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# Communication Practices and Political Engagement with Climate Change: A Research Agenda

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## Abstract

In this article, we call for a refocusing of research on citizens' political engagement with climate change. In doing so, we argue that communication practices not only help create the conditions for political engagement but they also comprise the modes of such engagement. Our argument proceeds in four steps. First, we review the literature on public engagement with climate change, concluding that there is a lack of attention to issues regarding the political. Consequently, we make the case for a refocusing of research on *political* engagement. Second, we explain how the notion of political subjectivity helps us to understand the relation between communication practices and engagement with the politics of climate change. Third, we discuss examples of dominant communication practices that constrain citizen political engagement by depoliticizing climate change, and alternative communication practices that have the potential to politicize. We end by outlining the many research questions that relate to the study of political engagement with climate change.

**Keywords:** climate change; communication practices; political engagement; political subjectivity; de/politicization; citizens

## Introduction

For a number of years, social and political scientists have been debating the increasing distance that appears to separate citizens from the realm of politics. Participation in political processes of various types has been waning, trust in political systems is at disturbingly low levels in many democracies, and social research has identified a widespread sense of disillusion and disconnect toward most things political (e.g. Stoker, 2006). Despite these trends, new forms of citizen engagement with collective matters have been developing in different spaces. Often emerging in arenas shaped by new information and communication technologies, modes of activism are variable in terms of organization, expression, and involvement of participants (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Postill, 2014). Furthermore, the last decade has seen some of the largest and longest "real life" street protests in history, such as the so-called Arab Spring and the Occupy movement.

A wealth of survey studies has shown widespread awareness and concern about climate change (Capstick et al., 2015) but little is known about the ways people relate to the problem's politics. The few existing studies suggest that citizens have low levels of knowledge and perceive formal political structures as rather inaccessible to them (Meira Cartea, 2009). Despite the fact that climate change poses enormous threats to human societies, most citizens appear to feel disconnected from the processes and spaces that

define debate and decision-making. In contrast, multiple forms of civic organization have developed in the last few years. From large-scale demonstrations directed at formal political arenas, such as the 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Conferences of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Copenhagen, 2009, and Paris, 2015, respectively), to community-based movements such as the Transition Movement, citizens have claimed agency and strived for empowerment.

These different forms of relating to collective issues raise questions about the conditions that influence engagement, both in a limiting or constraining way, and in an enabling or stimulating way, as well as to how such engagement takes place. In this article, we make two main claims: first, that a research effort on *political* engagement with climate change is urgently needed, and second, that research on communication practices is essential to understanding the conditions that influence political engagement and the various modes of engagement. This largely unexplored terrain presents crucial research questions. By sketching out a research agenda, this article aims to contribute to reorienting research toward citizens' political engagement with climate change and to foregrounding the role of communication practices.

Our argument proceeds in four steps. First, our review of the literature on public engagement with climate change reveals that there is a lack of attention to issues regarding the political. Consequently, we make the case for a focus on *political* engagement. Second, we explain how the notion of political subjectivity helps us in understanding the relation between communication practices and engagement with the politics of climate change. Third, we discuss examples of both dominant communication practices that have been found to constrain citizen political engagement by depoliticizing climate change, and alternative communication practices with the potential to politicize. We end the article by outlining the many research questions that relate to the study of political engagement with climate change.

### **Rethinking public engagement with climate change**

In the last few years, engagement has become something of a buzzword. In text and talk about environmental issues it is common to hear about “public engagement,” “engaging the public” or “engaging with the public.” However, the meaning of those terms is not always clear. In this section, we discuss the limits of dominant views on “public engagement,” and make the case for a focus on *political* engagement with climate change.

#### **From public engagement...**

Public engagement has been on the academic and policy agendas in the area of science and technology studies since the 1990s. Advanced as a step forwards from “Public Understanding of Science,” the notion of “Public Engagement with Science and Technology” (PEST) usually refers to a dialogical relationship between scientists and citizens that involves listening to the views of the latter and negotiating the meaning of scientific and technologic issues. However, in environmental studies and other areas, the promise of dialogue (Phillips, 2011) has not materialized into significant changes in institutional processes and structures. Initiating and promoting PEST is often viewed as a responsibility of science and policy institutions rather than of citizens, and PEST remains an ambiguous ideal in the discourse of researchers and practitioners (Davies, 2013).

