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Beyond the post-political zeitgeist

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ABSTRACT

This chapter calls for a reorientation of research aims in the field of environment and communication towards the social roles of media in liberal democratic societies and the relationship between media(ted) discourses, power and democratic politics. More specifically, the risk conflicts-perspective is put forward as an analytical framework which allows to draw conclusions on the contribution of public discourse(s) to facilitating democratic debate. Drawing from the literature on agonistic democracy and post-politics, a politicization of academic discourse is found to be a primary factor in accommodating research designs to reveal processes of de/politicization in public discourse.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is the product of an invitation to write a focused and incisive contribution on interesting new perspectives and emphases for potential future trajectories in the field of environment and communication. The perspectives and emphases I will advance in this chapter, however, are not consistent with what is generally associated with ‘new’, an overvalued label which immerses 21st century public and academic discourse, and communication and media studies in specific (Murdock 2004). To the contrary, this chapter calls for reinvigorating classic sociological concerns and approaches in research on environment and communication, which have lost their glamour during the last decades (Hansen 2011). Instead of calling for the analysis of specific understudied or ‘new’ media outlets or communication practices (such as online representations, user generated content, persuasive communication, games, multimedia platforms, etc.), technologies (synthetic biology, nanobiotechnology, etc.) or environmental risks (fracking, fine dust particles, etc.), it calls for a reorientation of research aims and questions towards the social roles of media in liberal democratic societies and the relationship between media(ted) discourses, power and democratic politics.

More specifically, an analytical framework will be put forward which allows to draw conclusions on the contribution of public discourse(s) to facilitating democratic debate and citizenship, and resultantly, on how to communicate more effectively from the perspective of democratic politics. A defining characteristic of this analytical framework, i.e. the risk conflicts-perspective, is its *politicization* of research in the field of environment and communication: its respective conceptual, methodological and empirical choices are aimed at accommodating research designs to function as spaces for conflict and dissent to be expressed and registered.

To this end, it is urgent to integrate literature from political theory on agonistic democracy and post-politics. I argue in this chapter that public and academic discourse on the environment is deeply characterized by the post-political zeitgeist that has swept through

Western societies these last decades, with consensus and de-politicization as fundamental logics. In that respect, the existing work of an emergent Belgian school is broadened and deepened by applying its insights to the field of environment and communication.

In a first section of this chapter, this post-political zeitgeist is characterized in general, before going deeper into existing work on the environment in specific. From this reading, three conditions are identified for developing a research agenda regarding the analysis of the contribution of public discourse to democratic debate and citizenship. In a second section, the extent to which academic discourse¹ in the field of environment and communication conforms to these conditions is investigated, by evaluating existing communication models and research literature on public discourse regarding climate change, respectively. In a third section, the risk conflicts-perspective is introduced, by focusing on its conceptual, methodological and empirical implications.

THE POST-POLITICAL ZEITGEIST

The literature on post-politics has been developed mainly by authors from Belgian origin. While political theorist Mouffe has been one of the leading theoretical figures in articulating the post-political condition, others such as Swyngedouw, Goeminne, Kenis and Lievens have recently applied this work to the environment.

The post-political condition

The post-political zeitgeist refers to how the post-Cold War period has generally been approached in public and academic discourse as the arrival of a ‘post-ideological’ era, characterized by the belief in a universal rational consensus, with experts reconciling conflicting interests and values through impartial procedures and technical knowledge (Fukuyama 1992; Giddens 1994). A particular school of political philosophers (Mouffe 2005, Rancière 1998, Žižek 1999) however criticizes this conceptualization as embodying not a ‘post-ideological’, but ‘post-political’ or ‘post-democratic’, condition, characterized by the de-politicizing nature of the politics of consensus. The post-political or post-democratic condition refers to how the essence of democratic politics, i.e. the confrontation of hegemonic political projects, is abandoned in favor of a *de-politicized* technocratic management of social, economic and ecological matters within the framework of an *inevitable* hegemonic neo-liberal project and global market forces.

In this process of *de-politicization*, the political is transformed from a matter of ideological contestation to a matter of administration, where decision-making is not a question of political position but of expert knowledge. As a result, technocratic decision-making and market considerations come to substitute properly political debate and the notion of (political) conflict is reduced to political bickering: the political is only addressed at the ontic or empirical level and not at the ontological level. As a result, a democratic struggle between alternative (e.g. economic, technological or socio-ecological) futures beyond the existing socio-political status-quo, and more specifically the continuing neo-liberalization of all social spheres, is foreclosed.

