"Radical Imaginature" Discursive Possibilities to Re-Politicize Climate Change

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Radical "Imaginature"

Discursive Possibilities to Re-Politicize Climate Change

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Introduction

Climate change refers to the alteration of long-run weather patterns and is the most challenging crisis humanity is facing in the twenty-first century (Weber, 2015, p. 561). Natural, social and climate systems are interconnected, and climate change has irreversible effects (IPCC, 2022, p. 7). Regarding human-induced climate change, atmospheric emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) are the most important cause (IPCC, 2022, pp. 128-130). General scientific agreement exists on the irresponsibility of continuing with the status quo (Weber, 2015, p. 567). Given the accelerating scope of the crisis, meaningful action in the present is urgent. Drastic cuts in GHG emissions present the only opportunity for humanity to prevent the climate apocalypse (Mishra et al., 2020, p. 174). But so far, emissions and the concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere keep rising (De Cock et al., 2021). To tackle the crisis, hinderances to meaningful climate change action need to be examined.

To understand impediments to climate change action, characteristics rendering it such a complex undertaking, are outlined. Here, uncertainty, globality and long operating time scales are identified as underlying the issue's complexity. These features are what many assertions regarding deficient responses embed their explanations in. To start off, scientific consensus exists about the reality of climate change and human responsibility for it (Steffen, 2011, p. 26). But because climate is the outcome of an obscure geo-atmospheric-ecological system, projections involve assumptions and scientific specifications deviate, complicating the determination of appropriate responses (Constantino & Weber, 2021, p. 152; Dryzek et al., 2011, p. 4). Moreover, climate change spans geographic scales concerning human contribution, mitigation and adaptation efforts, and effects (Farber, 2011, p. 479). The globality aspect of climate change is regarded as resulting in scaling problems concerning its governance, thus involving complex coordination (Farber, 2011, p. 479). Further, climate change is caused by a complex system of past, present, and future decisions, irreversible in character (Constantino & Weber, 2021, p. 153). Responsibility and effect are therefore not only spatially but temporally fragmented, complicating management (Constantino & Weber, 2021, p. 153). Therefore, scientific uncertainty, globality and long planning horizons characterize climate change as a complex issue.

But climate change is not merely an environmental phenomenon difficult to manage because of its complex character. It also presents an issue inherently political in nature (Hulme, 2015,

p. 894). Whether or not to act upon climate change is a political choice and political choices always involve making judgements on the facts (Arendt, 1958, p. 3). Intrinsic to such judgment of facts is a formulation of meaning, thus an interpretation based on existing knowledge, experience, and emotions (Hulme, 2015, p. 894). Here, discourses are regarded as social cues. Social discourses are "representations and systems of meaning", giving sense and context to an issue (Dryzek, 2022, pp. 11-12). What people make out of environmental affairs, thus how they think about and interpret facts, differs and a plurality of environmental discourses exists (Dryzek, 2022, p. 12). Diverging perceptions regarding causes, human responsibility, and strategies to address the climate crisis, result in different goals for action (Hulme, 2015, pp. 899-900). Contextually and historically contingent, dominance of specific discourses is not fixed. Generally, when acting upon collective issues like climate change, certain conditions are theorized to affect engagement (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 123). Social discourses can be regarded important ideational social facts conditioning engagement. Considering hitherto deficient responses to climate change, the workings of social discourses in hindering meaningful action are assessed in this paper.

To begin with, literature on hinderances to climate change action is reviewed. Here, accounts referring to human cognition are contrasted against those locating barriers to action at the structural level, namely (current) capitalism. Then, the eco-socialist argument of capitalism being systemically dependent on the exploitation of the environment, is used as a theoretical starting point. Attentive to capitalism's integral impediments to action, a critical theory approach is adopted to assess the workings of social discourses in this regard. The climate change action proposed and legitimized by different environmental discourses is assessed. Then, the engagement with the issue facilitated by the discourses themselves, is illuminated as being predominately apolitical. Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony is applied to theorize how the depoliticization of climate change is a manifestation of the maintenance of capitalism. The argument is made that a common sense organizes discourses, collectively creating and reflecting a depoliticizing consensus on climate change that needs to be countered. Here, concepts of depoliticization and re-politicization are drawn upon to outline what form this countering discourse might take. Discursive space for re-imagining the nature-human relationship is needed, re-politicizing climate change in radically imaginative terms.