Public participation in environmental policy is another facet of public engagement that has gained many adepts amongst academics and public officials. It has been promoted as a “fix” to the democratic deficit in decision-making processes with the potential to produce better policies and enhancing accountability (Coenen, 2010). Although different formats have been employed, from “notice and comment” to deliberative-type exercises with “citizen panels” or “consensus conferences,” this mode of citizens' political involvement is always constrained by the set-up created by state agencies in a top-down manner and by the role these “invited engagement” processes often play

in functioning as “technologies of legitimation” (Harrison and Mort, 1998) of existing institutions and their practices.

In research on climate change, “public engagement” has mainly been looked at from the standpoint of (social) psychology and has often been associated with change in attitudes and behaviors (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2009; Nisbet, 2009; Whitmarsh, O’Neill, & Lorenzoni, 2011). An ample number of policy reports have reproduced the view that people’s relation to climate change is mainly dependent on preferences and perceptions, and attempted to offer formulas for behavioral change (DEFRA, 2008; UNEP, 2005). In this approach, “engaging the public” implies someone doing a strategic work of motivating or persuading someone else toward a certain (externally defined) objective. Communication is typically conceived as a means or instrument for influencing behavior and “better” or more “effective” communication as a key to shaping responses to climate change (cf. Maibach & Priest, 2009; Moser & Dilling, 2007).

Some analyses have considered other dimensions, including public support for policy-making and public participation in policy processes (e.g. Whitmarsh, O’Neill, & Lorenzoni, 2013), but most attention and interest has continued to be centered on social marketing perspectives focusing on individual responses and how they can be managed through communication strategies used in campaigns and other interventions (Corner, Markowitz & Pidgeon, 2014; Whitmarsh, O’Neill, & Lorenzoni, 2011). The purpose is to achieve “private-sphere engagement” (Hoppner & Whitmarsh, 2011, p. 61) with little recognition of citizens’ political agency (Brulle 2010; Carvalho & Peterson, 2012).

In Nerlich, Koteyko and Brown’s (2010) words, analyses of public engagement with climate change have been dominated by a “limited view of the relationships between science and society, a limited view of the public and a curiously truncated view also of communications research as being about finding the right words and checking if people have listened” (p. 106). Echoing several of the assumptions of the so-called information deficit model, these individualistic and linear views rely on the alleged power of “persuasive” communication and “framing” to change people’s minds and actions (e.g. Maibach, Roser-Renouf & Leiserowitz, 2008). They tend to fall into what Shove (2010) termed the “paradigm of ABC – attitudes, behaviour and choice [...] [S]ocial change is thought to depend upon values and attitudes (the A), which are believed to drive the kinds of behaviour (the B) that individuals choose (the C) to adopt” (p. 1273).

### **...to political engagement**

We call for an analytical shift by focusing on how citizens may (or not) engage with the political fabric of climate change (rather than just with individual-level behavior related to consumption and lifestyle). In addition, we argue (further down in the section) that this entails looking at communication as a constitutive practice, rather than as a matter of transmission of messages.

Our analysis is based on the recognition that climate change is fundamentally a political issue. The transformations that are and will be associated with it either in the form of impacts or of needed mitigation and adaptation measures constitute climate change as a major societal challenge: hence, both action and inaction are political choices requiring widespread debate with inevitable disagreement (Hulme, 2009). Any significant advances require enacting fundamental political changes as there are numerous indications that continuing to walk the same political paths will not lead to a sustainable future. Climate change is political at its inception as politically instituted social systems and practices, epitomized by market-driven, neoliberal globalization, lie squarely at its origin. Local, national and international climate change politics are a matter of power distribution and power play, which is reproduced and amplified by a number of structures and mechanisms, such as centralized and fossil-fuel dependent electricity generation, the organization of the “global” economy and land-use planning practices that promote car use, to name a few factors (e.g. Newell & Paterson, 2010). Transforming the politics of climate change involves questioning those

arrangements and challenging the power and value systems that underpin them (Stirling, 2014). If we accept these premises, citizens' engagement with the political fabric of climate change becomes a key area of social research and social scientists ought to be making significant contributions to its analysis.

