Crises of Meaning: Seeking Radical Pluralist Opportunities through a Discursive Analysis of Climate Change Politics

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Introduction

The crisis(es) of climate change (CC) constitutes a political puzzle. On the one hand, most countries around the world have acknowledged its existence and the importance of curbing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to halt its acceleration. On the other hand, however, the urgency of addressing the problem professed by both policymakers and those potentially affected by climate change has most often failed to result in any dramatic (or some might say, even minor) changes in the global political economy of neoliberalism or the values emphasized in the international system. In short, as a general and broad consensus over the problem of climate change has developed, a loss of urgency for mitigating the effects of, halting, or reversing these global climatic changes has also taken hold.

The number of discourses surrounding the phenomenon of climate change and climate change politics is staggering. In this research, I examine two discourses of climate change at the international level which illuminate the inherent complexity and “meaninglessness” that has come to characterize the way that climate change is discussed, governed, and deployed in the international context. In particular, the two discourses under examination include the most powerful discourse of CC, which I refer to as the “IPCC/UNFCCC” discourse and which informs much of the universe of international agreements on CC, and the “climate refugee” discourse, which not only informs policymaking at the international level but which also serves to produce particular subjects of the neoliberal governance of CC. Importantly, both of these discourses are examined for two reasons. First, they each embody dominant, albeit heterogeneous and fluid, discourses which circumscribe the universe of climate change politics at the international level. Second, they each embody a particularly neoliberal ethos, which aids in the production of subjects of governance and delimits the possibility of alternative and self-produced political subjectivities which could orient politics in more democratic and ecological directions.

The loss of meaning and urgency elucidated above, I argue, reflects a fundamental de-politicization that is characteristic not only of the production of the neoliberal subject in its various iterations but also reflects an alienation of humanity at large from the political itself. Overall, then, I analyze the two above discourses on climate change in order to understand both their complexity and their “meaninglessness” and therefore, openness, including the ways in which they produce empty subjectivities and contribute to a loss of urgency about climate change in general. Importantly, this research project ultimately seeks to understand how the depoliticizing effects of power-laden climate change discourses, in particular, actually can contribute to rather than truncate opportunities for a subversive new politics which produces its own ecological and democratic subjectivities and embodies what Wendy Brown has called the opportunity to assert post-epistemological and post-ontological judgments through claims for the common good that assert, “what I want for us,” rather than, “who we are” (Brown 1995, p. 51).

Literature Review

*What’s in a Discourse? The Production of Meaning and Subjects for Climate Change Politics*

According to Michel Foucault, power is productive, meaning that discursive constellations of power/knowledge produce certain individual subjectivities in ways that preclude other subjectivities from coming into being. In short, Foucault argues that discourses imbued with power make humans into subjects (Foucault 1982). Discourses are not homogenous or static, but nevertheless tend to produce homogenizing effects on those who are subject to them. Moreover, according to Foucault, these discourses and in turn, subjects, are produced using particular rationalities of governing, or governmentalities (Foucault 2008). Analyzing power-laden discourses remains essential to understanding not only how subjects of governance are produced, but what kinds of power and agency these discourses imbue upon subjects.

According to Karen Bäckstrand and Eva Lövbrand (2006), discourse analysis has gained prominence in identifying “power relationships associated with dominant narratives surrounding ‘environment’ and ‘sustainable development’” (p. 51). In addition, the authors identify four elements of discourse analysis that inform their study on environmental discourses. First, discourses derive from intersubjective understandings, and are understood as constellations of ideas that are constantly produced and reproduced through particular practices and technologies. Second, power works to produce particular knowledge regimes (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006). Third, and perhaps most importantly for this study, policymaking itself derives from “discursive struggles” and empowers particular actors at the expense of others (p. 52). And finally, they argue that discourses are perpetuated and articulated by agents with political power, and sometimes even continually reproduced by agents who may lack power but who are nevertheless consistently subjected to particular powerful discourses (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006). Overall, then, particular configurations of rationality and power emerge in the international arena which dictate the terms by which climate change is discussed and governed and the discourses through which particular subject positions are produced.

In the context of neoliberalism, Foucault’s methods, in particular, can help uncover “the manner in which neoliberalism is not just a manner of governing states or economies, but is intimately tied to the government of the individual, to a particular manner of living” (Read 2009, p. 27). By producing human beings as “homo economicus,” neoliberalism entails the production of not only consumers and workers/laborers as subjects of governance, but also “others,” those who are deemed unfit for the role of homo economicus and are therefore considered “helpless victims” of an economic and governing rationality in which they do not necessarily fit (See Read 2009; Farbotko and Lazrus 2011). Analyzing the neoliberal rationalities at work in the context of climate change will help elucidate what sorts of subjects and rationalities of governing are produced in this regime. Importantly, however, other discourses are also at work, and neoliberalism itself does not constitute a homogenous regime of truth as it relates to climate change politics, policies, and policings.

