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Abstract

In the academic literature, two perspectives can be distinguished regarding the climate debate. The dominant consensus-building perspective problematizes the politicization of climate change as an important barrier to climate action and resultantly sets out to develop depoliticizing communication strategies which foster social consensus and public engagement. In contrast to this, the critical debate perspective problematizes climate change's capture in a depoliticized consensus and calls for its repoliticization to revive democratic debate and citizenship. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we will distinguish both perspectives on the basis of their diverging problem diagnoses and recommendations. Second, we will argue how only the critical debate perspective provides the tools for transformative socio-ecological change based on both democratic debate and democratic citizenship. We conclude by discussing how this divergence is reflective of a larger split in the social sciences between problem-solving and critical theory and how social scientists could contribute to democratic debate and citizenship.

Introduction

Can we agree among ourselves? We are a clever but quarrelsome species – in our public discourses, we can sound like a rookery in full throat. [*Ian Mc Ewan, Open Democracy essay on climate change, April 20, 2009*]

The answer to Ian Mc Ewan's poignant question depends on one's angle. Climate change is not only a "threat multiplier", which has the potential to exacerbate many of the challenges we are dealing with today.¹ It is also a multiplier of agreement and disagreement. On the one hand, both the stand-offs between developing and developed nations at the annual climate summits and global warming's integration in the culture war between liberals and conservatives in the United States show that the idea of climate change heats up various old and new disagreements. On the other hand, the urgency of the threat also compels many former antagonists, like environmental NGO's and multinational corporations, to increasingly collaborate in new partnerships.

These two observations reflect the divergence between two perspectives in the social sciences regarding the desirability of (dis-)agreement about climate change. The dominant consensus-building perspective highlights the idea that climate change has become a "conflict multiplier". It blames the politicization of climate change for impeding rational and effective debate and action. Therefore, it sets out to develop depoliticizing communication strategies which foster social consensus and public engagement on climate change.

In contrast to this, the emergent critical debate perspective focuses on the way(s) climate change is used as a depoliticizing "consensus multiplier". It argues that the depoliticization of climate change serves as a barrier to transformative socio-ecological change. Alternatively, it calls for its repoliticization to revive democratic debate and contestation about alternative sustainable futures.

First, we will distinguish both perspectives on the basis of their diverging problem diagnoses and recommendations. Second, we will argue how only the critical debate perspective provides the tools for transformative socio-ecological change based on both democratic debate and democratic citizenship. We conclude by discussing how this divergence is reflective of a larger split in the social sciences between problem-solving and critical theory and how social scientists could contribute to democratic debate and citizenship.

The Consensus-Building Perspective

Problem diagnosis

Most references to the politicization of climate change start with the paradoxical contradiction between an increasing consensus in scientific discourse on the one hand, and an increasing dissensus in public, media and political discourse, on the other. The politicization of climate change is then generally understood as the suppression and / or amplification of climate science by special interests for political reasons in combination with the alignment of attitudes towards climate change with existing ideological and partisan divisions.^{a 2 3 4 5} This congruence of political and scientific beliefs is criticized for resulting into social dissensus, which is seen as a major barrier for effective (i) science communication about, (ii) public engagement with, and resultantly (iii) policy action on climate change.

Studies starting from this perspective have mainly observed such politicization in the United States,^{2 3 5} and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom,⁶ Australia,⁷ and Canada.⁸ In the United States, the level of polarization has become so pronounced that positions on climate change, just like one's stances on gun control or abortion, are now found to signify a liberal or conservative political outlook.³ This ideological polarization has been linked to the behavior of: political party elites,² the 'anti-environmental countermovement',⁹ and scientists from all sides who engage in public debate.¹⁰ Furthermore, these scholars have criticized "the polluted science communication environment",³ "the heightened balkanization of news media",⁵ "and today's ideologically divided media culture",¹¹ for unnecessarily reinforcing polarization amongst the public by over-representing the ideological tail ends of opinion and distorting perceptions of expert advice. Lastly, this politicization of climate change has been shown to consolidate as people acquire information selectively in ways that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs.¹²

Recommendations

Within the consensus-building school, four distinct approaches can be identified when it comes to developing depoliticizing communication strategies to foster social consensus and public engagement: the technocratic, social marketing, green republican and deliberative dialogue approaches. The promotion of consensus as the basis for action is the common denominator which unites their seemingly divergent recommendations.