Mouffe in particular (2005) has argued how antagonism and conflict are constitutive, not only of the social condition, but more importantly, of *democratic politics*. She argues that any form of *consensus* is always based on acts of exclusion, entailing the naturalization of particular power relations. The politics of consensus turn anyone who disagrees with the consensus into a fundamentalist, traditionalist, or blind radical, through a *moralization* and *rationalization* of politics. This implies that the construction of the us/them opposition in political categories constitutive of democratic politics, is, respectively, replaced by the moral categories of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’, or neutralized by striving for a consensus reached by ‘rational’ argumentation between ‘rational’ experts. These processes eliminate not only the existence of fundamental (political) oppositions, but also of (political) adversaries by turning these into enemies of the consensus. Consequently, the dichotomy politicization versus de-politicization serves as a framework for revealing strategies of in- and exclusion, and more specifically, how processes of de-politicization separate *legitimate, responsible* actors and demands from *illegitimate, irresponsible* actors and demands, excluding the latter from democratic debate. Furthermore, this dichotomy also serves as a framework for revealing the hegemonic constitution of society, and more specifically, the role of power relations in the construction of particular forms of objectivity.

To move from a politics of consensus to democratic politics, or from de-politicization to politicization, implies rethinking the properly political and re-establishing the horizon of democratic politics by organizing spaces for the agonistic confrontation of competing alternative futures and fundamental politico-ideological conflict, in academic as well as public discourse. In other words: by the creation of a genuine political space of disagreement overall.

The post-political environmental consensus

During the last decade, an emerging literature has been concerned with identifying symptoms of the post-political condition within discourses on the environment.

Environmental geographer Swyngedouw (2007, 2010) has been a leading figure in this regard arguing how discourses on sustainability, nature and the environment have served as a key arena for the configuration, entrenchment and consolidation of the post-political condition. He primarily takes aim at the singular view of Nature as an harmonious equilibrium underlying existing discourses on sustainability. This (predefined consensual) concept of Nature turns sustainability into an empty signifier and reduces the politics of sustainability to a negotiation about the technomanagerial fixes at our disposal to ‘save’ nature from current ‘unsustainable’ paths: in other words, to retrofit nature to an apparently benign former status-quo. By concealing the competing imaginations mobilized by various social actors, this idea of nature precludes democratic debate about the kind of nature we would like to inhabit and how this can be achieved, since it inhibits the articulation of alternative socio-ecological futures beyond the liberal-capitalist order. Swyngedouw calls for turning the question of sustainability (and nature and environment) into a question of democracy, by creating spaces for the recognition *and* cultivation of conflict about the naming and trajectories of competing socio-environmental futures.

When it comes to climate change discourse in specific, Swyngedouw (2010) takes aim at its consensual presentation and mainstreaming as the struggle to stabilize rising CO2

concentrations in terms of a global humanitarian cause. He argues how this consensual framing is sustained by apocalyptic imaginaries and ecologies of fear, a particular science-politics short-circuiting procedure and the reification and commodification of CO₂. In these processes, scientific expertise is put forward as the only legitimate foundation for policy-making, which is narrowed down to an issue of rationality claims. Furthermore, the framing of climate change in terms of a struggle of “us” versus “CO₂” represents climate change as a universalizing and socially homogenizing threat to humanity and externalizes and objectifies CO₂ as the enemy. Since this disavows social conflicts and antagonisms, obfuscates structural inequalities, and eliminates any space for dissent, these de-politicizing processes preclude democratic debate since climate change is disassociated from alternative political programs or socio-ecological futures from which to choose, while constructed as remarkably fit for technomanagerial machinery.

Physicist and Science and Technology Studies (STS)-scholar Goeminne (2010, 2012) elaborates Swyngedouw’s arguments by focusing on how the consensual focus on the scientifically registered level of CO₂ emissions in UN climate politics² sustains a techno-scientific and market-oriented framing of climate change, which naturalizes the neo-liberal foundations of the Western economic development paradigm and conceals the political question of which society we want to live in. In this scientization of environmental discourse (and resultantly, policy), Goeminne identifies two accumulative levels in which particular forms of objectivity are constructed in terms of separating internalities from externalities, determining who and what is to be taken into account.

First, in addition to narrowing the potential range of dispute to ‘controversies between believers and non-believers ... regarding the validity of the answers science provides’ (2010: 212), this scientization brings in its wake the nature/society (ontologically) and fact/value (epistemologically) dichotomies. This results in the creation of a discursive space in which the (epistemic) superiority of rational decision-making (legitimized by the authoritarian status of science and the efficiency of technological developments) is put against the (epistemically-vacuous) inferiority of political judgment. The claim for rational decision-making in ‘consensual’ climate policy-making therefore functions as an exclusionary mechanism for anyone questioning the (neo-liberal) alliance between science and policy.