In particular, Stripple and Bulkeley (2014) have argued that,

Governmentality provides an analytical toolbox that can advance new perspectives on the climate as a political space, and enables us to grasp and highlight the existence of changing discursive productions of a warming world and their effects in mitigating or adapting to that world (Stripple and Bulkeley 2014, p. 10).

Indeed, the study of climate change governance from an anti-foundationalist perspective can help scholars understand the particular arts, techniques, and rationalities of governing that serve to naturalize particular foci in climate debates and politics and obscure alternatives, including alternative subjectivities. At base, then, climate governance as it is practiced and discussed by policymakers, NGOs, and the media becomes a naturalized and depoliticized phenomena amiable to scientific, technological, and broadly neoliberal rationalities. For example, Lövbrand and Stripple (2014) argue that a Foucauldian perspective applied to climate governance,

Sets out to investigate the different ways the activity or “art” called *climate governance* is made thinkable and practicable. While this analytical exercise to date has produced fragmented insights (there is no unified reading of climate governmentality), a fragmentation or destabilization of our carbon constrained present may be the very ethos of this approach. By beginning the study of politics and government from below, in the heterogeneous and dispersed micro-politics of power, Foucauldian analytics of climate government challenges the received fixedness and inevitability of what governing climate change is all about (Lövbrand and Stripple 2014, p. 38).

Thus far, post-structuralist studies of climate change governance and its production of subjects have been piecemeal and have yet to illuminate the possibilities for radical democratic politics that emerge when the fragmentary and empty nature of the climate change regime is made visible. As Lövbrand and Stripple (2014) suggest, the “very ethos” of a post-structuralist discursive analysis may, in fact, be related to the naturalization of the neoliberal climate regime itself. Importantly, how a loss of urgency and the depoliticization of climate change takes place alongside apocalyptic and fear-inducing discourses of that same phenomenon remains a paradox.

*Discourses of Climate Change and their Depoliticizing Effects*

Not only does neoliberalism produce particular subjectivities such as “homo economicus,” it also contributes to the depoliticization and loss of urgency discussed earlier, and climate change, in particular, provides a unique example from which to analyze how this loss of urgency affects subject positions and their agency. Moreover, this loss of urgency may demonstrate how, when subjects are produced according to particular imposed governmentalities, their subjectivity exists as a lack, an emptiness that is both fragile and naturalized.

Importantly, Erik Swyngedouw (2011) has argued that the concept of environment/ nature constitutes an empty signifier, whose signification truncates the actual unfixity and fluidity of the concept itself. While signification is inherently political, the universalizing tendency of signification also works to depoliticize these same signified objects and meanings. By declaring that addressing climate change is important for the future of life on the planet and that if not addressed, disaster will ensue, policymakers and environmental activists alike have achieved something close to consensus at the international level (although, outliers still exist, as in the conservative wing of the United States political system). Given this consensus and the apocalyptic narratives of fear that infiltrate climate change discourses, Swyngedouw highlights the fact that consensus can act as a depoliticizing force, where policies and debates become grandiose yet vague, and where the status quo (i.e. the neoliberal capitalist system) remains “adaptable” to the demands of climate in a global environment of consensus (Swyngedouw 2011). For example, Swyngedouw argues that “the techno-managerial eco-consensus maintains that, we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation—‘the partition of the sensible’ in Rancière’s words—so that nothing really has to change!” (Swyngedouw 2011, p. 264). The commodification of CO2 for example, marks only one example of the dominant depoliticizing discourse of climate change, according to Swyngedouw (2011). Additionally, Slavoj Zizek has called this condition of depolicitization post-political; and post-politics, in particular, “reduces the political terrain to the sphere of consensual governing and policy-making, centered on the technical, managerial and consensual administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic or other domains” (Swyngedouw 2011, p. 266).

In the context of this depoliticized and post-political condition of climate change discourse, debate occurs with consensus as the end goal and is elite-driven. The subjects produced by the broad discourse of climate change are not a heterogeneous group, but rather, “universal victims suffering from processes beyond their control” (Swyngedow 2011). Likewise, Bettini (2012) has argued that the climate refugee narrative, in particular, acts as a depoliticized discourse that reproduces current configurations of global power relations, especially by producing the figure of the climate refugee as innocent victim and (potential) legal individual body subject to international law. For example, both the politics of human rights and the politics of fear (of mass influxes of migrants into Northern countries from the South) characterize the apocalyptic narratives of climate disaster and mass migration that Bettini investigates. The result is that these narratives of fear and crisis can actually lead to a loss of urgency due to the complexity and the inevitability of the problem itself as it is described (Bettini 2012). Bettini also quotes Slavoj Zizek (2010) to aid in his description of the depoliticizing effects of climate refugee narratives, who stated that, “‘those same politicians and managers who, until recently, dismissed fears of global warming as the apocalyptic scaremongering of ex-communists, or at least based on insufficient evidence…are now all of a sudden treating global warming as a simple fact, as just another part of carrying on as usual’” (Zizek 2010, qtd. in Bettini 2012, p. 69).