This view of political engagement draws on the concept of "the political" from post-foundational political theory (Marchart, 2007). It is used to refer to society's ontological dimension, rather than its empirical or ontic dimension, meaning the existent parameters and bounds of conceivable/legitimate social practices at a given place in time. The underlying argument here is that effective and democratic change is dependent on acknowledging and engaging with the level of the political. Only then can the existent configuration of power relations and exclusions in a given social order be made visible, which is a precondition for becoming the subject of democratic discussion and contestation, and for being able to articulate and shape a radically different society (Kenis and Lievens, 2015). This agonistic conception of democratic politics (Mouffe, 2005) stands in contrast with a dominant tendency in social science (and public engagement research) to emphasize consensus as the remedy to a lack of rational and effective debate and action.

However, an emerging body of work (Carvalho and Peterson, 2012; Hulme, 2009; Machin, 2013; Pepermans and Maesele, 2014) argues that disagreement on the current political fabric of climate change is what is needed to revitalize debate and revive engagement. Questioning and proposing alternatives to fundamental aspects of climate change politics such as unambitious emissions goals (e.g. the current Intended Nationally Determined Contributions within the UNFCCC), the modes of arriving at them (e.g. carbon trading or, in the language of the new Paris agreement, "internationally transferred mitigation outcomes") and, most importantly, the social and political organization associated to the production of greenhouse gases (e.g. the disproportional power and influence of large corporate actors in shaping climate policies), are important forms of political engagement.

Whereas public engagement is often viewed as an aid to implementing governmental policies, the view of political engagement we propose values and encourages opposition toward dominant policies, which are detrimental to the global climate and exclusionary of critical voices. Rather than acceptance of centrally defined goals, political engagement involves critique and rebellion against the political goals, structures and/or processes that keep contributing to climate change (Kenis & Lievens, 2014) and foreclose radical alternatives. Instead of conceptualizing engagement as something that someone does to citizens, with citizens conceived of as a public to be influenced or mobilized, this view of political engagement involves displacing agency toward citizens (in all their different capacities) and thinking of engagement mainly in terms of "bottom-up" processes<sup>1</sup> (e.g. the People's Climate Summit in Paris in December 2015 and the fast growing civic-led initiatives of emissions-related litigation against governments and corporations).

Any political act of course raises questions of positionality and we are not claiming that citizens' proposals are necessarily better than those coming from experts or political leaders. What we are saying is that the failure of the political options tested up until now suggests that a different climate politics may be necessary and that citizen political engagement may play a key role in bringing it about. Our call is supported by a growing number of voices from very different quadrants. Both Pope Francis (2015) and Naomi Klein (2014) have argued for citizen engagement with climate politics. The Pope has called for more democratic climate politics (Carvalho, 2015), maintaining that "[u]nless citizens control political power [...] it will not be possible to control damage to the environment" (Francis, 2015, § 179). Klein has urged a bottom-up, people-based transformation of the global economy (2014: 449-466). Numerous civic groups have been asking for "system change" to deal with climate change, advocating ecosocialist transformation pushed by a "radical international grassroots movement" (System Change Not Climate Change, 2015). A Spanish study (Porro González, 2012) suggests that both experts and citizens consider that the ecological crisis demands a "democratic regeneration", that is, that it cannot be properly addressed without transformations at the institutional and political levels.

Our view of political engagement, grounded in engaging with “the political,” necessarily induces a shift from institutions, arenas and actors to communication practices as the central analytical category.<sup>ii</sup> We put forward as the central question whether social reality is interpreted and constituted (or not) by communication practices that acknowledge the political, thereby cultivating (or impeding) a discussion and advocacy on behalf of alternative sustainable futures beyond the status quo. We do not view communication as a matter of transmitting predefined messages from sender to receiver (as in traditional public engagement research), but as constitutive of how we understand the world and our place within it. As discussed next, the notion of political subjectivity sheds light on the relation between communication practices and engagement with the politics of climate change.

### **Political subjectivities and possibilities for engagement**

Theoretically, we start from the assumption that communication practices have both an ideational (or representational) function, in constituting the meaning of reality, and an interactional function, in constituting socio-political relations (Halliday, 1985). The ideational function refers to the meanings that are socially constructed about climate change and possibilities to address it. This includes whether it is represented as a technical or a socio-political issue, which potential responses are considered, whether their implications are discussed, and other considerations. These meanings are a key contextual background for political engagement. The interactional function means that the statuses of and relations between policy-makers, corporations and citizens, amongst others, are constructed through communication practices. A neoliberal discourse, for instance, confers corporate actors greater independence from policy-makers in managing their greenhouse gas emissions than an ecosocialist discourse. The discursive construction of social relations is also an important influence on citizens’ political engagement.