Human or structural: Literature on hinderances to climate change action

Scholars offer different accounts explaining hitherto deficient responses to climate change. In the following review, academic assessments referring to human cognition are contrasted against assessments identifying structural workings as hindering climate change action.

Human barrier: Cognition as an obstacle to climate change action

Academic accounts identifying human functioning as the barrier to action commonly refer to the complex character of climate change as overburdening the capacities of the human brain. Thus, cognitive mechanisms, especially in their socially conditioned form, are considered here the hinderance to meaningful responsive action.

To begin with, humans are considered as being most concerned with issues of present, immediate, and personal relevance (Slovic, 1982). Because of its complex character, climate change is trumped cognitively by other issues, like economic welfare (Dryzek et al., 2011, p. 8). Being temporally and spatially discounted as a future and faraway risk, inaction follows (Gifford, 2011, p. 292). Also, the perception humans have of the control they hold, is seen as affecting the motivation to act upon an issue (Huebner & Lipsey, 1981; Ajzen, 2002). Perceiving responses as senseless in the face of the scope and complexity of climate change, accompanying discouragement is hindering action (O'Connor et al., 1998). Operational paralysis is considered as following from feelings of hopelessness in the light of the inevitability of the climate catastrophe, thus inducing passivity (Pihkala, 2018, p. 549). Further, the desire for certainty is a human characteristic considered an obstacle to climate change action (Weber, 2015, pp. 564-565). Here, a psychological status quo bias is at play if climate change action is perceived as containing potential negative consequences which cannot be predicted (Weber, 2015, p. 567). In line with this, habit is regarded a hinderance to action (Hobson, 2003). Again, a status quo bias is present because of the resistant character of human habitual behavior and the perceived uncertainty inherent in alternative behaviors (Weber, 2015, p. 568). In sum, the cognitive workings of the human brain, in combination with the complexity of climate change, are considered as hindering meaningful responses. While always at play regarding human engagement and disengagement, cognition is not determining action in a homogenous way (Wyer & Srull, 1986, p. 322). Instead, cognition is mostly considered within social contexts to assess human obstacles to climate change action.

Thus, the workings of social cognition are assessed as hindering climate change action. For instance, ideologies and worldviews are studied as determining a ranking of values, inducing which action initiatives individuals consider important (Gifford, 2011, p. 293). Here, humans are explained as only acknowledging risks and crises when aligning with their value structure. Thus, individuals only decide to interpret, and act upon risks, if coherent with the ideologies and worldviews they adhere to (Hornsey & Fielding, 2020, p. 9). Also, social, and institutional trust is reckoned a cognitive pillar for bringing about support and behaviors in line with climate change action (Smith & Mayer, 2018, p. 149). Individuals must trust others not to take advantage of actions without contributing themselves, the effectiveness and well-intentioned nature of pursued strategies, and in the honesty and accuracy of institutions coordinating such action (Gifford, 2011, p. 295). Distrust towards scientists and political decision-makers but also distrust towards other states' intentions is theorized here as impeding action. (Gifford, 2011, p. 295). Predicted inequity, fearing to be tricked by free riders while carrying the burden of climate change action, is another facet of this explanation, and common academic argument explaining deficient responses to climate change (Smith & Mayer, 2018, pp. 149-150). Oftentimes assumed to require collective action, cognitive workings in social settings are given particular importance when reasoning hinderances to climate change action.

Cognition and especially social cognition are assessed to elucidate passiveness regarding climate change. But climate change is not a phenomenon "out there", experienced by individuals and social groups in determined ways, following law-like explanations. Cognitive functioning is an aspect in but also product of complex and dynamic social systems (Constantino & Weber, 2021, p. 152). The present insight is that obstacles to climate change action are not necessarily human but social in character. Here, discourses come to the picture. The workings of cognition are heavily involved in the meaning-making but also apprehending of discourses (Van Dijk, 1990, p. 164). Therefore, assessing the role of social discourses in hindering climate change action moves away from deterministic understandings of cognition, while entailing notions of cognitive workings. Cognitive workings are also not detached from structural forces at play in social settings. The following body of literature considers aspects, or systemic workings of (current) capitalism as hindering climate change action.