Second, these dichotomies can only be overcome by starting from a constructivist rather than representational account of science (which is based on the alleged universal and non-exclusive character of scientific knowledge), since the recognition of science as a situationist, compositionist practice reveals the political dimension of scientific representation, in terms of the separation of internalities from externalities: in other words, dividing between what is taken into account and what is not in the construction of scientific knowledge. Goeminne thus calls for shifting the focus from ‘a dispute over matters of fact in terms of true and false to a struggle for matters of concern in terms of internalities and externalities’ (212), since this opens the discursive space for a political struggle over what to be concerned about. Only then, the conditions are fulfilled to revive the environment, and the climate in specific, ‘as a matter of genuine political concern that is open to struggle and contestation between alternative visions of society, in this way constituting an essential component of social change (213)’.

Elaborating these analyses, political ecologist Kenis and philosopher Lievens (2012, Lievens and Kenis 2014) have recently identified a discursive shift with the rise of the Green Economy as a hegemonic project. Responding to what they identify as ‘the quantum leap’ in ecological awareness during this last decade, following Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and the hype surrounding the climate summit in Copenhagen (2009), this project calls for the mobilization of market mechanisms and capitalism’s innovative nature for making the transition to sustainability, based on (i) technomanagerial innovation³, (ii) sustainable entrepreneurship (i.e. corporate social responsibility), and (iii) sustainable consumption (i.e. individual behavior change). While the articulation and hegemonization of this project has initially been led by international institutions, governments, corporations, think tanks, and banks, its success is based on (a discourse of all-round) collaboration of environmental NGOs and green parties. The Green Economy project aims to incorporate environmental protest and turn it into a new regime for capital accumulation, therefore Kenis and Lievens equate green economy to green capitalism, and link it to earlier discourses of ecological modernization, transition management and people planet profit. The authors argue how the success of this project depends on the all-round collaboration between former antagonists against a common enemy (CO₂), which in turn depends on active processes of de-politicization, which, they argue, the ecological issue lends itself more easily to for the following reasons: (i) the existing post-political context, (ii), the lack of a clear emancipatory actor (sustaining discourses of all-round cooperation, dialogue and consensus), (iii) the technical complexity of the problem and proposed solutions such as emissions trading, (iv) the conservative nature of the singular view of nature, (v) a specific framing of climate in change primarily emphasizing the urgency, scale and nature of the threat, which favors pragmatic short-term solutions.

But more importantly, this discourse of all-round collaboration is to a significant degree sustained by the articulation of an antagonistic political relation towards those groups that deny the existence of a scientific consensus on the nature of climate change. With the aim of delegitimizing any fundamental government regulations or public interventions, this coalition of fossil fuel capitalists and climate skeptics contests and politicizes the epistemic level, resulting into a scientific non-debate replacing a proper political debate. However, what this latter coalition as well as the adherents of the Green Economy-project have in common is an instrumentalization of science, reducing policy-making to a matter of rationality claims, with profound de-politicization as a result: the reduction of climate change to an epistemic debate conceals the political positions underlying scientific positions and precludes a democratic debate between alternative futures beyond the existing socio-political status-quo. Therefore Kenis and Lievens argue how the re-politicization of the environment and the climate will involve a two-fold struggle: (i) the recognition of politico-ideological conflict as legitimate by opening up spaces of contestation and dissent, and (ii) the articulation of alternative futures to the Green Economy project.

In addition to these Belgian authors, British political theorist Machin published a book in the summer of 2013 in which she argues that only a radical democratic approach will allow to reinvigorate the politics of climate change and produce the collective action needed to address climate change. She takes aim at what she puts forward as four dominant approaches for failing to facilitate any conclusive decision-making, which she attributes to their common goal of inclusive agreement and rational discussion: (i) the techno-economic approach, based

on technology and markets, (ii) the ethical-individual approach, based on developing good conscience, (iii) the green republican approach, based on the assertion of a common good by responsible citizens, and (iv) the deliberative democratic approach, based on the transcendence of disagreement through rational discussion and mutual understanding. On the other hand, she argues how only the celebration and encouragement of disagreement results into a real choice between real alternatives, fostering democratic debate and citizenship, and creating the conditions for collective as well as decisive action. In that respect, she calls for the recognition of ‘nature’ and ‘climate’ as *political* categories constructed within particular socio-cultural imaginaries. A discursive construction of climate change in terms of an exclusionary scientific consensus on the other hand impedes democratic citizenship, since it encourages either political apathy by alienating people from owning the issue or polarization between acceptance and denial.

