THE DISCURSIVE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE: RISK, POWER AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

Anabela Carvalho

1Universidade do Minho, Portugal

*E-mail: carvalho@ics.uminho.pt

The speed and scale of human impact on the planet have, in the last few decades, reached unprecedented levels. As the composition of the atmosphere itself is rapidly modified, climate change has become the most severe threat to both biophysical systems and human security, thus demanding a fundamental rethinking of its root causes. Despite much expectation regarding the Paris Accord and other developments, most socioeconomic practices and structures remain unchanged. In this short paper I will argue that, despite much focus on (inter)governmental policies in media(ted) discourses, climate change has been depoliticized in various ways, and that a radically democratic approach is needed to address it.

Anthropogenic climate change is riddled with inequities (across countries, social groups/classes, generations, etc.) and is tied to multiple matters of power at the levels of both causation and (potential) responses. The following are among such key issues: the differential historical responsibility for the generation of greenhouse gases (GHGs); disparities in per capita ratios of GHG emissions; the various geographies of production and consumption of goods (and their associated GHGs); the highly differential vulnerability of countries and social groups to the impacts of climate change; its numerous and entangled spatial and temporal scales; and, more generally, the incomparable capacities of different states, communities and groups to shape debates, agendas and decision-making processes on climate change.

In most forms of action that are in place to mitigate climate change or prepare for its impacts, power systems and relations remain unchallenged. Most often, they are not even acknowledged; in other words, they are obscured and naturalized. It is obviously necessary to point out that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change refers to countries’ ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’
and that the governments of ‘developing’ countries have struggled within the respective Conferences of the Parties to get some of those unbalances redressed. However, the institutional constructs that have emerged from those processes, such as the Clean Development Mechanism and the Green Climate Fund, have led to various forms of bias and injustice, either at the inter- or intra-state levels.

What, then, does ‘risk analysis’ mean for climate change politics? Whereas a risk lens ‘implies control, manageability and accountability’ (Pidgeon & Butler, 2009, p. 676), there are numerous – and often incommensurable – values and perspectives at play as regards climate-related risks: for whom, assessed by whom, for what, when...

The meanings of climate change (along with those of the social and biophysical realities it is embedded in) are constituted in and through discursive processes that involve various types of texts (be they political speeches, activist communication, news and other media (ted) texts, etc.). The discursive politics of climate change also encompass the production and consumption (or ‘social circulation’) of texts and their interplay with multilevel contexts – other texts, social structures, culture, etc. The discourse(s) that is (are) dominant at a given time are institutionalized (i.e., translated into legal norms, policies, entities, etc.) and certain power relations are consequently constructed or reinforced. A given social order is, therefore, constantly reproduced or transformed in discursive processes. Within this social order, some aspects may be open to debate, while others are not.

In the words of Edkins (1999, p. 2), the political, as opposed to politics, ‘has to do with the establishment of that very social order which sets out a particular, historically specific account of what counts as politics and defines other areas of social life as not politics’. Maeseele and Raeijmaekers (2017, p. 4) maintain that depoliticization ‘concerns not only the concealment of those particular politico-ideological values, perspectives and choices that underlie a social order and shape its politics, but also – and more importantly – the misrecognition of the fact that any social order is always the provisional product and expression of a particular configuration of power relations.’ Depoliticization is about concealing ‘the
contingency of social reality’ and obscuring ‘discursive struggle by silencing alternative views’.

Several scholars have argued that climate change has been depoliticized over the last few decades. Drawing on their analyses, I shall briefly discuss some of the discursive processes (and their corresponding institutional and material practices) that have contributed to this depoliticization, namely technocratization, carbonification and commodification.

Technocratization is a highly sedimented logic of global climate governance (Methmann, Rothe, & Stephan, 2013). As noted by Rothe (2011, p. 341), over time, there has been a progression towards a ‘post-political condition in climate politics where policies are chosen by economic and scientific technocrats rather than by a democratic decision-making process’. In the words of Methmann et al. (2013, p. 250), ‘scientists and ‘carbon professionals’ (...) make climate change countable, visible, understandable and hence malleable (...). And they are legitimated as inventors of solutions to the problem – solutions, which again, are merely technical ones.’ In the process, other voices and other views are excluded: ‘The discourse on climate politics so far is an expert and elitist discourse in which peoples, societies, citizens, workers, voters and their interests, views and voices are very much neglected.’ (Beck, 2010, pp. 254-5).

Carbonification refers to discursive processes that reduce climate change to a problem of excessive CO₂. Tons of the equivalent of carbon dioxide are promoted as a commodity and the unit of measurement against which technologies and individual actions are evaluated (Mert, 2013). One ton of CO₂ emitted by a coal-fired power station in the USA becomes equivalent to and interchangeable with a ton of CO₂ sank through planting trees in, say, a deprived local community in Brazil. According to Swyngedouw (2018, p. 137), ‘while the socio- and political-ecological framings of these two processes are radically different and incommensurable, monetizing CO₂ renders them fully interchangeable and commensurable.’ Using this logic, what have been termed as ‘luxury emissions’ of the rich and ‘survival emissions’ of the poor become equivalent. With carbonification, all the problematic structures and practices at the root of climate
change are reframed in terms of one substance, and all social divides and tensions associated with emissions-producing practices are suppressed. Carbonification also justifies responding to climate change with mere displacing problems. Nuclear power, for instance, becomes accepted within this logic of analysis of climate change while creating a series of other concerns.

Through commodification, CO$_2$ becomes amenable to be managed via ‘the market’. Promoted by many liberal economists as the best way in which to deal with climate change, via mechanisms such as emissions trading, commodification advances analyses of climate change in terms of economic risks and opportunities for private investment. Via public finance mechanisms, the state features primarily in the role of the facilitator of capital accumulation rather than the guarantor of security and the equal rights of all citizens. Paterson (2014) argues that commodification has numerous consequences that should be resisted, such as the creation of different forms of carbon colonialism and the development of mechanisms that obscure the failure of markets in dealing adequately with climate change.

Functioning as an overarching hegemonic discourse, ‘sustainable development’ has apparently reconciled all aspirations to economic development, social justice and environmental protection and has arguably had a significant depoliticizing effect: ‘the sustainability argument has evacuated the politics of the possible, the radical contestation of alternative future socio-environmental possibilities and socio-natural arrangements, and silences the radical antagonisms and conflicts that are constitutive of our socio-natural orders by externalizing conflict.’ (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 228).

Where do we go from here? Are there possibilities for the (re)politicization of climate change? What would that entail? While critical, answers to these questions cannot be explored in detail in the limited scope of this paper. I will simply maintain that a transformation towards socially just and environmentally balanced futures requires a radically democratic debate and decision-making process. This means looking into – and making visible – the roots of the social and political systems that have produced climate change, bringing alternatives to light and cultivating inclusive debates and political processes. The Climate Justice movement and the
Energy Democracy movement are examples of social developments that offer opportunities for the democratization of climate change. They both bring power and difference to the fore.

And with respect to the concept of ‘risk, in the words of Pellizzoni (2014, p. 206), ‘the destiny of risk as an instrument of critique, that is, as a means for opening up spaces of discussion, contestation and change, is (...) unclear.’ (...) The critical leverage of risk (...) rests on its connection with political agency, which means using the concept to reorient our attention to problems of choice and distribution against issues of safety and efficacy; to questions of ‘whether or not’ or ‘for the benefit of whom’, against questions of ‘how’.

References