Through the reification of discursive space, certain outcomes, such as mass migration and crisis become naturalized as inevitable, becoming the unquestionable topic of elite-driven neoliberal policymaking (See Bettini 2012). In other words, subjects of neoliberal governance, such as the figure of the climate refugee are reified into victims of forces beyond their control that were not created or set in motion by their own actions (Farbotko and Lazrus 2011). Perhaps most importantly, the official IPCC/UNFCCC discourse on climate change has shifted dramatically over the last 20 years, most notably, as Angela Oels has stated, “Instead of avoiding the possible consequences of climate change, the new emphasis is on preparing for these contingencies [the outcomes of a warming world that are beyond scientific predication or modelling], surfing them, surviving them and making sure they are dealt with appropriately to prevent them from turning into large-scale disasters” (Oels 2014, p. 208). Although this official discourse remains committed to keeping CO2 levels down through carbon markets and other mechanisms, it also sustains a strong commitment (at least at the discursive level) to building capacity and resilience in people and governments that may be subject to dramatic (or even small) climatic shifts (Oels 2014).

Overall, then, the narratives produced by both sets of climate change discourses discussed here contribute to the depoliticization of climate change itself, the production of static figures or victims of climate change whose future is out of their control, the reification of current global power configurations, and the reproduction of neoliberal governance of the environment. The next two sections examine these discourses in more depth in order to discern whether they exhibit the above tendencies, and also to discern whether other narratives may also contribute to this loss of urgency. Although agreement exists that power-laden discourses such as climate change narratives may truncate politics itself, the very impossibility of signifying both subjects and fundamental elements of climate change may present a rare opportunity for alternative politics and radical democratic openings.

Discourse 1: The IPCC and the UNFCCC

*IPCC Discourses*

Established in 1988 by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Society (WMS), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has widespread support as the leading body of scientific experts on the progression and potential outcomes of climatic change (IPCC 2015). In addition to scientific experts, the IPCC has 195 member countries which share in overseeing the organization and its endeavors. In the description of the organization, the IPCC states that, “The work of the organization is therefore policy-relevant and yet policy-neutral, never policy-prescriptive” (IPCC 2015, n. pag).

Within their summaries and scientific documents, the IPCC makes a number of claims about the impacts of climate change based on five levels of confidence which include, “very low confidence,” “low confidence,” “medium confidence,” “high confidence,” and “very high confidence,” where these descriptions represent probabilities that range from “exceptionally unlikely to virtually certain” (IPCC 2014, p. 2). In their most recent report the IPCC designated three categories that will be affected by climate change which include “physical systems” (glaciers/snow/permafrost, rivers/lakes/floods/drought, and coastal erosion/sea level effects), “biological systems” (terrestrial ecosystems, wildfire, marine ecosystems), and “human and managed systems” (food production, livelihoods/health/economics). Interestingly, the only place where human livelihood/health/economics effects will be felt with medium confidence is in North America and Europe, according to the most recent projections by the IPCC. The effects on livelihoods are actually given low confidence or very low confidence on all other continents, including small island states (IPCC 2014).

Overall the tone of the IPCC discourse on climate change reflects the observations of Swyngedow (2011), and much of the language is risk-averse and warns of the irreversible effects of climate change, albeit without making specific policy recommendations like the ones promoted by the UNFCCC and decided upon at the Conference of the Parties (COP). Interestingly, however, the emphasis is not merely on the effects that climate changes poses for humans but also the risks that it poses to ecosystems at large and earth systems vital to life on the planet in general. For example, the IPCC states that “Climate change will amplify existing risks and create new risks for natural and human systems. Risks are unevenly distributed and are generally greater for disadvantaged people and communities in countries at all levels of development” (IPCC 2014, p. 13). The document also emphasizes the fact that while stabilizing CO2 emissions and therefore, the global mean temperature, would probably prevent some irreversible damages and loss of species/human livelihood, certain species and ecosystems have most likely already been affected by climate change in irreversible ways. Furthermore, the IPCC emphasizes the importance of combining mitigation with adaptation strategies and argues that adaptation alone will not prevent widespread, dramatic, and irreversible impacts. Without mitigation, negative feedback loops caused by increasing CO2 levels may devastate the possibilities of viable human and animal adaptation, and substantial emissions reductions of CO2 that would approach zero emissions by the end of the 21st century would be required for mitigating the most severe impacts of climate change (IPCC 2014).

Although the IPCC itself claims to stay away from policy recommendations, the organization does make some broad (and relatively vague) suggestions about the importance of good governance, effective institutions, successful policymaking, and cooperation. Moreover, the IPCC suggests that policy diffusion across scales and sectors can aid in both mitigation and adaptation levels. Key actors in reigning in climate change, according to the IPCC include the UNFCCC, national governments, local governments, and the private sector (IPCC 2014). The latter two actors are lauded for the potential they can have on promoting adaptation in “communities, households, and civil society and in managing risk information and financing” (IPCC 2014, p. 29). And finally, the IPCC also acknowledges the importance of climate change as a threat to the broader goal of sustainable development (IPCC 2014).