The return of the political

These authors have identified the following characteristics of the post-political condition in discourses on the environment: first, the de-politicizing nature of the politics of consensus precludes debate on the meaning(s) of the environment and resultantly on the articulation of alternative (environmental, technological, etc.) futures, by concealing the competing imaginations mobilized by social actors. This naturalizes the existing socio-political status-quo and neo-liberal foundations of the Western economic development paradigm in specific, and reduces the politics of the environment to a negotiation about potential technomanagerial fixes within this framework. Second, a rationalization of politics is sustained by a focus on the epistemic level and the assumption that the politics of the environment is a matter of translating a scientific consensus into a political consensus, thereby reducing policy-making to a matter of rationality claims. Third, a moralization of politics is sustained by framing the environmental question as a global humanitarian threat, based on processes of universalization and social homogenization and the externalization and objectification of the problem. These processes of rationalization and moralization are deeply characterized by mechanisms of exclusion, since those actors and demands that either disagree with the scientific consensus or with framing climate change as an epistemic matter or a global humanitarian threat are stigmatized as enemies of the consensus. Fourth, by foreclosing the space for politico-ideological conflict, these processes result in precluding a democratic debate between alternative futures and in stifling democratic citizenship, since people are turned into passive spectators and not active participants in the articulation and shaping of alternative futures.

If we translate this work into a research agenda for the field of environment and communication, the central question becomes: to what extent do we find public discourse facilitating or impeding democratic debate and citizenship regarding environment and communication? To be able to provide an answer to this question, three conditions need to be fulfilled: (i) the recognition of an underlying politico-ideological conflict to each and every social issue, including controversies on the environment, (ii) the creation of a discursive space to reveal the nature and extent of politico-ideological struggle and dissent, and (iii) the identification within this space of those discursive strategies which aim at her foreclosure (de-

politicization) or cultivation (politicization) and related ideological preferences. In other words, to avoid the post-political trap, a politicization of academic discourse is called for. In what follows, we investigate the extent to which any of these conditions are fulfilled in existing communication models in the field of environment and communication and in the existing research literature of public discourse on climate change.

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Analytical perspectives

When talking about environment and communication, and media(ted) discourses on the environment in specific, we need to engage with the literature on media and science, since science is inevitably involved in discourses on the environment. I have argued before how this literature can be characterized in terms of two analytical perspectives which are based on different underlying communication models (Maesele 2013).

First, there is the science- and media-centric traditional approach, which is heavily influenced by the adjacent fields of science popularization, science communication and risk communication. This approach characterizes the relationship between science and society as a *problem* of communication and information: its conceptual and methodological focus is the efficiency of the *transmission* process between the “scientific realm” on the one hand and (a presumably non-scientific) society on the other (Farago 1976, Kriegbaum 1967). As a result, research questions are reduced to measuring the level of accuracy in media reports or to measuring public knowledge of individual scientific facts. Since any dislocation in the relationship between media and environment is attributed to an inadequate transmission of scientific information and since scientific information as such is not problematized, while ‘media’ and ‘the public’ (or society in general) are, this is a media- and science-centric approach. Finally, it equates a lack of environmental progress to overcoming resistance towards specific scientific facts, either from special interest groups, professional mediators (e.g. journalists) or citizens. The solution, as always, is expected to be found in more and better science diffusion, media coverage, and public understanding. Although many scholars in the field (mainly sociologists, historians of science, and media sociologists) have been proclaiming the end of this conceptualization since two decades for its reliance on outdated communication and sociology of science models (Bucchi 1996, Meyer 2006), it remains the prevailing way of thought: it displays a remarkable tenacity in official circles and public campaigns and is still prevalent in publications by science organizations and public institutions (Royal Society 2006), advocacy groups (Hartz and Chapell 1997) and science communication scholars (Willems 2003).

These last two decades, a more sociological approach has increasingly made its way into the academic field, with which the meaning-making practices in public discourse regarding the environment have become the central point of concern (Anderson et al. 2005, Nisbet and Hoge 2006). Here, the conceptual and methodological focus is how public discourse functions as a site of contestation over different representations put forward by various (heterogeneous and unequal) social actors, not in the least over science’s representations. This approach allows a much broader range of research questions, focusing

either on understanding (i) how scientific claims are represented in public discourse and by whom, (ii) how this relates to issues of access to media and social debate in general, and (iii) how these discourses are interpreted and used by various audiences. In other words, the production, representation and audience reception levels become equally important levels to analyse the circulation, (re-)production and (re-)configuration of meanings about environmental issues. Furthermore, the mediatisation of science itself, i.e. the professionalization of marketing practices, public relations, and image management within science organizations, also becomes an object of critical concern.

