



# The Non-political Politics of Climate Change

**Erik Swyngedouw<sup>1</sup>**

Geography, School of Environment and Development  
University of Manchester, UK  
Erik.Swyngedouw@manchester.ac.uk

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The climate change bandwagon has decidedly gone off course in recent years. The onslaught of the deepest and most structural crisis of capitalism of the last 70 years that struck the cozy neoliberal consensus as a bombshell in the fall of 2008 and the subsequent hectic formation of a new commons of the bourgeoisie to assure that all political energies are mobilized to get the sputtering accumulation engine going again, irrespective of the social and environmental cost, has decidedly altered the elite's political agenda. While environmental—and in particular climate change—concerns increasingly dominated the agenda in earlier years, the last few years saw a resurgence of an obsession with getting accumulation for accumulation sake going again. The eagerly awaited (at least by those concerned by the climatic predicament we are in) COP15 climate conference in 2009 in Copenhagen and its 2011 successor Durban meeting turned out to be utterly disappointing. The elites' concerns turned yet again to where it normally is, i.e. making sure that the neoliberal order can survive somewhat longer. As the commons of the bourgeoisie rallied around making sure that collective political and financial efforts were directed to re-booting capitalist growth, climate concerns were relegated again to the backburner of policy agendas and retreated to the sphere of climate activism.

This special issue testifies nonetheless to the continuing importance and relevance of climate politics, and attempts in a variety of ways to both take stock of the situation we are in and distil key political lessons to be learned. In this short opening commentary, I will briefly explore the contours of the strange non-political politics that have marked the terrain of climate change over the past few years and



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argue for re-centering the political as a necessary step towards taking the climate (and environmental) issue really seriously. Or in other words, if we really care deeply about the climate and other socio-environmental conditions, our theoretical gaze and political passions have to shift from a concern with the environment per se to a concern and passion for the construction of a different politics.

### **1. 'Ecology as the new opium for the people'**

The birth pains of the Anthropocene raise urgently the specter of the obligation to consider what sort of environment we wish to live in, how to produce it, and with what consequences (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Chakrabarty, 2009). It calls for a new modernity that fully endorses human/non-human entanglements and takes responsibility for their nurturing (Latour, 2008). We do know that the environmental catastrophe is already here, that the geo-climatic changes and other environmental transformations are already such that they are inimical to the continuation of life in some places and for some humans (as well as non-humans), and this will undoubtedly get worse as climate change intensifies (Wynne, 2010). Nature as the externally conditioning frame for human life – an externalization that permitted the social sciences and humanities to condescendingly leave the matter of Nature to their natural science colleagues—has come to an end. The anthropocenic inauguration of a socio-physical historical nature forces a profound reconsideration and re-scripting of the matter of Nature in political terms. The question is not any longer about bringing environmental issues into the domain of politics as has been the case until now but rather about how to bring the political into the environment.

Political philosopher Alain Badiou has recently suggested that the growing consensual concern with nature and the environment should be thought as a contemporary form of opium for the people (Badiou, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2010). This seems, at first sight, not only a scandalous statement, one that conflates ecology with religion in a perverse twisting of Marx's original statement, it also flies in the face of evidence that politics matters environmentally. Yet, in this opening commentary, I wish to take Badiou's statement seriously and consider how exactly—in the present configuration—the elevation of environmental concerns to the status of global humanitarian cause operates as "a gigantic operation in the de-politicization of subjects". Ulrich Beck concurs with this:

"In the name of indisputable facts portraying a bleak future for humanity, green politics has succeeded in de-politicizing political passions to the point of leaving citizens nothing but gloomy asceticism, a terror of violating nature and an indifference towards the modernization of modernity." (Beck, 2010: 263)

I shall briefly explore the paradoxical situation whereby the environment is politically mobilized, yet this political concern with the environment, as presently articulated, is argued to suspend the proper political dimension. I shall explore how the elevation of the environment to a public concern it is both a marker of and

constituent force in the production of de-politicization. The paper has three parts. In a first part, the emblematic case of climate change policy will be presented as *cause célèbre* of de-politicization. I argue how climate matters were brought into the domain of politics, but articulated around a particular imag(in)ing of what a ‘good’ climate or a ‘good’ environment is, while the political was systematically evacuated from the terrain of the—now Anthropocenic—environment. The second part will relate this argument to the views of political theorists who have proposed that the political constitution of contemporary western democracies is increasingly marked by the contested consolidation of a process of post-politicization. I shall conclude that the matter of the environment in general, and climate change in particular, needs to be displaced onto the terrain of the properly political.