*UNFCCC Discourses*

In December of 2015, UN member countries came together to draft a non-binding agreement regarding how countries should proceed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote adaptation to deal with climate change. The Paris Agreement is utilized here as the main focus of this analysis for a few reasons. Not only is it the most recent international agreement on climate change, but it also departs in important ways from previous agreements like the Kyoto Protocol, especially in its acknowledgement of the differentiated responsibilities of developed, developing, least developed, and small island states. The document also emphasizes the importance of technology sharing, equity, justice and even, perhaps surprisingly, the idea of a “just transition,” which considers how livelihoods will be impacted by climate change and mitigation strategies. Furthermore, the document recognizes the importance of recognizing cultural differences, affirms the importance of public participation/awareness and cooperation across scales of governance (Conference of the Parties 2015).

Overall, the main goal of the agreement is to mitigate climate change through a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions without negatively impacting food security or livelihoods, especially in least developed and developing economies. In this regard, mitigation and its role in enhancing adaptation capacity is emphasized throughout the agreement Importantly, the main responsibility for reducing greenhouse gas emissions falls on developed countries, and to a lesser extent, developing countries who should have assistance from developed economies in meeting their reduction goals. The voluntary nature of the agreement is also emphasized frequently (Conference of the Parties 2015).

Like the IPCC positions, the UNFCCC and the COP also endorse the importance of pursuing “sustainable development” as the background goal of climate change mitigation, adaptation, and vulnerability reduction. In terms of vulnerability, the agreement recognizes that developing and least developed countries are particularly vulnerable to the devastating effects of climate change. The document cites the urgency required to successfully assist these countries in mitigation and adaptation. Although developed countries are cited as having a responsibility to help less developed and developing countries, the Paris Agreement recognizes that,

Adaptation action should follow a country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory, and fully transparent approach, taking into consideration vulnerable groups, communities, and ecosystems, and should be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems, with a view to integrating adaptation into relevant socioeconomic and environmental policies and actions (Conference of the Parties 2015).

As evidenced by the emphasis on differentiated responsibility, participation, justice, equity, respect for gender, indigenous rights, and technology sharing, the differentiation between the responsibilities of developed and developing/least developed countries is emphasized in almost every section of the agreement. Moreover, the importance of state sovereignty is also emphasized in the context of increased reporting and transparency requirements and recommendations. As mentioned, these emphases are consistent with the coextensive emphasis on non-punitive measures and voluntary requirements. And finally, to be viable and come into force, the agreement must be signed by at least 55 member states (and these states combined must contribute at least 55% of world GHG emissions) within the period between April 22, 2016 and April 21, 2017 (Conference of the Parties, 2015).

The overall themes present in the 2015 Paris Agreement by the Conference of the Parties reflect a similar attitude as the IPCC findings, albeit with explicit policy prescriptions. The importance of differentiated responsibilities is emphasized frequently and throughout, as is the importance of combining both mitigation and adaptation strategies while respecting the national sovereignty of member countries. Furthermore, the goals of sustainable development, technological innovation, and continuing economic prosperity are all emphasized. Although the content of the Paris Agreement reflects the use of consensus and cooperation as a path toward addressing the problem of climate change, the tone of the document is neither urgent nor pessimistic. By contrast, the Paris Agreement does not engage in what Swyngedow and Bettini have referred to as the “apocalyptic” narrative of climate change, and demonstrates an optimism that if countries simply agree with one another, set goals, continue to cooperate, and finance innovation and adaptation, climate change will constitute a much less serious threat to global security and prosperity. The importance of these observations and the overall language used in the IPCC and UNFCCC contexts is analyzed further in the forthcoming “findings” section.

Discourse 2: Climate “Refugees”

Rather than attempt to broadly delineate the particular rationalities of governing that infiltrate the realm of international climate change politics from the most important organizations and agreements in the regime alone, I also delve into one particular discourse that flows through many scholarly and policymaking discussions of the potential effects of climate change, namely, the idea of “climate refugees.” Interestingly, however, the specific term “climate refugee” is nowhere to be found in the language of the Paris Agreement nor in the most recent reports by the IPCC. The UNHCR (The UN High Commissioner on Refugees) and the UNFCCC more generally, however, have acknowledged the importance of including environmental migration and environmentally displaced persons in their overall rhetoric about the risks of climate change.

The UNHCR, for example, acknowledges that climate change will cause rises in water and food scarcity. The organization emphasizes the inevitability of adaptive strategies and migration by already impoverished groups, where “such moves, or the adverse effects that climate change may have on natural resources, may spark conflict with other communities, as an increasing number of people compete for a decreasing amount of resources” (UNHCR 2016, n. pag). Since the term “refugee” is considered an official category of international law subject to very specific regulations and rules, the term is mostly avoided by organizations affiliated with the UN and other intergovernmental bodies. The terms “displaced person,” or “environmental migrant,” or “environmentally induced migration” are sometimes used, and it is also acknowledged by the UNHCR that actual refugees, especially those already internally displaced and living in extreme poverty in refugee camps outside of their home country may also be adversely affected by climate change. The term “forced” is also often added as the first word of the term in order to indicate the involuntary nature of the move (UNHCR 2016; Faist and Schade 2013). Furthermore, the term “environmental refugee” was used by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in the 1980s, in a report that characterized these refugees as “‘those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardised their existence and/or seriously affected their quality of life’” (El-Hinnawi 1985 qtd. in Faist and Schade 2013, p. 5). The IPCC has said that migration might be the last resort for people that do not have other options or the capacity to adapt to climate change (Faist and Schade 2013).