Structural barrier: (Current) capitalism as an obstacle to climate change action

Structural workings facilitated by the predominant economic order of capitalism are commonly identified to hinder climate change action (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021, p. 309). Capitalism is defined here as an "economic system in which the production of goods and services is motivated by expected profits, materializing in market exchange" (Beckert, 2013, p. 327). The notion of capitalism hindering climate change action is based on the argument that the (current) system is the root cause of the crisis. Steffen et al. (2015) demonstrate that capitalism and concomitant human economic activities became pervasive enough to have planetary environmental effects only with extensive capitalist expansion following World War II (p. 93). The "Great Acceleration trends" of human activity brought about the "coupling of socio-economic and biophysical systems at a planetary scale" (Croeser, 2021, pp. 7-8). Under the doctrine of the neoliberal globalization process following the crisis of the global economy in the mid-1970s, further expansion and intensification of capitalism came with unsuitable consumption patterns and environmentally detrimental means of production and transportation (Williams, 1996). Climate change is regarded a symptom resulting from exacerbated and ongoingly increasing GHG emissions accompanying capitalism as it presently functions (Croeser, 2021, p. 14). Proponents of green growth, degrowth, and eco-socialism agree that the current workings of the capitalist system underlie the climate crisis but disagree on the extent to which it structurally hinders climate change action. Therefore, these ecopolitical accounts differ in the extensiveness of change to the system (or beyond), they deem necessary to meaningfully respond to climate change (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021, p. 308).

A green economy is defined "as one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities" (UNEP, 2011, p. 16). For advocates of green growth, this is a project that involves "getting the economy right" (UNEP, 2011, p. 16). Here, economic growth is analytically "decoupled" from environmental destruction, pollution generation and so forth (Wanner, 2014, pp. 29-30). Green growth proponents are critical of the way capitalism functions currently but argue that a green economy is generally compatible with the existing, capitalist logic (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021, p. 309). Moreover, the stabilization of the climate is seen as a prerequisite for continuing growth and capitalist interest in the effort therefore high (Kenis & Lievens, 2015, p. 221). Thus, not the systemic logic of capitalism is regarded as hindering climate change action but specific malfunctions following from insufficient regulation of the market. The hinderances to climate change action can therefore be addressed within the framework of

the prevailing economic system, capitalism. By restructuring policies, regulating the market, and creating incentives for innovations and investments, current obstacles to climate change action may be bypassed (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021, p. 313). Central here is the integration of ecological concerns with economic strategies, without rejecting the systemic logic of capitalism (Fiorino, 2018, p, 189). The introduction of a carbon price presents an exemplary green growth policy (Bowen & Hepburn, 2014, p. 420). The project of green growth originated with environmental economics but has arrived at mainstream policymaking (Wanner, 2014, p. 22). Thus, accepting current market malfunctions and finding solutions at a surface level, a profound assessment of systemic hinderances is neglected.

Whereas green growth advocates regard economic growth and a sustainability to be generally accordant, degrowth proponents see an inherent incompatibility. Thus, they consider the extent to which the current workings of capitalism hinder climate change action in more extensive terms. The capitalist drive for unlimited growth and maximization of profit is identified as necessarily bringing about accelerating emissions of greenhouse gases (Löwy et al., 2022, p. 56). Therefore, the productivist logic of capitalism's current working is seen as incompatible with addressing climate change, so hindering action. But perceptions regarding the centrality of growth to capitalism differ, resulting in disagreement among degrowth advocates whether the logic of growth can be overcome within the capitalist order (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2021, p. 313). Whether one characteristic, the drive for endless growth, or the system inherently hinders climate change action, remains unsettled. Generally, degrowth is aimed at achieving sustainable and equitable societies without endless economic growth, and production and consumption matching human needs, not wants. But because degrowth advocates miss to challenge the capitalist system in general by focusing on one characteristic, notions of ideal alternatives remain underdeveloped (Koch et al., 2017). Not offering a structural alternative but instead eco-social policy options to implement, the logic of growth is perceived as systemic hinderance to climate change action, but not necessarily the capitalist system itself.