## 2. The Climate as Object Cause of Desire

“If we do nothing, the consequences for every person on this earth will be severe and unprecedented—with vast numbers of environmental refugees, social instability and decimated economies: far worse than anything which we are seeing today.”<sup>2</sup>

Irrespective of the particular views of Nature held by different individuals and social groups, consensus has emerged over the seriousness of the environmental condition and the precariousness of our socio-ecological predicament. There is a virtually unchallenged consensus over the need to be more ‘environmentally’ sustainable if disaster is to be avoided; a climatic sustainability that centers on reducing and stabilizing the CO<sub>2</sub> content in the atmosphere to some sort of mythical point that represents the ‘right’ climate (1989?) (Boykoff, et al., 2010). In this consensual setting, environmental problems are generally staged as universally threatening to the survival of humankind and sustained by what Mike Davis (1999) called ‘ecologies of fear’ on the one hand and a series of decidedly populist gestures on the other. The discursive matrix through which the contemporary meaning of the environmental condition is woven is one quilted by the invocation of fear and danger, and the specter of ecological annihilation or at least seriously distressed socio-ecological conditions for many people in the near future.

It is this sort of mobilizations without political issue that led Alain Badiou to state that ‘ecology is the new opium for the masses’, whereby the nurturing of the promise of a more benign retrofitted climate exhausts the horizon of our aspirations and imaginations. We have to make sure that radical techno-managerial and behavioral transformations, organized within the horizons of a liberal-capitalist order that is beyond dispute, are initiated to retrofit the climate. The proposed transformations often take a distinct dystopian turn when the Malthusian specter of overpopulation is fused with concerns with the climate, whereby, perversely,

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<sup>2</sup> Prince Charles, Speech at State Dinner in Santiago, Chile, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2009 [http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/newsandgallery/news/hrh\\_warns\\_of\\_the\\_urgent\\_need\\_to\\_protect\\_the\\_environment\\_at\\_a\\_1876977673.html](http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/newsandgallery/news/hrh_warns_of_the_urgent_need_to_protect_the_environment_at_a_1876977673.html) - accessed 5 August 2010.

newborns are indented as the main culprits of galloping climate change and resource depletion, a view supported by luminaries like Sir David Attenborough (OM CH CVO CBE), Dr Jane Goodall (DBE), Dr James Lovelock (CBE), and Sir Crispin Tickell (GCMG KCVO), among others<sup>3</sup>. In other words, the techno-managerial eco-consensus maintains, we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation—‘the partition of the sensible’ in Rancière’s words (Rancière, 1998) —so that nothing really has to change! Eco-warrior and Gaia-theorist, James Lovelock, put it even more chillingly: “ ... [w]hat if at some time in the next few years we realize, as we did in 1939, that democracy had temporarily to be suspended and we had to accept a disciplined regime that saw the UK as a legitimate but limited safe haven for civilization. Orderly survival requires an unusual degree of human understanding and leadership and may require, as in war, the suspension of democratic government for the duration of the survival emergency.”