The Nansen Initiative constitutes a group of countries that consult with the UNHCR regarding "disaster-induced cross-border displacement,” which attempts to foster international cooperation, set standards for displaced people regarding their admission and status when they cross borders, and generate funding for the responses to climate-induced and disaster-induced migration. According to the Nansen Initiative,

While people displaced within their own countries are covered by national laws, international human rights law, [and] the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, a serious legal gap exists with regard to cross-border movements in the context of disasters and the effects of climate change. These people are in most cases not refugees under international refugee law, and human rights law does not address critical issues such as their admission, stay, and basic rights. The situation is exacerbated by operational and institutional shortcomings, such as lack of coherent institutional responses and effective inter-state as well as (sub-)regional cooperation (Nansen Initiative 2014).

Importantly, the Nansen Initiative explicitly rejects the usage of the term climate refugee, claiming that the term refugee refers to particular legal protections that would not be afforded to those fleeing environmental displacement. Indeed, the goal of this initiative and much of the discussion surrounding environmental displacement is oriented toward creating new legal mechanisms to protect these vulnerable groups (Nansen Initiative 2014).

According to many predictions, most climate refugees are expected to become internally displaced within their own countries (Biermann and Boas 2007), however other countries may disappear altogether and require evacuation/ relocation. As part of the UNFCCC, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) formed in 1990 and quickly earned a reputation at UN climate talks as a moral leader on climate change. Since its inception, AOSIS has maintained that “the inhabitants of small island and low lying coastal states, and coastal inhabitants of larger states (even in developed countries) will be the first to face the ultimate onslaught of the adverse consequences of human induced climate change” (AOSIS 2015, p. 13). The organization emphasizes that if the political will is cultivated, and mitigation is taken seriously, small island states still have the chance to survive, flourish, and embrace a global path toward sustainable development and sustainable living. The language of displaced persons and/or “refugees” is completely absent from the official statements of AOSIS, and instead the focus is on sustainable development, livelihood, self-determination, and community flourishing (AOSIS 2015).

The mainstream scholarly debate on the issue of climate or environmental refugees mostly involves discussions about the great deal of complexity of the issue itself (and how it has been simplified in international debates), over the predictions and potential numbers of future refugees, and finally, a small number have studies has utilized critical perspectives in order to determine the discourses used by the affected versus intergovernmental organizations and NGOs. Some of these perspectives have been termed alarmist, where the movement of people is attributed solely to their vulnerability and inability to adapt to their surroundings. These perspectives, although dominant in the field, tend to ignore the positive and empowering role that migration has historically served in many people’s lives (Faist and Schade 2013).

A relatively comprehensive proposal was put forth by Biermann and Boas (2007), which argues that the UNHCR is ill-equipped to deal with a 20 times larger number of refugees than they currently support. By contrast, their proposal calls for “large-scale, long-term planned resettlement programs for groups of affected people, mostly within their country” (Biermann and Boas 2007, p. 11). Likewise, they call on the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank to lead the way in developing protections for climate refugees, citing the fact that forced migration and lack of adaptive capacity constitutes a development issue first and foremost. In short, Biermann and Boas call for the explicit development of a new international regime to deal with the protecting and resettling climate refugees under the auspices of the UNFCCC, with help from the UNDP and the World Bank. In this way, the authors assert that the climate refugee regime will be tied to international climate policy, will be planned and voluntary (to avoid even greater destruction and potential loss of life from immediate threats), and will also be tailored to populations, villages, and even entire states (such as small islands), rather than individuals. Importantly, Biermann and Boas also support the use of the term refugee to describe persons displaced by climate change given the fact that these groups of people will be forcibly fleeing in fear due to the effects of climate change. And finally, the authors call for swift action given that the IPCC is able to somewhat accurately predict where the most damage and devastation due to sea level rise and other factors may occur. Waiting until 2050, when disaster may be immanent, Biermann and Boas argue, will be too late (Biermann and Boas 2007).