A vital difference however between both approaches is their radically divergent interpretation of the relationship between science and society, and science and media in specific. Starting from a representational account of science, the traditional model is depoliticizing by definition: based on the assumption of a (predefined) scientific consensus, the *scientific* demands of *responsible* actors are distinguished from the (epistemically-vacuous) *illegitimate* demands of *irresponsible* actors, shifting the site of struggle from the political level to the epistemic level in terms of dichotomies such as science versus anti-science, religion, ideology, politics, emotions, fear, etc. Furthermore, it serves to reify science and scientific authority in terms of a discourse of ‘sound science’ which is used as a rhetorical tool to isolate unacknowledged (and unaccountable) value-laden assumptions and material interests in competing demands. In so doing, the traditional model is concerned with strategies to safeguard institutionalized conceptions of environmental risk by distinguishing these from ‘false’ manifestations instead of ‘alternative’ ones, starting from an assumption of communication practices as the (in)efficient communication of predefined matters. As a result, the traditional model forecloses the discursive space for politico-ideological conflict by delegitimizing its potential in advance⁴. On the other hand, by starting from an assumption of communication practices as indefinite articulations of meaning, the sociological approach allows to create the discursive space for politico-ideological conflict. Ultimately, while both interpretations represent a struggle between two politico-ideological models for interpreting the relationship between science and society, only the latter creates the discursive space for approaching public discourse as a site of politico-ideological conflict, while the aim of the former is exactly to delegitimize its acknowledgment. In the end, the politico-ideological struggle starts in first instance in academic discourse on science and society, and science and media in specific, where the potential value of public discourse is determined, while only in second instance in public discourse itself, by starting from those academic starting points which allow to reveal the ideological nature of public discourse.

However, the existing research literature appears to suggest that the sociological approach’s potential in this respect is dependent on specific conditions: in a recent review of the research literature (Maesele 2013), the institution of science was found to successfully adapt to the mediatisation of society, to the extent of a relatively effective control of its public image in media(ted) discourses: for instance, this last decade, science reporting is found to be characterized by a largely affirmative, sometimes even, hyperbolic nature, which is often the result of the success of science PR. Furthermore, a high degree of satisfaction is found among scientists regarding their media contacts and media reporting in general. And last but not least, specific culturally-dominant discourses such as technological progressivism, scientism and neo-liberalism prevent critical sources to be accredited with legitimacy or critical stories

to gain prominence. It is here exactly that important questions come forward concerning the social role of media in liberal democratic societies and the relationship between media, power and democracy. Since what is at stake is the creation of a discursive space for an ideological struggle between alternative futures, environmental issues should be approached from a framework of political conflict, entailing ideological discussion and collective debate and choice. Therefore, to avoid the post-political trap in sociological approaches, it is instructive to exceed a non-committal focus on meaning-making processes underlying media(ted) discourses, and develop a research agenda regarding the contribution of public discourse to democratic debate and citizenship. This requires an accommodation of research designs to function as spaces for conflict and dissent to be expressed and registered.

Media research on climate change

With the rise of climate change as an acknowledged and institutionalized global problem, there has been a similar rise of research in media and communication studies on the representation of climate change in public discourse. A recent review of by Pepermans and myself revealed that much of the existing research literature primarily evaluates public discourse on the extent to which it either contributes to communicating a scientific consensus⁵ or to achieving a social consensus (Pepermans and Maesele forthcoming).

One important school within this literature starts from the assumption of a failed discursive translation between scientific and popular discourse (Antilla 2005, Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, Dispensa and Brulle 2003). Conceptually and empirically, most of these studies have in common that they distinguish between actors and demands informed by the scientific consensus, and others who are not, and blame the journalistic norm of objectivity, which leads journalists to balance two contrasting positions, for effectively instilling bias (or: 'balance as bias', see Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). According to this school, this creates the undue perception that both sides present equally scientific claims, which confuses and misinforms the public, potentially delaying the necessary action to address climate change. Partly in response to this, a second school aims at 'saving' the consensus by focusing on how to overcome conflicting positions through reframing climate change in a specific way, which either allows to translate the scientific consensus better or communicate it successfully across ideological divides (Lakoff 2010, Nisbet 2009, Segnit and Ereaut 2007). The aim of a third school is not the translation of a scientific consensus, but how to achieve a social consensus and overcome conflicting values and interests in terms of creating the conditions for rational dialogue based on 'substantive' considerations (Jönsson 2012, Kumpu and Kunelius 2012, Malone 2009).