The technocratic, information-deficit approach rests on the assumption that the dissemination of “objective” knowledge about the physical causes and consequences of climate change in combination with the rebuttal of misinformation will encourage agreement on how to respond to the challenges we are confronted with.¹³ Famous examples are the websites “Skeptical Science” and “The Consensus Project”,¹⁴ where scientists aim “to remove the politics from the debate by concentrating solely on the science”. However, many social scientists criticize the technocratic approach as ineffective in understanding and changing people’s attitudes towards climate change. They argue that the rejection of climate science is not shaped by a lack of adequate information, but by its incongruence with particular audiences’ needs, values and predispositions.^{2 3 5}

Consequently, they advocate a mainstreaming of climate change through a social marketing approach. This entails tailoring climate change communication to these needs, values and predispositions. For instance, by reframing climate change in terms of public health, national security, ethics, or economics, to make it more congruent with hierarchical-individualist, materialist values.^{5 11}
^{15 16} This could include calling for the diversification of policy options with technological choices more in line with hierarchical-individualist values (e.g. geo-engineering, nuclear energy, carbon-capture and storage, etc.) as a supplement to solutions more in line with post-materialist, egalitarian-communitarian values (e.g. favoring renewable energy and the regulation of businesses).¹⁷ Or by including a greater diversity of trusted societal leaders who can frame the issue in a manner that resonates with the identity and cultural background of broader segments of the public.^{2 5}

The green republican approach on the other hand argues that such a mainstreaming approach risks to sustain unsustainable values and practices.^{18 19} In response, it advocates strategies (e.g. environmental education, community gardening, and the enhancement of social capital) which foster post-materialist, intrinsic values and life goals to enhance deeper, more encompassing forms of citizen engagement which support the transformative changes and interventions necessary to stop climate change.

Lastly, the deliberative dialogue approach rejects the green republican approach’s predefined notion of ‘the good life’. Alternatively, it aims to achieve political action against climate change

through inclusive and rational dialogue, which takes into consideration the myriad of differences between actors.²⁰ The civilized ideal of democratic decision-making that deliberative theorists support is the unhurried and reflexive exchange of arguments between reasonable persons guided by the principle of impartiality.²¹ Dryzek and Stevenson (reference 22) stress the importance of deliberative systems which take climate science as a platform for rather than a part of deliberation. These should provide a public forum (e.g. “The Worldwide views on climate and energy” citizen consultation coordinated by the Danish Board of Technology ²³) where different actors and discourses can engage with each other in an authentic, inclusive, and consequential way, and potentially come to a rational consensus about effective strategies to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.^{20 22}

The Critical Debate Perspective

Problem diagnosis

A number of scholars from disparate fields point out a very different paradox in the climate debate, namely that the rise of climate change on the political agenda as an urgent issue has coincided with the decrease of contestation over (alternatives to) the social structures which cause the problem.²¹ This paradox is understood as the post-political,^{24 25 26 27 28 29} post-democratic,²⁴ or anti-political³⁰ condition of climate change. These different concepts all refer to processes of depoliticization.

Depoliticization is generally understood here as the process in which the dominant approach to climate change is continuously represented as ‘the’ scientific or social consensus, while the values, interests and assumptions which inform this representation remain concealed, and dissenting actors are excluded as ‘skeptical’, ‘alarmist’ or ‘radical’ enemies of the consensus. This discursive construction of climate change in terms of an exclusionary scientific or social consensus is problematized for two reasons. First, for impeding a democratic debate about alternative sustainable futures beyond the framework of a global neoliberal market economy. Second, for stifling democratic citizenship as it encourages either polarization between acceptance and denial or political apathy by alienating people from owning the issue.

Studies starting from this perspectives have offered various explanations for climate change’s capture in a depoliticized consensus. It has been connected to the issue’s lack of an obvious, privileged subject and object of social change (compared to traditional emancipatory movements such as feminism) and to the specific role that ‘nature’ plays as a supposedly external, objective factor from which unequivocal policy conclusions can be drawn.^{24 25} Studies have also linked the depoliticization of climate change to: the way climate science has been institutionalized in the United Nations’ climate process,²⁸ social scientists’ approach of the issue,^{26 27 31} the dominant discourses about the green

economy,²⁵ the governmentality of carbon trading,³² national adaptation policies,³⁰ mainstream media's legitimization of governments' techno-managerial approach and marginalization of more transformative discourses,³³ and citizens' everyday experiences and practices with regards to climate change.²⁹

These analyses stem start from a post-foundational outlook on climate change. This implies that climate change is only observable through representations, which are always the provisional, contingent and changeable result of power relations and struggles (Reference 25, p.25-26). As a consequence, it rejects strict dichotomies between science and politics, knowledge and power, or normative judgment and empirical analysis.³⁴ This stands in contrast to the foundationalist outlook of the consensus-building perspective, which understands climate change first and foremost as a physical phenomenon that can be observed, discerned, quantified and managed with some degree of scientific objectivity.^{25 31} Such a view entails a strict distinction between on the one hand, indisputable, dispassionate facts, and ideological, passionate, interest-driven politics, on the other.³⁴ Furthermore, it promotes the idea that the latter should always follow the former.