Moreover, the discourse on climate refugees is also influenced by a number of more critical voices, who see the production of the figure of the climate refugee as robbing small island states and their people of agency and prospects for self-determination. For example, McNamara and Gibson (2009) interviewed seven national ambassadors from small island states at the UN in New York and also analyzed official intergovernmental and NGO documents to determine how the subject category of climate refugee is produced, contested, and deployed. They find that “climate refugees” tend to be portrayed as threatened, helpless victims of external climatic and environmental changes out of their control. These environmental changes are portrayed as entirely caused by developed countries (McNamara and Gibson 2009). Additionally, the figure of the climate refugee is considered vulnerable, poor, passive, and possessing few resources that would aid in adaptation to climatic changes. In short, climate refugees are supposedly marked by “little internal capacity and resilience to remain in their homelands” (McNamara and Gibson 2009, p. 479). Echoing Swyngedouw (2011), McNamara and Gibson also argue that the language used in this discourse is apocalyptic, dramatic, and the idea of resettlement is seen as inevitable. By contrast, the ambassadors representing small island states tended to emphasize the fact that leaving their homelands was not a viable alternative to mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions. Importantly, “a key theme from the interviews with Pacific ambassadors was that focusing on migration instead of mitigation was not only defeatist but a globally irresponsible vision for the future” (McNamara and Gibson 2009, p. 480).

And finally, the importance of sovereignty and self-determination has also been emphasized by small island states in the context of the debate over climate refugees, in particular (McNamara and Gibson 2009). Biermann and Boas (2010) have defined climate refugees as “people who have to leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity” (p. 67). Farbotko and Lazrus (2011) critique this discourse on the grounds that the use of the world ‘habitat’ is condescending, wrongly assuming that people in the developing world (including indigenous populations) are always “rooted in the territory in which they live” (p. 384). In other words, though sovereignty and self-determination are vital articulations made by those who are themselves portrayed as future “climate refugees,” the dominant discourse surrounding this topic portrays these groups of people first and foremost as potential helpless victims in need of security, regardless of their desire to retain sovereign rights as peoples.

Findings: Reified Discourses or Open Assemblages of Power?

Overall, I identify four themes or trends present in the two discourses examined above regarding the governance of climate change, its production, and reproduction. Overall, there is evidence that while both discourses tend to reinforce the neoliberal idea of sustainable development, each does so in ways that are not fixed. The four themes are discussed and evaluated in terms of how they “produce the crisis of climate change and its subjects through both powerful refrains and truth claims.” Ultimately, I also evaluate whether or not these four narratives prove porous or, by contrast, if they have reified subject positions in a way that further entrenches current global configurations of power.

*Inequality and Differentiated Responsibilities*

The first trend worth analyzing I call the “inequality/differentiated responsibilities and burdens” narrative, which manifests in both the UNFCCC/IPCC discourse and the “climate refugee” discourse. While it is imperative that policymakers recognize that different groups, especially those who lack political, economic, and cultural power, are identified for their lack of power, the ways in which inequality and the idea of “differentiated responsibilities” (See Conference of the Parties 2015) becomes fixed and reified in the context of climate change governance becomes highly problematic. Indeed, by identifying “least developed” countries as victims rather than perpetrators of climate change, powerful actors bifurcate the world in a way that does not necessarily reflect reality nor the needs of those most vulnerable to climatic shifts around the globe, including those in the Global North. To be sure, by producing the victims of climate change as refugees (or displaced persons) in the Global South, the narrative of “differentiated responsibility” and inequality implies that the countries who house these vulnerable groups are less able to not only adapt to climate change, but also to speak about it and ultimately, to govern it. In other words, by discursively constructing certain countries as perpetrators and others as victims who lack agency and capacity, the less developed countries are produced as less than agents of change and more as passive observers of the processes and proposals governing climate change.

More specifically, for example, AOSIS perceives itself as a moralizing voice in international talks on climate change, bringing the stories and struggles of the people of its member countries to the forefront of climate talks, especially in Copenhagen and Paris (AOSIS 2015). Yet, why is this group of states and the ambassadors interviewed in McNamara and Gibson (2009) viewed in terms of their moral authority, rather than their scientific authority, adaptive capacity, and agency? The positionality of these small island states, and of other “less developed” states facing the multifaceted threats of climate charge often reproduce their own subject positions within global configurations of power.

The inequality/ differentiated responsibility theme also becomes complicit in the project of depoliticization of climate change governance in general. When the position of one country in the global power structure is produced and reproduced not only in language such as “developed vs developing vs less developed,” but also in the official documents of the Conference of the Parties itself, the likelihood that these less developed countries will be granted real authority in decisionmaking processes in intergovernmental decisionmaking bodies is lessened. The position of states in the global order is naturalized by the discourses of climate change that constitute some actors as victims and others as agents of change/ problem-solvers/ policy makers. Truth claims, not only about the science of climate change itself, but about the proper solutions (sustainable development, adaptive capacity, and resettlement) are managed and produced from the top. Powerful developed countries are able, then, to set the terms of debate not only because they possess more material and financial resources to fund projects like resettlement and development, but also because they have consistently been positioned as “developed,” “the North,” “industrialized,” “capitalist,” and “innovative/rational/scientific.” The process of producing subjects, in short, requires particular framings that influence how groups relate to one another, while also reifying the power relations between those groups, at least temporarily (Foucault 1982).