Eco-socialist understandings determine the extent to which the capitalist system hinders climate change action in most extensive terms. Here, capitalism is regarded as being the driver of climate change "by virtue of its very nature" (Fraser, 2021, p. 98). Eco-socialists regard capitalism as "crisis ridden but also crisis dependent" and therefore structurally unsuitable for ecological sustainability (O'Connor, 2021, p. 21). Capitalism is perceived not merely as economic system but "institutionalized social order" (Fraser, 2021, p. 100). The argument is

that capitalism inherently depends on "non-economic" conditions to function (Fraser, 2021, p. 100). Relying on systemic domination, the exploitation of nature is only one instance of this (Brownhill et al., 2021, p. 3). The undermining of climate change action is explained with capitalism's structural responsibility for and dependency on environmental exploitation. Thus, only deep transformation, a system beyond capitalism, presents a possibility for impeding complete ecological collapse (Fraser, 2021, p. 98).

Reviewing literature giving reason to hitherto deficient responses to climate change, the gained insights are summarized. Engagement and disengagement must be seen as socially conditioned. This is illustrated by assessments of human barriers to action, pointing towards socially conditioned operations of cognition. While cognitive workings are always involved, the obstacle to climate change action is considered social, not human in character. Fundamentally, an assessment of hinderances to climate change action must be attentive to the workings of capitalism. In this paper, a critical analytical approach is adopted and eco-socialist insights as an instance of this extended. Thus, assessing environmental discourses as reflecting social facts conditioning engagement with climate change, is of interest. Attentive to the workings of the capitalist order and considering hitherto deficient climate change action, the following research question is posed:

How do environmental discourses hinder climate change action?

As established by eco-socialism, capitalism is systemically dependent on the continued exploitation of nature. Because serious climate change action cannot take place within the capitalist system, deficient responsive action can be regarded a symptom of capitalism's structural maintenance (Fraser, 2021). Eco-socialists are criticized for not offering sufficient insights on how an alternative to capitalism can be achieved, thus how this structural maintenance can be disrupted (Albert, 2023). Fraser (2021, pp. 126-127) identifies a new eco-political common sense, trans-environmental and anti-capitalist in nature, as a possibility to become translated into an undertaking countering capitalist hegemony and bringing about eco-societal transformation. Moving towards a common sense like this requires an in-depth understanding of the functioning of a current common sense. Assessing environmental discourses as social conditions upholding the capitalist structure, reflects the academic contribution of this paper.

Raising awareness of how discourses are conditioned to facilitate apolitical engagement, collectively depoliticizing climate change and therefore hindering action, presents prescriptive opportunities for discursive undertakings. Diagnosed workings can be a starting point to theorize about possibilities to re-politicize climate change. Offering discursive political space, facilitating debate about meanings given to human-nature relationships, radical alternatives might be perceived, articulated, and discussed. This is of interest to eco-socialists, as it might help them overcome the criticism expressed.

Critical perspective: Climate change action and environmental discourses

Critical theory as an analytical approach is adopted and contrasted against problem-solving theory by referring to Cox's (1981) distinction. Then, eco-socialism as an instance of critical theory is elaborated upon. These theoretical positions are used to conceptualize climate change action in radical terms. Elaborating on the concept of social discourse, attention is given to its performative function. Environmental discourses are considered as proposing and legitimizing specific forms of climate change action but also facilitating engagement with the issue in themselves.

Critical theory analysis

Critical and problem-solving theory as analytical approaches are not inevitably mutually exclusive but can be seen as different normative decisions theorists take. Whereas the former challenges the status-quo, problem-solving theorists perceive existing conditions as a given, thus work within and reinforce them (Croeser, 2021, p. 33). Problem-solving theory generally accepts the world as it finds it, and existing institutions and power relations are considered the fixed framework for action (Cox, 1981, p. 128). Aiming at making these institutions and relationships work, specific problems and their possible solutions are the theoretical undertaking (Cox, 1981, p. 129). To find solutions, an issue becomes analytically reduced to a limited number of variables. Guiding tactical actions, patterns in the workings of social facts are not questioned, thus the particular takes precedence over the general or structural (Cox, 1981, pp. 129-130).