Recommendations

Authors of the critical debate perspective generally advocate a repoliticization of climate change. This entails the creation of spaces where the issue can be reframed as a democratic debate between competing socio-environmental trajectories. However, it needs to be noted that, until now, there have only been a handful of empirical studies or practical guidelines about how repoliticization can take shape.

For instance, several authors argue that repoliticization should focus on shifting the terms of the debate from a focus on scientists' assessments of the physical causes and consequences of climate change to a focus on the societal root causes, the various strategies for change and the existing different visions and alternatives at stake.^{25 28 35} It entails the diagnosis and destabilization of dominant socio-ecological arrangements which are deemed to be problematic (e.g. carbon capitalism, green growth, ecological modernization) and opening up conversations on political alternatives.³¹ This would allow to reveal and contest the political choices, inequalities and oppositions which are concealed in apparently neutral scientific, economic or technical representations (reference 25, p.138-161). This way, the existing social order is represented as contingent, and therefore changeable.

In practice, repoliticization is often understood as an egalitarian, emancipatory struggle against (free market) capitalism and for 'the commons' and 'climate justice'.²⁴ Some authors, on the other hand, have warned against its connection to one privileged discourse or actor.²⁵ Apart from direct action and the Climate Justice movement,²⁴ repoliticization has also been linked to the prefigurative

action of the Transition Movement (e.g. community gardening, renewable energy cooperatives, local car sharing initiatives, etc.), which challenges the idea that there is no alternative for business as usual and shows that people already have a degree of autonomy in the present to do things differently and reclaim their futures.³⁶ Lastly, alternative media are often found to provide spaces where readers and viewers can confront disparities of knowledge, values and power that mainstream media often gloss over.³⁷

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Discussion

In this article, we have shown that there are two conflicting perspectives regarding the climate debate and how to ameliorate it (see table 1). However, only the critical debate perspective provides the tools for transformative socio-ecological change (beyond the neoliberal status-quo) based on both democratic debate. Indeed, the consensus-building perspective's framing of the climate debate is itself characterized by exclusionary mechanisms, since it is based on an idea of separating those actors and demands which are recognized as legitimate to participate in the debate and those who are not. Furthermore, its primary goal of achieving consensus not only makes it blind for the political nature of a particular discourse or social order (about which it promotes consensus), but also impedes democratic debate about alternative discourses (and social orders). Instead of diffusing disagreements, it shifts these to a depoliticized meta-level where they are transformed into disagreements between 'science' and 'politics', or 'realism' and 'radicalism'. In other words, instead of creating a space where society can choose between different political choices leading to alternative sustainable futures, it leaves us only with a struggle between right ('science' and 'realism') and wrong ('politics' and 'radicalism').

Nevertheless, both the critical debate perspective's diagnosis of the climate debate as depoliticized or 'post-political', as well as its call for a repoliticization of the climate debate, has been criticized by various authors. We will use the rest of this discussion section to simultaneously address and rebut these criticisms. The first object of contention entails the diagnosis of the current state of the debate. 'Post-carbon sociologist' Urry in particular has argued that "politics is increasingly carbon-based and what is developing are elements of a potentially 'post-carbon' politics, but not 'post-politics'" (reference 38, p.99). In this argument, Urry uses "carbon-based politics" to refer to the anti-environmental countermovement in the US, a coalition of conservative think tanks, fossil fuel interests and sympathetic scientists (i.e. the so-called climate deniers) that aims to deproblematize climate

change. “Post-carbon politics” refers to the global grassroots movements which aim to challenge society’s over-reliance on fossil fuels, such as the Climate Justice movement.

Indeed, pluralism and (ideological) conflict have not completely disappeared. However, in the mainstream public sphere, and especially in the corridors of power, what could be referred to as alternative “post-carbon” discourses are either ignored, emptied of their content or blatantly delegitimized.²⁵ Furthermore, not all alternatives to the dominant depiction of climate change are necessarily politicizing. Climate denial for instance should be seen as a symptom of the post-political condition, rather than a challenge to it.²⁸ By instrumentalizing their version of climate science for political goals and by raising doubt over climate science, climate sceptics stage a scientific non-debate, while avoiding what is and should be the central topic and source of disagreement: the question of how to (re-)organize society (Reference 25, p.32-33).

The call for conflict and resistance has also attracted its share of criticism. For instance, Hoffman understands a politicized climate debate in which people fight and contest each other over values, and in which interaction is based on power and coercion, as a “worst-case scenario” which would encourage ideological retrenchment and fragmentation with highly inefficient policy outcomes (reference 2, p.30-31).