Related to the interactional function of language, discourses also create subject positions for individuals, which are particular “positions of agency and identity” (Hall, 1997: 315). For instance, in dominant climate policy discourses (e.g. the Paris agreement) large corporate actors are constituted into powerful positions whereas citizens are often constituted into a position of consumption. Those subject positions are constantly in (re)construction in multiple communication practices. Individuals also constantly negotiate them as they try to construct positions for themselves, as in the example of citizens attempting to address large corporations from a position of (political) equality (e.g. SumofUs initiative).

All of us as individuals experience the political world, our roles within it, and the spaces for contestation by way of different discourses that involve diverse communication practices. Hence, political subjectivity is defined as a dynamic combination of discourse-generated subject positions on collective matters and views about the political world and the political self, which are embedded in lived culture and experience.<sup>iii</sup> Subjects are positioned – and position themselves – in given ways in relation to social and political issues through a variety of communication practices including informal conversations, media texts, legal documents and other processes (Fairclough, 1990). Political subjectivities on climate change depend on subject positions that are available for citizens in various discourses and on the ways people position themselves in relation to the issue and other actors in their communication practices. For instance, indigenous peoples, who are severely marginalized in dominant discourses on energy and climate, have become increasingly visible in international climate negotiations through various communication strategies. They are bounded by the prevailing intergovernmental discourses but at the same time have claimed for a voice in the policy-making processes and advanced alternative ideas, such as the rights of Mother Earth. Political subjectivities are discourse-based but are also linked to multiple social practices, such as participating in demonstrations, meetings or various modes of organization, like the Indigenous Environmental Network. Lived experience, including material conditions such as whether one has access to a library, the Internet or computers, also influences political subjectivities (Van Wessel, 2016).

Drawing on Hannah Arendt to analyze the “climate change paralysis,” Hargis (2016, p. 475) claims that “engaging in politics has been made *extraordinarily difficult*” and that “because of the modern situation of politics, people do not know what to do or how to act politically, or why acting politically is important” (p. 476). In that regard, Boaventura Sousa Santos (2014) has spoken of a “crisis of agency”. Stating that neoliberalism “emptied politics of politics” he provocatively argued that the “great enemy is within us.” An extensive US survey study (Roser-Renouf, Maibach, Leiserowitz, & Zhao, 2014) appears to confirm this idea: it showed that “identity” was the largest barrier to engagement with climate change politics, with a third of respondents saying they were not “activists.” The survey also showed that most people have low expectations for the efficacy of their political actions: they do not believe that they can alter the course of climate policies and hence do not even try. In the next section, we suggest that dominant discourses on climate change are likely to contribute to this as they foreclose citizen participation and contribute to the withdrawal of (most) citizens from debates on climate politics.

Nevertheless, in spite of the prevalence in public spheres of discursive constructions that demobilize citizens from engaging politically with climate change, some communication practices can instead be politically motivating and empowering. Indeed, communication practices are both structuring and enabling. On the one hand, language creates forms of subjectification (Foucault, 1980), meaning that individual subjects are “produced” in terms of their standings and identities by a pre-existing system of power relations associated to particular discourses (Heller, 1996). On the other hand, language opens up spaces for defiance and transformation, and allows for the “articulation of political claims” (Norval, 2007, p. 3), such as exposing the wrongdoings of a government in terms of energy and emissions policies and challenging its legitimacy in the media.

Someone’s subjectivity can thus never be fully fixed; it is only temporarily constituted at the intersection of various discourses. As constructions of political subjects and of the political world evolve in meanings produced by the individual and others, political subjectivities also change. As Norval (2007) maintains, “[a] change in political identification involves a change in understanding one’s self and one’s place in relation to others and to a set of wider practices” (p. 127). Hargis (2016) also suggests that resignification is possible: “Recognizing political action as courageous gives value and legitimacy to political action and works against the modern trends undermining politics” (p. 490). When politically aware and energized, citizens often engage in the process of presenting demands and addressing claims to those in positions of power. Looking at how meanings (including those related to citizenship) can be challenged in climate change politics and how language can enable transformation is thus a crucial mission for social researchers.

Research on communication practices that help the continuation of politics-as-usual and on those that question it is important in order to understand how we got to where we are and how we may inflect into a different future. Below we discuss examples of both drawing on the concepts of depoliticization and politicization.