The negativity of climatic disintegration finds its positive injunction around a fetishist invocation of CO<sub>2</sub> as the ‘thing’ around which our environmental dreams, aspirations as well as policies crystallize. The ‘*point de capiton*’ for the climate change problematic is CO<sub>2</sub>, the *objet petit a* that simultaneously expresses our deepest fears and around which the desire for change, for a better socio-climatic world is woven<sup>4</sup>, but one that simultaneously disavows radical change in the socio-political co-ordinates that shape the Anthropocene. The fetishist disavowal of the multiple, complex and often contingent relations through which environmental changes unfold finds its completion in the double reductionism to this singular socio-chemical component (CO<sub>2</sub>). The reification of complex processes to a thing-like object-cause in the form of a socio-chemical compound around which our environmental desire crystallizes is indeed further inscribed with a particular social meaning and function through its enrolment as commodity in the processes of capital circulation and market exchange. The procedure of pricing CO<sub>2</sub> reduces the extraordinary socio-spatial heterogeneities and complexities of ‘natural’ CO<sub>2</sub>’s to a universal singular, obscuring—in Marx’s view of commodity fetishism—that a commodity is “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties”(Marx, (1867) 2004: 162). The commodification of CO<sub>2</sub>—primarily via the Kyoto protocol and various off-setting schemes—has triggered a rapidly growing derivatives market of futures and options. On the European climate exchange, for example, trade in CO<sub>2</sub> futures and options grew from zero in 2005 to pass the 3 billion tons mark in June 2010; 585,296 contracts were traded

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.optimumpopulation.org](http://www.optimumpopulation.org) – accessed 2 August 2010}.

<sup>4</sup> “Object a is not what we desire, what we are after, but rather that which sets our desire in motion, the formal frame that confers consistency on our desire. Desire is of course metonymical, it shifts from one object to another; through all its displacements, however, desire nonetheless retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of fantasmatic features which, when encountered in a positive object, insures that we will come to desire this object. Object a, as the cause of desire, is nothing but this formal frame of consistency.” (Žižek, 1997: 39). See also Stavrakakis (2007).

during that month, with prices fluctuating from over 30 Euro to less than 10 Euro per ton over this time period<sup>5</sup>. CO<sub>2</sub>'s inscription as a commodity (and financialized asset) is dependent on its insertion in a complex governance regime organized around a set of managerial and institutional technologies that revolve around reflexive risk-calculation, self-assessment, interest-negotiation and intermediation, accountancy rules and accountancy based disciplining, detailed quantification and bench-marking of performance. This regime is politically choreographed and instituted by the Kyoto protocol (only marginally amended by the Copenhagen and Durban debacles) and related, extraordinarily complex, institutional configurations. It is precisely these gestures that permit incorporating the atmosphere into the commodified logic of capital circulation and neoliberal recipes. It also stands guarantee that economic growth and energy demands will continue on their insatiable trajectory. The consensual scripting of climate change imaginaries, arguments and policies reflect a particular process of de-politicization, one that is defined by Slavoj Žižek and others as post-political and becomes instituted in what Colin Crouch or Jacques Rancière term 'post-democracy'.

### 3. Post-Politicizing Climate

Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe define post-politicization as a procedure that actually forecloses the political (see Swyngedouw 2010). Post-politicization rejects ideological divisions and the explicit universalization of particular political demands, reduces the political terrain to the sphere of consensual governing and policy-making, centered on the technical, managerial and consensual administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic or other domains. This administration of matters remains of course fully within the realm of the possible, of existing social relations. The consensual times we are currently living in have thus eliminated a genuine political space of disagreement: "[e]verything is politicized, can be discussed, but only in a non-committal way and as a non-conflict. Absolute and irreversible choices are kept away; politics becomes something one can do without making decisions that divide and separate" (Diken and Lautsten, 2004: 15). Difficulties and problems, such as re-ordering the climate or re-shaping the environment that are generally staged and accepted as problematic need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus, operating nonetheless within a given neoliberal order that remains beyond political dispute.

Climate governance and the policing of environmental concerns are among the key arenas through which this consensus becomes constructed. The post-political environmental consensus, therefore, is one that is radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future environmental possibilities and assemblages. There is no contestation over the givens of the situation, over the partition of the sensible; over

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.ecx.eu](http://www.ecx.eu) – accessed 2 August 2010.

the necessity to preserve the order of the perceptible; there is only debate over the technologies of management, the timing of their implementation, the arrangements of policing, and the interests of those whose stake is already acknowledged, whose voice is recognized as legitimate. Although disagreement and debate are of course still possible, they operate within an overall model of elite consensus and agreement, subordinated to a managerial-technocratic regime (Crouch, 2004). Disagreement is allowed, but only with respect to the choice of technologies, the mix of organizational fixes, the detail of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation, not with respect to the socio-political framing of present and future natures.