First of all, it is important to emphasize that there is nothing essentially wrong with compromises or consensual discourses, as long as they do not conceal the existence of disagreements, or misrecognize that they are only one possible way to conceive of society or deal with climate change (reference 25, p.23). Consensus is valued as much as consensus and institutions should be able to manifest both.²¹ Furthermore, as both Machin³⁹ and Sarewitz⁴⁰ have argued, transformative change never requires or achieves (global) consensus amongst all actors about the cause of or solution to a problem. On the contrary, change always proceeds in the face of opposition and requires temporary agreements among a democratic majority about specific decisions. Antagonism cannot be fully eradicated, but it can be transformed into agonism: “The decision that is eventually (but never finally) made is one that not all participants agree with, but that they all agree to go along with, at least until it can be challenged and the issue re-decided” (reference 39, p.102). Lastly, in the current largely post-political context in which the idea of “green capitalism” has become hegemonic and activism is increasingly criminalized, mobilization for degrowth or climate justice indeed remains limited to small sections of society. Despite this observation, there is little reason to believe that more inclusive, reflexive and rational public forums would be able to serve as an alternative to repoliticization. Indeed, these could never function in a fully impartial way or be able to resolve society’s inequities and antagonisms by themselves. Quite to the contrary, they would have to exist in a context which is characterized by large inequities of power and the absence of an authority which can discriminate

between better and worse sources of scientific claims.⁴¹ Consequently, they would be likely to reinforce the already powerful. Empirical scrutiny of such forums like the United Nations' "Worldwide Views of Climate change" has shown that the terms of the debate were predefined by the initiators, while the opportunity for alternative issue-framings or perspectives to emerge and to influence decision-making were limited to non-existent.²³ Such public forums thus risk to become tools to manage the condition of sustained ecological and social unsustainability, rather than spaces for debate and social change. Therefore, the critical debate perspective aims to contribute to a plurality of public arenas to create spaces for marginalized voices in both mainstream and alternative media, as well as in other arenas, where debate and dissent rather than consensus is expressed.⁴²

Conclusion

This paper has argued that only the assumptions of the critical debate perspective allow for the recognition that society is contingent, that it can be understood and organized differently, and that there should be scope for questioning currently existing social arrangements. Because of the exclusionary assumptions from which it starts from, the consensus-building perspective, on the other hand, is not only incapable of analyzing the political foundations of the current order and climate change discourses, it simultaneously contributes to concealing them and closing the space to question them.

Nevertheless, the influence of the critical debate perspective remains marginal compared to the consensus-building perspective. This becomes clear when one inserts the keywords 'climate change' and 'politicization' in the academic search engine *Web of Science*. Only one out of the first ten articles belongs to the critical debate perspective.²⁴ On the Wikipedia pages about the subject, the critical debate perspective is even completely absent.⁴³

Several explanations for the dominance of the consensus-building perspective pop up. These include the fact that this approach is predominantly descriptive of the situation in the Anglo-Saxon world and the United States in particular. Climate change research is severely biased towards these countries.⁴⁴ The dominance of the consensus-building over the critical debate perspective also reflects the wider split and discrepancy in the social sciences between problem-solving and critical theory.^{45 46}

Problem-solving theory accepts and sustains the existing order's logics, while critical theory questions and challenges these by examining how the prevailing order came about and how knowledge can be a guide to potential alternatives. However, the critical tradition suffers from the political economy of research funding agencies. These generally choose to emphasize performance (measured as 'policy impact') and accountability to clients (reified as 'tax-payers' or 'decision-makers')

whose preferences are presumed to be practical and oriented toward measurable outcomes (reference 45, p. 784).

Social scientists can contribute to a critical debate by mapping and describing the frontlines of an issue, such as climate change. They can do this by exposing, challenging and extending the ontological and ideological assumptions that inform how various actors make sense of and respond to a rapidly changing environment.³¹ Furthermore, they can also examine how different practices and discourses open or close the space to debate between alternative socio-environmental futures.^{26 27} However, it is important to emphasize that scholars can never entirely put themselves above or outside the field of political contestation. Therefore, they should not try to hide behind the veil of objectivity, but rather be explicit and reflexive about their preferences. We believe that this is the way forward for scholars investigating and participating in the public debate about climate change.

Notes

- a. The politicization of climate change is usually attributed to the anti-environmental countermovement of fossil fuel interests, conservative think tanks and sympathetic scientists. Interestingly, climate deniers, like the Republican chairman of the US Senate Environment committee James Inhofe, also problematize the politicization of the issue. They blame it on the 'alarmism' of environmentalists: "too often emotion, stoked by irresponsible rhetoric and ideological purity, rather than facts based on objective science, shapes the contours of environmental policy". (Reference 47, p.166).

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