Critical theory generally targets notions of positivism (Agger, 1991, p. 106). Institutions, orders, and assumptions of reality and rationality are not seen as definite but called into question by assessing their origins, contradictions, and continuing workings (Cox, 1981, p.

129). Perceiving social facts as historically contingent, they are always up for change (Agger, 1991, p. 109). Thus, social realities are approached from a perspective that goes beyond the existing order and aims at offering insights into the range of alternatives that exist (Cox, 1981, p. 130). From a critical perspective, assuming fixity of social facts is considered a bias of problem-solving theory. Value-laden in the way it accepts a current order as its own framework for theoretical inquiry, it cannot be regarded an objective approach (Cox, 1981, p. 130). Critical theorists are also not unbiased, but do not claim to be. Instead, the theorists' embeddedness in a historical order is a central consideration, supposed to be continuously transcended by expanding consciousness about this order (Cox, 1981, p. 135). Thus, critical theorists aim to create knowledge and sensibility about the forces constituting historically contingent frameworks for action (Agger, 1991, p. 106). Here, the concept of dialectical imagination offers insights into critical theory understandings of historical change (Jay, 1973). The world is viewed regarding its potentials for transformation (Agger, 1991, p. 109). Thus, contradictions of the existing order must be acknowledged and understood to be transcended into alternative visons. Critical theorists perceive this to be their undertaking, thus substantially contributing to possibilities of change.

In sum, from a critical point of view, action is never completely unrestrained but happens within a framework. This framework constitutes the context of possibilities and constraints, but does not directly determinate people's actions (Cox, 1981, p. 135). Constituted by a combination of material conditions, human institutions, and ideational patterns, coherence is created (Cox, 1981, p. 135). The structure within which action takes place (or not) is to be examined. The workings of discourses exemplify social forces contributing to the framework for action which seems to hinder meaningful climate change action.

Eco-socialism as an instance of critical theory

Eco-socialist theory is a particular critical approach, apparent in the way contradictions of the capitalist order are examined. The capitalistic dependency on environmental exploitation underlies the argument considering systemic workings hindering climate change action (Croeser, 2021, p. 33). Functioning as the theoretical steppingstone of this paper, eco-socialist insights concerning this internal contradiction are outlined. Classical Marxist crisis theory situates capitalism's first internal contradiction between relations of production, tending to grow in productivity, and productive forces, characterized by limits (Young, 1976, pp. 196-200). This underlies the argument of system change as the only solution to conflicting workings

of capitalism (O'Connor, 2021, p. 16). For present purposes, the second internal contradiction identified by eco-socialist scholarship is of interest. The exploitation of "nature" being one of capitalism's "conditions of production" is seen as contradictive (O'Connor, 2021, pp. 20-21). The pollution and destruction of ecosystems, and the exhaustion of natural resources, that capitalisms' functioning is dependent on, is seen as inevitably leading to a "realization crisis", in form of ecological catastrophe and underproduction (O'Connor, 2021, p. 21-22). The present global ecological crisis, and climate change as an instance of this, is regarded a symptom of this second contradiction of capitalism (Saito, 2021, p. 137). Being crisis-ridden but also crisis-dependent, solutions cannot come from within the system. Thus, this underlies the insufficiency of any effort regarding climate change not aimed at system change (O'Connor, 2021, p. 23).

Climate change action

Ecological crisis being a symptom of capitalism's second internal contradiction, a different socio-economic system presents the only solution (Croeser, 2021, p. 118). Climate change action is therefore conceptualized in radical terms and contrasted against individualist and reformist understandings. Given the scale of transformations needed, climate change action transcends what is possible to bring about at an individual level (Croeser, 2021, p. 112). Instead, climate change action needs to be collective in nature. Most importantly, action must target "the economic, political and social systems and institutions that are responsible" to be regarded meaningful (Croeser, 2021, p. 112. Changing individual behavior, for instance in form of environmentally conscious consumption, does not address the root cause of global warming (Jensen, 2019).