### **Communication practices on climate change and “the political”**

During the last decade, an emerging literature has been concerned with establishing whether and in what ways communication practices on climate change have either acknowledged or concealed the political, relying on the concepts of politicization and depoliticization, respectively (Felli, 2015; Goeminne, 2012, Maesele 2015a, 2015b; Pepermans & Maesele, 2014, 2016; Swyngedouw, 2010). In this section, we first discuss in what ways dominant communication practices have been found to constrain citizen political engagement by depoliticizing climate change, before turning our attention to alternative communication practices with the potential to politicize.

#### ***The depoliticization of climate change***

Research into the discourses of international institutions (e.g. Goeminne, 2012; Kenis & Lievens, 2015), media organizations (e.g. Pepermans, 2015) and citizens (Berglez & Olausson, 2014) has



demonstrated the depoliticized nature of mainstream communication practices on climate change. Depoliticization stands for a discursive logic that frames climate change in terms of a social consensus about how it should be understood and what should be done about it (Maesele 2015a, 2015b). Consequently, any actor (or demand) that wishes to partake in the debate but draw from alternative, contesting communication practices is stigmatized and excluded as an enemy of this consensus. In a context of depoliticizing communication practices, citizens' political engagement is constrained as people are pushed into a role of passive spectators rather than active participants in the articulation and shaping of alternative futures beyond the status-quo (Carvalho & Peterson 2012; Machin 2013).

This literature has revealed different strategies of depoliticization, such as scientization, economization and moralization, as well as a higher order strategy of naturalization of the capitalist system. Scientization refers to the widespread claim that the politics of climate change constitutes nothing more than the translation of the established consensus within (physical) climate science regarding the anthropogenic nature of climate change into a political consensus (e.g. Goeminne, 2012; Pepermans, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2010). Scientization reduces policy-making to a matter of rationality claims and technocratic, expert-led decision-making. It puts forward climate change as a scientific or technical problem, which is problematic because it creates a discursive field that positions believers against non-believers, based on a presumed epistemic superiority of value-free rational decision-making against a presumed inferiority and inefficiency of political or citizen judgment. In other words, science (here equaling particularly the physical or "natural" sciences) serves as a mechanism of exclusion, delegitimizing any actor or demand questioning the existing alliance between science and policy.

The interpretation of climate change as an economic problem is equally problematic for citizen political engagement: it creates a context in which technical, market-based policy responses are justified by a logic of economic calculation, that frames these as both economically profitable and environmentally friendly "win-win solutions." Both Hulme (2009) and Machin (2013) have argued that cost-benefit analyses, such as the 2006 Stern Review, are used to overcome political disagreement and naturalize particular "economic" choices, such as carbon markets, thereby concealing the underlying value judgments about predilections on economic growth, the climate and/or the rights of future generations.

Communication practices in which the struggle against climate change is framed as a humanitarian struggle of "us" versus CO<sub>2</sub>, often cast in apocalyptic rhetoric, also constrain citizen political engagement (e.g. Kenis & Lievens, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2010). This externalization of CO<sub>2</sub> as the enemy to fight transforms the politics of climate change into a negotiation about the techno-managerial fixes at our disposal to reinstate an apparently benign status-quo. Similarly, the depiction of the struggle against climate change as the ethical and individual responsibility of cosmopolitan individuals not only individualizes responsibilities, but also categorizes those who for whatever reason do not change their lifestyles as "immoral", because individuals are differentiated as either ethically "good" or "bad," "green" or "greedy" (Machin, 2013). In the end, the moralization of climate change contributes to framing particular choices as either good or bad "for the climate," implying that anyone who opposes a particular policy consensus is "bad for the climate" and in favor of its potential apocalyptic consequences.

Strategies of scientization, economization and moralization have been found to contribute to the naturalization of capitalism and neoliberal globalization as we know it. Kenis and Lievens (2015) have argued that the discourse of sustainable development has been re-appropriated and reframed in terms of the "Green Economy" (UNEP, 2011), "Green New Deal" (Green New Deal Group, 2008), "Green Growth" (OECD, 2011) and similar terms by international institutions such as the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), with the primary aim of promoting "green capitalism." By discursively appropriating climate change in ways that serve the agenda of continuous economic growth, organizations such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, for example, leave out any debate on the economic and political structures at the basis of the current environmental crisis.