These three schools have in common that they start from exclusionary mechanisms discriminating between who/what is recognized as legitimate and who/what is recognized as illegitimate, thereby excluding those actors and/or demands which are not conforming to a (predefined) scientific or social consensus from democratic debate. However, considering their focus on an epistemic framing of climate change and their underlying desire for consensus, the respective analytical frameworks are not only incapable of recognizing or addressing these processes, but simultaneously contribute to them: in other words, their specific conceptual and empirical choices not only actively contribute to the *de-politicization*

of climate change, but actually presume that (an ‘unjustified’) *politicization* is the problem to overcome.

Secondly, although most of these studies reject a transmission model of communication and take into account the wider social context and media logics, public discourse is nonetheless (explicitly or implicitly) evaluated on the extent to which it accurately represents a scientific consensus, therefore the underlying relationship between science and society is characterized as a problem of communication and information. In other words, despite an often explicit epistemological and conceptual distance from the traditional model, there remains a clear normative affinity with it in academic discourse on environment and communication. On the other hand, the advocates of a consensus are always likely to prefer the traditional model, because of its politico-ideological functions (which, ironically, are to reject anything politico-ideological), its assumption of an instrumental role for media and communication and its equation of a lack of environmental progress to resistance towards specific scientific facts. So, although the research questions of these schools are inspired by the sociological approach, these schools somehow lament the fact that the conclusion of a relatively effective control of science’s public image apparently does not sufficiently hold up in the case of climate change.

Two recent publications however succeed in exceeding these pitfalls by integrating insights from agonistic democratic theory. In their edited volume *Climate change politics. Communication and public engagement*, Carvalho and Peterson (2012) start from the observation that citizen engagement in climate change politics is remarkably low, therefore the various chapters investigate in what ways communication could be able to contribute to a transformation of politics. They identify three modes of public engagement, based on different underlying views of climate change communication and politics: (i) social marketing, (ii) public participation, and (iii) agonistic pluralism. In their own words:

‘Whereas social marketing and formal public participation are top-down managerial practices, citizen-led political participation is initiated from the bottom-up. Engagement starts with citizens who see faults in the ways formal political institutions deal with climate change and advance alternative forms of governance, whether through proposals for different governmental policies or through social and economic changes. This involves dissent over alternative political projects. The [agonistic pluralism] mode of engagement cultivates political conflict and rejects the viability of consensus between opposing viewpoints’ (Carvalho and Peterson 2012: 12).

The impact of the first two approaches is seen to be limited in challenging the hegemonic technomanagerial approach to climate change: the social marketing approach individualizes responsibility and addresses people as consumers, thereby reducing the political realm to lifestyle choices, and the public participation approach often functions as an exclusionary legitimation tool and top-down approach to the production of consensus. The agonistic pluralist approach on the other hand is seen as conducive to helping to transform the socio-political status-quo. The three chapters covering this approach in the volume, subsequently focus on the role of art in questioning and subverting politically dominant discourses (Polli 2012), the role of alternative media in developing agonistic politics on climate change

(Gunster 2012) and an analysis of the exclusion of voices and views of large parts of society from climate change politics and how to include them (Scandrett et al. 2012).

Lastly, Berglez and Olausson (2013) recently published an empirical exploration of how the post-political condition of climate change was discursively established in a 2009 focus-group study with Swedish citizens, by focusing on the ideological nature of their discourses. The authors identify three features counteracting radical political discourse capable of challenging the socio-political status-quo: (i) emotional indifference when it comes to personal experiences of a changing climate, (ii) the fragmentation into various particular causes of climate change underlying the ‘belief’ in climate science (and not market capitalism as such), and (iii) individual responsibility and behavior change. The authors conclude that only the recognition of market capitalism as the ‘singular Cause’ of climate change, will enable the articulation of alternative socio-environmental futures.

However, both of these publications do not put forward an analytical framework on how to systematically identify processes of politicization and de-politicization in public discourse. Berglez and Olausson (2013: 2) recognize this deficit: ‘This process of post-politicalization is rather well theorized but has seldom been substantiated with empirical evidence; thus, there is a need for discourse analyses that are able to empirically explore the discursive elements that function as post-political building blocks.’ In the following section, an analytical framework is proposed which should answer their call.

THE RISK CONFLICTS-PERSPECTIVE

In this section, the risk conflicts-perspective is put forward which allows to draw conclusions on the contribution of public discourse(s) to facilitating democratic debate and citizenship. It will be discussed in terms of its respective conceptual, methodological and empirical choices.