Led by the idea that global capitalism can be reformed to address climate change effectively, moderate climate change action is occupied with managing specific issues at a surface level (Croeser, 2021, p. 117). This form of action aligns with problem-solving ideas. Some eco-socialists regard those reformist actions as important transitionary measures (Albert, 2023). But from a critical lens, supporting policy solutions within the capitalist system entrenches capitalist relations, reinforcing the order climate change is rooted in, and undermining an imagination beyond these systemic forces (Wanner, 2015, pp. 35-36). Coming with an awareness for crises deriving from structural exploitation, radicalism is aimed at getting to the root of issues, striving for fundamental change (Khasnabish, 2020, p. 1718). Overall, only responses to global warming dealing with capitalism as the singular cause, thus aimed at socio-

economic transformation, can be regarded meaningful climate change action (Löwy et al., 2022, p. 56).

Social discourses and environmental discourses

Generally, discourses can be considered "systems of meaning" (Dryzek, 2022, pp. 11). These meanings portray a somewhat coherent understanding and interpretation of a matter (p. 12). Central to the way humans perceive and think through issues, social discourses are omnipresent (Lakhoff, 2010). Embedded in language, a discourse gives context and meaning to uses of words (Fairclough, 2001). Also social in character, a discourse displays shared comprehension (Dryzek, 2022, p. 9). Environmental discourses concern the relationship between humans and the environment, thus reflecting and conditioning the way environmental affairs are defined, interpreted, and addressed (Dryzek, 2022, p. 12). Meanings given to climate change are embedded (Almiron & Xifra, 2019, p. 107). Portraying "constructions of stories", an environmental discourse entails a relatively consistent comprehension of climate change and solutions to it (Dryzek, 2022, p. 12).

Social discourses have certain functions by which they represent and construct the meaning, they entail. Because "every way of seeing is a way of omitting", a specific discourse always directs the view away from another meaning given (Almiron & Xifra, 2019, p. 107). Inevitably discrediting other realities, a discourse legitimizes its system of perceiving (Angenot, 2010, pp. 65-69). The meaning presented accordingly legitimizes, values, and proposed certain practices (Angenot, 2010, pp. 107-108). Therefore, an environmental discourse is a social cue, giving meaning to climate change, and proposing and legitimizing certain forms of responsive action. This always entails the hiding of other perceptions and alternative ways of reacting.

Besides proposing and legitimizing certain climate change action, environmental discourses themselves also represent engagement with the issue. This is considered another aspect of discourse's performative function. Here, political engagement is contrasted against every form of involvement that cannot be regarded as such. Political engagement involves "critique and rebellion against political goals, structures and processes that keep contributing to climate change" (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 125). To be regarded political engagement, discursive space must be offered to question existing configurations of social order (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 124). In contrast, apolitical engagement is determined and constrained by existing establishments in a top-down manner and is therefore "invited" (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 124).

Here, the objective of engagement is regarded as being defined extrinsically. While apolitical engagement aligns and is invited by the order of the status quo, political engagement enables the questioning and targeting of this very structure (Swyngedouw, 2011, pp. 268-269).
Another conceptual nuance to political engagement is introduced. Imagination is considered a crucial aspect of the fundamentally political and always collective […] labor of reweaving the social world" (Khasnabish, 2020, p. 1720). Radical imagination describes the ability to envision the world as it might be otherwise (Khasnabish, 2020, p. 1718). For discourses to facilitate political engagement with climate change, discursive space must be present to perceive socio-ecological alternatives to the status quo, thus imagine nature-human relationships radically.

Critical theory applied; environmental discourses assessed

From a critical perspective, a configuration of forces (or potentials) in the shape of material capabilities, institutions, and ideas, constitute a historically contingent structure (Cox, 1981, p. 135). As stated, this order does not determine human behavior but constitutes a framework for action (Cox, 1981, p. 135). Discourses, considered social facts, present the opportunity to assess an instance of this framework. In the following, academic insights on the plurality of existing environmental discourses, giving meaning to climate change and proposing responsive action, are assessed. With a critical lens, attention is given to discursive patterns identified.