Even as climate change raises fundamental social, ethical and value-related matters, the techno-managerial discourses (and material practices) that have come to be hegemonic have transformed it into a narrow and exclusionary language of numbers, models and legal jargon. Responses to climate change have been largely privatized through carbon markets, energy investment decisions, price speculation, etc., which displace non-expert voices. In Rothe's words (2011), there has been a progression toward a "post-political condition in climate politics where policies are chosen by economic and scientific technocrats rather than by a democratic decision-making process" (p. 341). The depoliticization of climate change thereby contributes to the creation of symbolic conditions that demobilize, discourage and delimit citizen political engagement.

Beyond all these closures we are interested in perceived possibilities or imagined openings to address climate change in a democratic manner. Where do we find examples of discursive spaces and communication practices that encourage the articulation and shaping of alternative sustainable futures?

### ***Searching for (re)politicizing communication practices***

Zooming in on existing research, below we discuss whether and/or how communication practices aiming for citizen political engagement involve: (a) articulation of alternatives; (b) forms of mobilization and citizen engagement with those alternatives; (c) and potentiality for confrontation between alternatives.

First, to what extent are alternatives being articulated through which citizens might question fundamental assumptions of climate politics? As Stevenson and Dryzek (2014) show, a range of climate change discourses exist, and these are advocated in the global public sphere. Beyond what they call "mainstream sustainability," which dominates policymaking arenas, they distinguish "expansive sustainability," "limits" and "green radicalism." While "mainstream sustainability" stays within the parameters of the existing political economy, holding that sustainability and material growth are compatible, the other three discourses pose challenges to these starting points. The different discourses appear to be mostly articulated in fora dominated by policymakers, civil society organizations (CSOs) and experts and also through national and international CSO campaigns (Bond, 2012; Doyle, 2009; Cox, 2009; Klein, 2014; North, 2011).

Existing research has also shown how alternatives are articulated through acts of resistance and prefigurative action involving different spaces and means of expression. For instance, the physical blocking of open-pit mining or of other concrete practices contributing to climate change may challenge those practices in terms of rights and values (Klein, 2014). Often locally based, such initiatives also connect with global discourses like climate justice, as well as with national and international CSOs advancing them (Bond, 2012). Prefigurative action articulates alternatives through citizen-led change initiatives, locally based but typically networked, nationally and internationally. Examples include the Transition Movement (Bay, 2013; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014), Carbon Rationing Action Groups and the Low Carbon Communities Network (North, 2011); initiatives seeking to realize change through citizen-led technological innovations (Hisschemöller & Sioziou, 2013); and community-based renewable energy initiatives (Van Der Schoor & Scholtens, 2015). Through prefigurative action, involving material and symbolic practices, such groups articulate alternative ways of living by providing models. In some cases, the same actors combine advocacy employing language, resistance and prefigurative action, thereby illustrating that organization and communicative practices are emergent and fluid in nature rather than linear (Staggenborg & Ogrodnik, 2015), with initiatives themselves providing collective spaces for re-interpretation and re-imagining citizenship (Stevenson, 2012).

Mobilization through those types of alternatives is likely to matter to citizens' subjectivities and imaginaries of social structures, roles and options for collective action. However, the creation of a popular climate movement has proven difficult. While some CSOs have succeeded at building and sustaining movements and inspiring local action, research reports limited results from efforts

to mobilize wider publics and suggests that mobilization remains limited to certain small sections of society (Hale, 2010; North, 2011). Various factors may explain this.

Limitations appear to be in part related to the nature of climate activism. “The climate movement,” while forming a “community of concern,” shows limited integration, both internally and with society at large, often appearing as a counterculture rather than a potential movement toward mass-supported large-scale societal transformation processes, even when large-scale mobilization is the ambition (cf. Connor, 2012; Connors & McDonald, 2011; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014).

Another likely limit to the ability of existing alternatives to contribute to citizens’ engagement with climate change pertains to their appeal (Hale, 2010). The need for defining alternatives in ways that connect with citizens’ existing realities and understandings has been stressed (Hale, 2010; Klein, 2014), but available climate change discourses appear wanting here. Although Climate Justice is distinct, it offers meaning to which Northern publics at large may not easily and widely connect. The North-South solidarity and the sense of Northern responsibility toward the South that Climate Justice discourse evokes may be potentially more recognizable as a politicizing alternative for populations in the South, which is a reason to consider the issue of engagement in its trans- and international dimensions rather than focusing just on the challenge of Northern publics’ engagement.