Conceptual choices

Since the primary condition to avoid the post-political trap is the recognition of an underlying politico-ideological conflict, this requires (i) to put forward environmental issues as a new type of *social conflict* in late modern societies, and (ii) to distinguish between (conflicting) *scientific rationality claims* on the one hand and (conflicting) *values* and *interests* on other. These ‘risk conflicts’ then involve contestation between various social actors over conflicting risk definitions, which are based on the confluence of conflicting (i) scientific rationality claims, (ii) values, and (iii) interests. Depending on their respective material and/or ideological interests towards a given status-quo, these social actors aim at either the politicization or de-politicization of an environmental issue. The *risk conflicts-perspective* then entails a Copernican revolution: instead of approaching controversies in terms identifying the relevant science and its spokespersons versus those who distort ‘the science’ in promotion of ‘special interests’, it proposes to start from an identification of the competing values and interests at work, to arrive at the heart of what is at stake: an *ideological* struggle between *alternative* (technological or socio-ecological) *futures*, which are based on competing analyses of the current and ideal state of affairs.

In elevating the struggle between processes of politicization and de-politicization as the main analytical concern, the legitimacy of the participants and the debate as such become a central issue: processes of de-politicization refer to discursive strategies in which legitimate, responsible actors and demands are distinguished from illegitimate, irresponsible actors and demands, based on the assumption of a (predefined) moral or rational consensus. In these processes, *moral* or *rational* demands of responsible actors are distinguished from *radical* epistemically-vacuous concerns of irresponsible actors, thereby stigmatizing adversaries as enemies of an existing or potential consensus. These moral or rational imperatives effectively shift the *site of struggle* from politico-ideological conflict between alternative futures to a struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ or ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ (or ‘scientific’ and ‘unscientific’, or ‘economic’ and ‘uneconomic’), and in doing so, act in the service of concealing rather than revealing what is stake. Eventually, these processes of de-politicization aim to preclude an adversarial democratic debate in favour of consensual technocratic decision-making and/or market forces. Processes of politicization, on the other hand, refer to discursive strategies, which, instead of amplifying a moral or rational consensus, aim at revealing competing sets of rationality claims, values and interests underlying competing responses to uncertainty, and relate these to underlying alternative visions of society, which are subsequently made subject of public debate. This cultivates a discursive space for a democratic debate between conflicting, yet legitimate, demands of political adversaries, and a democratic struggle between alternative futures beyond the existing status-quo.

Eventually, democratic debate is found to be facilitated when an environmental issue is framed as an (*ideological*) debate involving key *political* choices between *alternative* futures. On the other hand, democratic debate is found to be impeded when an issue is framed as a (*predefined consensual*) matter best left to *technocratic* decision-making and *market* forces. In other words, when public discourse(s) contribute(s) to processes of *politicization* or *de-politicization*, respectively.

Methodological choices

To allow for the combination of an in-depth examination of discursive strategies and ideological preferences, a strong focus on language use and the relationship between discourses on the one hand and specific social, political and cultural contexts on the other is required. This implies that qualitative content analytic methods are preferred over quantitative content analytic methods, which generally aim at identifying the frequency of predefined thematic categorizations (often referred to as ‘frames’) and positive/negative evaluations of actors, technologies or demands. More specifically, critical discourse analysis allows to reveal the role of discursive strategies and practices in the creation and reproduction of (unequal) relations of power (Carvalho 2008, Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, Maesele forthcoming, Raeijmaekers and Maesele forthcoming). On the other hand, specific (critical) framing analysis approaches, which start from a dynamic framing concept, could also be used in this respect (Maesele 2010, 2011).

With regard to the role of ideology in public discourse, and media(ted) discourses in specific, we draw on the work of Carvalho (2007, 2008). She defines ideology as ‘a system of values, norms and political preferences, linked to a program of action vis-à-vis a given social

and political order' (Carvalho 2007: 225). Furthermore, she puts forward a concept of ideological cultures, which emphasizes their socially constructed nature and allows a certain level of diversity and pluralism. Ideological cultures then refer to 'communities of ideas, values and preferences inside media organizations and in their particular audiences' (Carvalho 2007: 239-240). To be able to reveal the respective ideological cultures, four subsequent steps are needed: in a first step, the relevant ideological fault lines are identified. In the case of environment and communication, the most relevant fault lines as identified in research on climate change and GM food have been the techno-environmental and socio-economic fault lines (Carvalho 2007; Maesele 2010). In the former, a Promethean discourse in which there are no limits to the mastery and exploitation of nature for material development or economic growth is distinguished from a discourse of harmony with and respect for nature and other species. In the latter, a non-regulatory approach driven by values of market liberalism, individual freedom and profitability is distinguished from a public accountability approach, in which the precautionary principle (i.e. technological innovations should not be commercialized before risks and dangers are sufficiently known), social responsibility and equity warrant political action. In a second step, the relevant discursive strategies are identified, such as framing (selection and composition), positioning, homogenization, universalization, de/legitimation, etc., which allow us to decide on processes of de/politicization. A third step identifies which ideological preferences and discursive strategies relate to each other and groups these as the respective ideological cultures. In a potential fourth step, the dominant problem definition of an environmental issue is induced from the ideological culture characterized by de-politicizing discursive strategies, indicating the naturalized ideological preferences.