#### **4. Conclusion: From Environmentalizing Politics to Politicizing the Environment**

Taking the climatic catastrophe seriously requires exploding the infernal process of de-politicization and urges us to re-think the political again. The Real of natures or, more precisely, the diverse, multiple, whimsical, contingent and often unpredictable socio-ecological relations of which we are part have to be fully endorsed. However, there is an urgent need to question legitimizing all manner of socio-environmental politics, policies and interventions in the name of a thoroughly imagined and symbolized Nature and its acting, a procedure that necessarily forecloses a properly political frame through which such imaginaries become constituted and hegemonised, one that disavows the constitutive split of the people by erasing the spaces of agnostic encounter. Indeed, the ultimate aim of proper political intervention is to change the given socio-environmental ordering in a certain manner. Like any intervention, this is a violent act, erases at least partly what is there in order to erect something new and different. Consider, for example, the extraordinary effect the eradication of the HIV virus would have on sustaining livelihoods (or should we preserve/protect the virus in the name of biodiversity?). Proper political interventions are irredeemably violent engagements that re-choreograph socio-natural relations and assemblages, both distant and nearby; that always split the consensus and produce socio-ecologically uneven outcomes. Engaging with natures, intervening in socio-natural orders, of course, constitutes a political act *par excellence*, one that can be legitimized only in political terms, and not—as is customarily done—through an externalized legitimation that resides in a fantasy of an idealized nature, of the right climatic conditions. Any political act is one that re-orders socio-ecological co-ordinates and patterns, reconfigures uneven socio-ecological relations, often with unforeseen or unforeseeable, consequences. Such interventions signal a totalitarian moment, the temporary suspension of the democratic, understood as the presumed equality of all and everyone qua speaking beings in a space that permits and nurtures dissensus. The dialectic between the democratic as a political given and the totalitarian moment of policy intervention as the suspension of the democratic needs to be radically endorsed. While the democratic political, founded on a presumption of equality, insists on difference, disagreement, radical openness, and exploring multiple possible futures, concrete

environmental intervention is necessarily about temporary closure, choice, a singular intervention and, thus, certain exclusion and silencing. The democratic political process dwells, therefore, in two spheres simultaneously. Jacques Rancière (1998) defines these spheres respectively as 'the political' and 'the police' (the policy order). The (democratic) political is the space for the enunciation and affirmation of difference, for the cultivation of dissensus and disagreement, for asserting the presumption of equality of all and everyone in the face of the inegalitarian function of the polic(y)e order. Any policy intervention, when becoming concretely geographical or ecological, is of necessity a violent act of foreclosure of the democratic political (at least temporarily), of taking one option rather than another, of producing one sort of environment, of assembling certain socio-natural relations, of foregrounding some natures and peoples rather than others, of hegemonizing a particular view of what constitutes a good socio-physical arrangement. And the legitimation of such options cannot be based on corralling Nature into legitimizing service. The political, and certainly a progressive political project, has to fully endorse this, dare to articulate its visions and recognize the impossibility of non-exclusion. The production of new and egalitarian socio-environmental arrangements implies fundamentally political questions, and has to be addressed and legitimized in political terms. Politicizing environments democratically, then, become an issue of enhancing the democratic political content of socio-environmental construction by means of identifying the strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more egalitarian mode of producing natures can be achieved. This requires reclaiming proper democracy and proper democratic public spaces (as spaces for the enunciation of agonistic dispute) as a foundation for and condition of possibility for more egalitarian socio-ecological arrangements, the naming of positively embodied ega-libertarian socio-ecological futures that are immediately realizable. In other words, egalitarian ecologies are about demanding the impossible and realizing the improbable, and this is exactly the challenge the Anthropocene poses. In sum, the politicization of the environment is predicated upon the recognition of the indeterminacy of nature, the constitutive split of the people, the unconditional democratic demand of political equality, and the real possibility for the inauguration of different possible public socio-ecological futures that express the democratic presumptions of freedom and equality. And these are among the key questions and issues address in the sequence of papers that is to follow.

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