Lastly, the “differentiated responsibilities” narrative does not necessarily prove inaccurate in that, clearly, “developed” and “developing” countries have contributed a great deal more to causing climate change than “less developed” countries and economies. The problem relates to the fact that responsibilities include much more than reducing carbon emissions and technology sharing, at least implicitly and in practice. The “developed” and “developing” world retains primary responsibility for mitigation, but also for dictating the terms of agreement themselves, since they are painted as the parties making deep economic changes and sacrifices. The “least developed” economies, by contrast, are told that they too must try to cut carbon emissions. They are left to hope that developed economies and their governments around the world hold up their voluntary agreements; they lack agency, expertise (or are at least perceived to lack expertise), and discursive resources to dictate the terms of the agreement in any substantial way.

*Adaptation and Mitigation*

The second theme identified via the above analysis is the focus on adaptation/mitigation. As Farbotko and Lazrus (2011) have noted, the idea of forced displacement is rarely if ever considered a key aspect of adaptation strategy in the face of climate change. Despite this omission in the adaptation strategy discourse, however, migration has proven a key strategy for many groups fleeing crisis throughout history. Moreover, the discourses above seem to fluctuate about which strategy for addressing climate change is paramount. The IPCC and the Paris Agreement both try to balance their respective emphases on adaptation and mitigation. For the IPCC, for example, adaptation may prove difficult if it does not coincide with drastic reductions in GHG emissions (IPCC 2014). For the Paris Agreement, mitigation and adaptation are key components, where mitigation requires non-binding voluntary participation on the part of at least 55 countries, and adaptation requires technology sharing with, sustainable development, and investment in “less developed” countries (Conference of the Parties 2015).

At the other end of the spectrum, those facing potential resettlement on islands and coastlines that may disappear altogether tend to emphasize mitigation instead of adaptation. In short, this narrative suggests that those responsible for climate change are also morally responsible for saving the homelands and livelihoods of those who have barely contributed to the problem. Adaptation, relocation, and shift in lifestyle are not seen as viable options by these so-called “vulnerable” groups and small island states (See McNamara and Gibson 2009; Farbotko and Lazrus 2011). At the same time, however, a contradiction exists despite a perception by the IPCC and COP of the importance of combining and balancing mitigation with adaptation strategies. This contradiction is visible and requires analysis of the third and fourth narratives that manifest in the above climate change discourses.

*Inevitability, Cooperation, and Consensus*

The third and fourth themes present in the analyzed discourses have already been mentioned and they are intimately tied to one another. The implied inevitability of climate change mentioned by Swyngedouw (2011) is clearly present in the dominant discourses of climate change, including the IPCC’s emphasis on effects of climate change already being felt and the emphasis of Biermann and Boas (2007) on the urgent need for a climate refugee regime. At the same time, however, this inevitability fosters a lack of urgency, and a lack of real political discussion and debate. The idea of climate change and its effects becomes naturalized—a problem to be dealt with by the parties that have the power to do so—rather than a topic of vigorous debate that requires the imagining of alternative futures (See Swyngedouw 2011). At the same time, the emphasis at the Conference of the Parties in Paris in 2015 was not based on dissensus and disagreement, but rather on the development of consensus, cooperation, and agreement (See Conference of the Parties 2015). In this regard, mitigation acts as a policy objective that must fit within the confines of the current global configurations of power, including the neoliberal ethos of economic growth, which is also largely consistent with the concept and objective of sustainable development. Adaptation, in turn, acts as a narrative for helping the helpless victims of the inevitable destructiveness of climate change, rather than a last resort.

In short, the two goals of adaptation and mitigation work in tandem to mask the relatively feeble and voluntary attempts at GHG emission decreases and the implied inevitability of climate change, respectively. Furthermore, climate change is deployed as a phenomenon that is subject to infinite human control, a fact that may be denied at least partially by the IPCC, but which is also contradicted by their so-called “neutral policy recommendations,” recommendations which can help mitigate the destructiveness of future climatic change (IPCC 2014).

Radical Pluralism & Re-Subjectivizing Ourselves: Ecological and Democratic Subjectivities

Given that the subjects of climate change governance are produced via powerful discourses of development, neoliberalism, and victimhood, it is difficult to understand how these presumably rigid subject categories might be rejected and re-inscribed in more meaningful, ecological, and pluralistic/democratic directions. As Foucault himself has demonstrated, however, subjects do not exist apart from their production, and that production is always subject to negotiation, contestation, and at times, outright rejection (See Foucault 1978).

At base, the failure of dominant climate change discourses to foster political will and genuine urgency on the part of both powerful and disempowered groups demonstrates the emptiness of the subjects that neoliberalism itself is capable of producing. Although threatened groups, especially AOSIS parties and others who live in flood-prone parts of the world have attempted to assert their rights to self-determination and sovereignty, they assert these identities in a context that has already coded them as victims, as vulnerable beings incapable of sufficient adaptation and resilience. By implicitly embodying their own victimhood through discourses of self-determination and identity, these groups, although correct in asserting their right to continued existence and flourishing, may be inadvertently re-inscribing the same subject-positions that keep them relatively powerless against so-called “developed countries.” Moreover, the implicit acceptance of drastic and irreversible climate change as a phenomenon that is likely to occur only reinforces its depoliticization.