Empirical choices

In terms of empirical framework, we acknowledge the urgent need recently formulated by Hansen (2011:8): 'for reconnecting and reintegrating the traditional, but traditionally also relative distinct, three major foci of communication research on media and environmental issues'. This means that the traditional reflexive circuit between social actors, media(ted) discourses and audience discourses not only remains as relevant as ever, but in fact appears as most promising to reveal the material needed to draw conclusions on the contribution of media(ted) discourses to facilitating or impeding democratic debate and citizenship. Regarding the level of social actors, it is important to identify the respective strategic actors (those individuals or groups with interests in an issue's representation) and to reveal from their strategic communication documents not only whether they sponsor politicizing or de-politicizing discourses, but more importantly, the ideological nature of these discourses. In addition, their communication activities and media strategies should be mapped as to gain insights into the nature and success of their claims-making efforts. Regarding the media level, it is important to examine which social actors and discourses influence or fail to influence media(ted) discourses and to reveal the nature and extent of ideological discussion. Here it is important to include a wide range of media, such as new alternative, online media, since these are most likely to produce alternative, i.e. politicizing, discourses. Preferably, the analysis is restricted to 'critical discourse moments', selected cases marked by topical (scientific,

political, etc.) events which have the potential to transform the configuration of meaning. With respect to time-scales, these cases should be analyzed along two axes: a comparative-synchronic axis (simultaneous coverage in different media) and a historical-diachronic axis (consecutive coverage in one media outlet). Lastly, to seize the significance of these discourses, audience discourses should be studied using reception analyses, with a focus on the extent to which media users succeed in making media(ted) discourses relevant on a personal and/or political-societal level. Eventually, once we are able to draw conclusions on the contribution of public discourse to democratic debate and citizenship regarding an environmental issue, it is fairly straightforward to conclude on how to communicate this issue more effectively from the perspective of democratic politics.

CONCLUSION

The literature on agonistic democratic theory allows us to identify three conditions required for a research agenda on the evaluation of public discourse with regards to its contribution to facilitating democratic debate and citizenship. Since the articulation of alternative futures depends on conflict about the naming and trajectories of competing futures, the first condition, the recognition of an underlying politico-ideological conflict, is found to be the primary factor in shifting the site of struggle from the epistemic level to the political level, academically as well as socially. Furthermore, the evaluation of public discourse in this respect is found to be dependent on a corresponding *politicization* of academic discourse, since this research agenda requires fundamental conceptual and methodological shifts: only when nature and the environment are recognized as political categories, resisting singular views or framings exclusively in terms of scientific rationality claims, a real confrontation between alternative futures becomes possible.

NOTES

¹ In this chapter, the concept of academic discourse is used to refer to scholarly discourses, while public discourse is used to refer to discourses circulating in the public sphere, such as media(ted) discourses, citizen discourses, strategic communication by organizations, etc.

² While the IPCC reports have played a vital role in framing climate change in terms of a scientific battle against CO₂-emissions (IPCC reports), the annual climate summits have narrowed the politics of climate change to debates on particular technologies and market mechanisms

³ Geo-engineering, carbon capture and storage, nuclear power, biofuels, etc.

⁴ Interestingly, the inflation and tenacity of the traditional model in the guise of the Public Understanding of Science-movement since the mid-1980s has been explained in terms of a response of the scientific establishment to a widely perceived legitimation vacuum and crisis in public trust in a period in which the commercialization of science took off in leading areas of biotechnology (Durant 1999, Wynne 1995). This is ironic, since its politico-ideological function is exactly to naturalize the existing institutionalized culture of science in terms of its

representation, organization, patronage, control and social relations, while systematically deleting the institutional and epistemic characteristics of dominant forms of science (Wynne 1995).

⁵ Presuming that public discourse accurately represents what is commonly put forward as the established consensus within climate science regarding the anthropogenic nature of climate change.

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