, by silencing counter-discourses.

Coming to the effects of the problem representation, the second part of the research question can be answered, as they carry several implications for the implementation of the concept. With depoliticizing the discourse on the transition towards a Circular Economy, the EU is able to carry on with its utopian vision of one concept solving multiple complex issues at once, which is a dangerous oversimplification of the current global issues and their far-reaching consequences especially for future generations. At the same time, the Commission does not need to conduct this paradigm shift in reality but can carry on with business-as-usual, secured by taking-for-granted constructs, like the neoliberal ideas of ecological modernization, decoupling and green growth.

Facing the global consequences of climate change, resource exploitation, rising inequalities and biodiversity loss, the way the EU uses its powerful position within a network of highly influential international organizations to shape the CE policy discourse and problem representations in its own interests, is all in all very alarming, as the much needed change in the way our economy works is not happening and counter-discourses, which could truly have positive socio-ecological impacts, rarely have a chance to enter mainstream policy-making, due to these huge power imbalances.

However, this thesis contributed to a better understanding and critical reflection of the way the European Commission as a powerful international actor employs its Circular Economy discourse since the publishing of the EU Green Deal, which opens the space for alternative policymaking in this context. As the thesis is limited in time and scope, there are several aspects, which can be assessed in future research. For example, it might be useful to compare the Circular Economy discourses of different European member states and involved stakeholders in order to draw a larger picture of the status quo of the concept. Moreover, it can be useful to contrast the Circular Economy discourse of the European Commission with several counter-

discourses, for example from the Global South, as this thesis has not been able to focus on this highly relevant aspect. Lastly, future research in this field might benefit from various new insights by combining different methodological approaches with the one presented in this thesis.

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7 Data Appendix

Question	Code	Description
What is the problem represented to be in a specific policy?	Problem Representation	Identifying how certain aspects are represented as problems in the policy
What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?	Underlying Presuppositions and Assumptions	Exposing underlying notions, claimed truths and established concepts
How has this representation of the problem come about?	Policy Context	Revealing in which context/web of power/knowledge the policy has come about
What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?	Unproblematized Aspects	Highlighting hints/notions of unproblematized/silenced aspects within the policy
What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?	Effects of Problem Representation	Discussing possible implications of the problem representation

Table 2: Coding Scheme

Document	Author	Year	Description
Circular economy action plan: For a cleaner and more competitive Europe	European Commission	2020	Publication outlining the European Circular Economy strategy after the EU Green Deal
Leading the way to a global circular economy: State of play and outlook	European Commission	2020	Publication elaborating on the EU external/global Circular Economy strategy

Table 3: Textual Data List