Just as certain subjects are produced and reproduced by the above discourses of climate change, however, other types of political subjects remain latent, including democratic and ecological subjects of climate change governance. Those whom adaptation strategies are most designed to assist remain depoliticized subjects, perceived as incapable of real agency and embodying moral rather than political claims. Politics, for theorists like Jaques Rancière does not come from agreement and consensus, but rather, from disagreement, the cultivation of dissensus and the making of claims on the “part of those who have no part” (Rancière 1999).

Subjects are always produced, never existing a priori to an articulation, and the dominant articulations of climate change currently disempower rather than empower those who stand to lose the most from climate change. In fact, native communities in the Arctic, for example, are completely disregarded as legitimate voices on the subject of climate change in the most powerful arenas for the production of climate change as a problem with a specific set of status quo solutions.

Importantly, the figure of the “climate refugee” constitutes only a single example of the ways in which climate change is produced as a socio-ecological problem with particularized subjects. In this regard, though, the figure of the climate refugee, the poverty-stricken, vulnerable human fleeing from floodwaters inland or to other countries provides an example of what Wendy Brown (1995) has called the installation of “injury as identity” inscribed in law. Brown, in her work, *States of Injury* provides a compelling argument against identity politics, not because identity is meaningless (although it is fluid, unfixed, and constructed), but because identity politics actually limits the practices of freedom. Again, for Brown, identity politics represents a desire not for freedom, but for protection, and this desire for protection simply re-inscribes a particular identity as injured. Injury itself marks an identity; the subject becomes incapable of articulating desires outside of a particular identity category, in other words (Brown 1995).

Also relevant in Brown’s critique of identity politics is the fact that its rise coincided with the decline of critiques of capitalism (Brown 1995). At base, then, identity is produced not only by those claiming that identity, but by powerful discourses that render identities historically relevant and meaningful for particular purposes. In the above discourses of climate change, the identity of the climate refugee becomes co-produced with the narrative that climate change is manageable within the current framework of neoliberal capitalism. Those most affected by climate change are boxed into arguments that are of a moral and identity-based nature, rather than political claims that question the role of the neoliberal capitalist system in their lives or the production of their own identity as victims.

In sum, then, Wendy Brown’s proposed alternative to identity politics relates to the practicing of freedom through political claims. Namely, Brown argues that political claims that assert “I want this for us,” where the desire is the collective good, may be a better alternative toward genuine plural and radical democratic politics than claims that assert an identity, which is portrayed as fixed (Brown 1995). In short, the fact that identity politics often makes claims based on the fact that a particular identity is injured only serves to re-entrench that identity as injured. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the construction of climate change as both apocalyptic yet manageable, inevitable yet able to be mitigated serves particular purposes, including the depoliticization of the phenomenon itself. Climate change becomes everything and nothing. The contradictory and paradoxical nature of the claims made by powerful actors in the regime of climate change governance are exposed as meaningless, empty signifiers that serve to produce a phenomenon that is not problematic for the status quo, but instead, manageable and requiring no substantive change in the status quo.

Likewise, the figure of the climate refugee also reveals itself as an empty identity, produced from a desire to depoliticize certain types of claims and elevate moral and identity claims at the expense of a critique of capitalism or a multiplicity of identities all calling for GHG emissions mitigation instead of adaptation and relocation. Of course, the identities of the inhabitants of these small island states is not unimportant to their livelihoods, lifestyles, and values, but most of the representatives of these states also reject the identity of climate refugee as incompatible with their continued existence.

Conclusions and Future Research

This research has attempted to understand how climate change governance is produced through particular discourses that privilege certain actors over others and how climate change discourses produce particular subjectivities that only reinforce existing global political configurations of power. Through a post-structuralist lens, this work has begun the task of illuminating how climate change governance, in particular, has lost its sense of urgency and how climate change itself has become a naturalized and depoliticized phenomenon capable of human management and control.

Moreover, this research has aimed at understanding how particular subjectivities amiable to a neoliberal ethos and the status quo of neoliberal capitalism are produced through particular discourses of climate change, a commitment to its inevitability, a commitment to consensus based politics, and a commitment to mitigation and adaptation as paradoxical yet complementary strategies for dealing with the problem of climate change.

And finally, this research begins to question the production of subjectivity based on particular identities inscribed as injured, following Wendy Brown’s work. In short, I argue that examining the particular discourses that disempower particular subjects of governance illuminates the fragility of these identities and the constructed basis and limited options for actions under neoliberalism upon which they are based. Finally, although identity is vital to an understanding of ourselves and our world, when the production of identity coincides with and is generated by those with the most power to determine the direction of climate change politics, it begins to function as a limiting factor on the possibilities of subjectivity itself. As Wendy Brown asserts, the future of democratic politics and meaningful engagement with the political depends on the ability of humans to speak and act on their desires for the common good, rather than on their ontological status as members of particular injured identities.

Future research will attempt to navigate how post-epistemological and post-ontological proclamations of desire for the collective good can enhance the prospects of radical democratic pluralism and the creation of fluid subjectivities outside of the neoliberal ethos.

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