The fast spreading of local resistance and prefigurative initiatives in recent years in both North and South, however, suggests that other avenues for citizens’ political engagement beyond global discourses may be significant. Those initiatives are often successful at mobilizing publics for action embedded in local settings (Klein, 2014) with the overall practices of meaning-making seeming key to success (Staggenborg & Ogrodnik, 2015).

When it comes to the constitution of spaces for confrontation of alternatives, Stevenson and Dryzek (2014) found that the different climate change discourses that are present in the public sphere get articulated in enclaves. Importantly, those discourses that contest mainstream sustainability and green economy discourses tend to find little inclusion in key arenas where the latter dominate. Some prominent CSOs have sought collaboration rather than confrontation in climate change policy-making, so much so that some analysts have come to deny or question the extent to which such CSO politics even involves contention (Klein, 2014; North, 2011). The Climate Justice movement forms a notable exception here by explicitly confronting states and private enterprises in discourse and other forms of action (Bond, 2012). Direct action (whether or not relating to the climate justice discourse) clearly seeks to enhance space for alternatives at some scale (Cox, 2009; Doyle, 2009; Klein 2014, p. 293-418).

In contrast, the extent to which prefigurative action initiatives do the same is debatable. Focusing on doable action, many are not (ostensibly) out to challenge existing systems. In fact, much research on the Transition Movement stresses its apolitical nature. In its principles, Transition states that it encourages “positive visioning” and is not *against* current wrongs but *for* change (Hopkins & Lipman, 2009, p. 7-8 in Bay 2013). The movement is “political” in the sense that it problematizes the way people live their lives every day, and calls for changes in habits, thoughts and actions (Bay, 2013). While it promotes an obvious alternative way of dealing with climate change, it is non-confrontational, avoiding joining hands with political parties or getting involved in contentious politics. Aiming for the broadest inclusion possible, the strength of Transition lies in the way it opens up the possibility of building diverse coalitions across political, cultural, economic, social and other differences by accommodating a range of points of view (Bay, 2013; Connors & McDonald, 2011). At the same time, the apolitical nature of Transition is questionable, in the sense that the construction of a “resistant identity” (Stevenson, 2012) and community empowerment are some of its core ideas.

Other prefigurative action initiatives confront power structures more directly. For example, renewable energy initiatives in the Netherlands have developed partly as a quest for popular sovereignty against established energy regimes. Initiatives may also combine prefigurative action, multi-stakeholder collaboration and confrontational political activity, including litigation of the state, as

seen with the Dutch CSO Urgenda in 2014-2015, which took the Dutch government to court for failing agreed emission reduction targets and won (<http://www.urgenda.nl/en/>).

The potential of these kinds of initiatives for creating space for alternatives is emergent. Need, capacity and opportunity for assertion of alternatives appear to develop as initiatives and capacities grow, as well as when they run into limits imposed by systems and other actors. This is illustrated by Dutch renewable energy initiatives: in their engagement with other actors, seeking to reclaim energy and the power to control it, some appear to have politicized further as they found that they needed to confront energy regimes politically (Schwenke, 2012). Through such practices, citizens' sense of agency and their capacities for questioning, negotiating and contesting regimes can develop.

### **Toward a research agenda**

The connection between citizens and the political world is crucial to understanding present and future pathways of climate change, a wicked problem that is a carrier of multiple worldviews and ideologies (Hulme, 2009). In the agonistic view of democracy, political engagement entails a disposition to challenge the power arrangements and value systems that feed climate change. We have maintained that communication is key to political engagement and shown that some practices open up spaces for citizens to be active participants in the articulation and shaping of alternative sustainable futures while others foreclose them. However, there are still many things that we do not know and urgently need research about. Connected areas that require attention include the discursive operation of (de)politicizing texts, modes of consumption and production practices, and how those practices relate to political subjectivities and to political engagement.

First, we lack empirical research to understand the relation between depoliticizing discourses and political subjectivities regarding climate change. How do citizens relate to depoliticizing discourses? To what extent do they accept, question or contest the subject positions that those discourses construct for them? How do they (re)construct understandings of their political roles and opportunities? In-depth research on practices of consumption of depoliticizing discourses among different social groups could draw on approaches from cultural studies and from audience studies that are sensitive to the active forms of reading that tend to take place. Studies of citizens' views through interviews and focus/discussion groups could be combined with ethnomethodological research to examine everyday talk, discursive exchanges in online spaces such as forums and social media, and readers' comments in news media, amongst other forms of communication, as well as their embeddedness in social, institutional and material realities.