Climate change action proposed and legitimized, and engagement facilitated

Environmental discourses are performative in the sense that certain actions follow from, and are legitimized by, the interpretation of an issue the discourse entails (Angenot, 2010, pp. 107-108). Therefore, which form of climate change action the following discourses imply, is assessed. Further, discourses have more far-fetching conditioning implications in the way they function performatively and facilitate engagement with climate change in themselves. Most of the environmental discourses are identified to propose and legitimize reformist climate change action while epitomizing apolitical engagement with the issue. The collective discursive workings are reflected upon afterwards.

Climate change individualized and moralized: Personal and local action

The first discourse assessed, considers environmental wellbeing the responsibility of individuals. Attention is given to personal behaviors and their impact on the environment.

Therefore, consumption patterns and transportation methods deemed environmentally unfriendly are criticized (Flanagan & Raphael, 2022, p. 7). Calling for private-sphere engagement, the act of purchasing an electric car, exemplifies the legitimized responsive action (Hoppner & Whitmarsh, 2011, pp. 61-62). Proposing that climate change may be remedied through individual actions, discursively calls for and legitimizes action not addressing the cause, nor matching the scope of the climate crisis (Croeser, 2021, p. 112).

The second discourse expands the assumptions of the previous one to small-scale collectives. Again, individuals are considered as causing environmental issues. But these problems are perceived as demanding local action to be resolved (Flanagan & Raphael, 2022, p. 8). The actions envisioned and reflected, may for instance come in form of carpooling or tree planting initiatives, organized by a municipality. Thus, responding to climate change, action at the local level is considered achievable and therefore appropriate.

Climate change action proposed and legitimized by these two discourses is not in line with radical action required. Capitalism as the source of climate change is not identified and entailed responses are not aimed at socio-economic transformation (Flanagan & Raphael, 2022, p. 8). Additional depoliticizing workings of these discourses are discussed. The main issue identified is that people are left to believe that they are at fault regarding climate change (Constantino & Weber, 2021, p. 153). Thus, responsibility becomes located at the individual level and attention is diverted from corporate responsibility and structural workings of capitalism (Jensen, 2019). Individualizing responsibility moralizes climate change, rendering those acting not in line with what is proposed by these discourses as "bad" people (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 128). The guilt that is felt for (consumer) complicity is usually re-directed into the economic system. Achievable and immediate forms of compensation for complicity offered are then market-based in nature. Working as "purification" of guilt, individuals and local groups are left to believe their actions make a change. This is considered to hinder meaningful collective action targeting the actual cause, namely capitalism (Jensen, 2019, pp. 96-97). The individualization and moralization of climate change impedes political engagement with the issue because critiques targeting the structure become diverted. No discursive space is offered to imaginatively transcend the status quo and the involvement with climate change represented is therefore apolitical.

Climate change rationalized and pragmatized: Administrative and democratic action

The following two discourses perceive environmental issues to be scientific matters, translated by rational agents into responsive actions. Concerning climate change, a scientific consensus is assumed (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 128). One discourse considers the implementation of scientific insights to function directly, and expert-led, the other discourse offers room for interpretation to entail public involvement. Dryzek (2005) refers to the former environmental discourse as "Administrative Rationalism". Here, bureaucracies governing and managing environmental issues are perceived as impartial and calculating agents, therefore implementing scientific judgements to their best knowledge (p. 86). Resulting in rationalized administration, informed by best expertise, managerial action by governmental bureaucracies is seen as equalizing the public will, unitary in character (p. 88). Because the ability to respond to the climate crisis is restricted to scientists, experts, and rational bureaucrats; no discursive meaning is given to other, civic-led, forms of responsive action.

A democratic variation of this discourse exists as well, involving a similar perspective on climate change and reaction to it, while presenting its approach to be more legitimate in character. Dryzek (2005) terms this discourse "Democratic Pragmatism". The difference to "Administrative Rationalism" lays in the way the translation of the scientific consensus is supposed to involve a multiplicity of agents with differing interests (p. 100). Including many voices and a flexible and complex process of translating scientific knowledge into climate change action, interactive problem-solving is perceived to be pragmatic and cooperative, thus democratic in character (p. 100). Therefore, accepting of the existing order, "Administrative Rationalism" and "Democratic Pragmatism" propose and legitimize expert- or interaction-led climate change action, if anything reformist in character.