Second, more research is needed about the conditions of emergence and development of counter-hegemonic discourses and about their roles in political engagement. How do knowledges, organizational conditions, ideological and material aspects weigh in on communication practices that defy the political "common sense"? What discursive space do they acquire? How do they play into political involvement on climate change? Research on other themes suggests that communication practices such as talking about political films and series (van Zoonen, 2007) or playing political internet games (Neys & Janz, 2010), can allow for the performance of a "political self", that is, citizens can get politically engaged and enact particular political roles in doing so. However, there is a lack of research into how political subjectivities regarding climate change are reconstructed and transformed through the communication practices of various publics and into what these imply for political engagement.

Research with bloggers, activists and their audiences would be useful to grasp the ways in which meanings are reconstituted in the circulation of discourses on climate change. Studies on modes of engagement with the politics of climate change through communication practices found in social media are still limited (e.g. Askanius & Uldam, 2011). Artistic forms, alternative media and politicizing practices in mainstream media, amongst other relevant discursive spaces, would also be relevant realms of analysis (Gunster, 2012; Pepermans, 2015). Social movements offer crucial research

opportunities. For example, the communication practices and experiences of participants at the Climate Action Zone (ZAC) during COP21 would have been a rich research terrain (composed of CSOs and movements working on the environment, labor, human rights and other matters, ZAC saw alternative conceptualizations of the processes at the basis of climate change being debated and different constructions of citizens' political roles being advanced).

Third, much research is needed on the wider circulation of politicizing discourses and on how, besides CSOs, social movements or other "niche" groups, citizens at large may engage politically with climate change. To what extent and in what ways are citizens actually exposed to alternative discourses? How do debates and different interpretations have, or fail to have, significance for citizens' political engagement? How does engagement depend on the nature of alternatives offered, the ways they are communicated and/or their positioning in public debate by media practitioners and other key actors? Here, an important question is how to address the lack of spaces where alternatives can be asserted. Developing ways to overcome the enclaved nature of politicized climate change talk by consciously seeking out and facilitating space to express alternatives may be part of an action-research-type agenda (cf. Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014), which can draw on ongoing initiatives in other domains, such as the project D-CENT<sup>iv</sup> (Decentralized Citizen ENGagement Technologies).

Considering the significance of community-centered action, the construction of local initiatives as spaces of political engagement involving alternatives can increasingly become part of citizens' political imaginary, thereby contributing to a citizen-based rethinking and reshaping of climate politics. Connecting different levels, local initiatives and global discourses can complement and synthesize into increasingly citizen-based confrontations of existing structures and political processes. Relatedly, a relevant question is how to address the interplay between globally, more abstractly articulated alternatives, and local understandings through which citizens' political engagement might take shape. In terms of what collective(s) are citizens to engage?

Finally, social researchers ought to look at communication practices as not only a crucial influence on political engagement but also as a site for performing engagement. We have argued that both the ideational and interactional levels of meaning-making practices matter for political engagement or, in other words, how climate change (politics) is represented, and how socio-political relations and subjectivities are constructed.<sup>v</sup> As politicization requires challenging power-based relationships and reconstituting social identities, future research ought to give interactional aspects a particular emphasis when examining communication that (may) politicize climate change. Specifically, which practices construct alternative forms of agency and redefine the roles and rights of non-dominant social actors in the politics of climate change? Studying the production of meaning around politicization would involve analyzing how different groups not only create alternative understandings of climate politics but also alternative positions of agency and identity through communication practices, thereby redefining their places and statuses.

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<sup>i</sup> There might of course be cases of progressive governmental policies and if so promoting the engagement of the public toward supporting and helping to implement them could be beneficial for the climate. However, as of yet, no government in the “Western”, “rich” countries has advanced sufficient and adequate responses that may meet the scale of the problem.

<sup>ii</sup> Communication practices are arrays of meaning-making activity involving language and/or other codes and modes of communication, mediated by power, knowledge, culture, institutional and social structures, technologies and artifacts.

<sup>iii</sup> Political subjectivity is a contested concept that has been elaborated differently by “classical” thinkers such as Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze. For reasons of space, we will focus on authors that have made connections with communication.

<sup>iv</sup> [dcentproject.eu](http://dcentproject.eu)

<sup>v</sup> This calls for the development of approaches that critically integrate the analysis of those levels (cf. Carvalho, Pinto-Coelho & Seixas, 2016).