Further implications considering their performative function are considered. Assuming action to follow from a scientific consensus, climate change is scientized. This delegitimizes and excludes any claim questioning the decisions taken (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 128). "Administrative Rationalism" excludes the broader public from engagement with climate change, establishing a hierarchy of agency based on expertise (Dryzek, 2005, p. 87). Thus, the discourse itself facilitates no engagement with climate change. "Democratic Pragmatism" invites people to become involved in translating scientific knowledge into climate change governance (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 124). The objective of climate change action is presented as being formulated in a reflexive process. The reality of powerful agents having the ability to

skew outcomes of such debates, is not reflected in the discourse (Dryzek, 2005, p. 117). By identifying participating agents as equal, no space is given to determine and describe structural forces advantaging some over others. In sum, neither discourse can be considered facilitating political engagement with climate change because no discursive room is offered for the systemic cause of climate change to be recognized, structural workings to be questioned, or imagined to be different.

Climate change economized: Market-, modernization-, and political reform-based action

Another discourse considers environmental issues in general, and climate change specifically, to be economic in character (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 128). Here, nature is perceived as an input to capitalism, supplying for human needs and wants (Dryzek, 2005, p. 134). Assuming that by properly placing incentives and property rights, the most favorable results for society are brought about, including environmental conditions in the interest of humans, expertise on managing the environment is taken for granted (pp. 134-135). Characterized by economic rationalism, agents are perceived to be motivated by material self-interests, rendering human relationships competitive (p. 134). Within this discourse, the market is trusted to resolve the issue of climate change and any notion of active citizen involvement is missing (p. 135). Therefore, this meaning given to human-environment relationships does not even suggest and legitimize reformist climate change action.

"Ecological Modernization" aligns with some notions of the former discourse, but centers around an understanding of modernization and technological innovation resolving environmental crises (Flanagan & Raphael, 2022, p. 8). Here, environmental degradation, and climate change specifically, are perceived as being caused by workings of capitalism but not in such structural terms that a different kind of socio-economic system is required (Hajer, 1995, p. 25). Instead, a modern re-working within the system is considered the appropriate response to environmental crises. This is portrayed to be in the economic interest of business itself, therefore partnering with scientists, governments, and moderate environmentalists (Dryzek, 2005, p. 169). Approaching climate change from a problem-solving perspective, the discourse of "Ecological Modernization" proposes and legitimizes action prototypically reformist.

The "Sustainable Development" discourse generally considers economic growth to be essential to continuously meet legitimate needs of humanity (Dryzek, 2005, p. 145). But acknowledging that natural and human systems are interconnected, ecological constraints and limits must be

respected for development to be considered sustainable (p. 154). The assumption of a positive-sum outcome, for economic and ecological prosperity, underlies this discourse (p. 155). Because the sustainable management of nature is considered achievable, the discourse assumes human domination over nature. Considering the common effort, human relations are cooperative (p. 157). Capitalism is generally taken as a given but political systems and workings are perceived and presented as needing reform (p. 154). Aiming at shifting political power away from states and towards networked governance, climate change action proposed and legitimized comes in form of coordinated international action, also involving grassroot initiatives (pp. 154-155). Green growth can be considered an alteration of the sustainable development discourse (Wanner, 2015, p. 22). Both indicate nature to be manageable in a way that aligns with human economic interests, therefore analytically decoupling growth from environmental destruction (Wanner, 2015, pp. 29-30). Advocating and reflecting political instead of transformative socio-economic reorganization, is in line with problem-solving notions and proposes and legitimizes climate change action reformist in character.

These discourses share characteristics rendering the involvement with climate change, they themselves facilitate, apolitical. Interpreting climate change as an issue economic in character, the "Economic Rationalism" and "Ecological Modernization" discourses, epitomize engagement with climate change based on cost-benefit analyses. The choices promoted, human passiveness concerning climate change, reasoned with trust in the market, or reformist action based on technological innovation in line with modernization efforts, are justified (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 128). Rooting these actions in economic calculation depicts the choices made as the only right ones. By hiding the economy-centered values this engagement is based on, aligning with the capitalist status quo, actions become naturalized and political disagreement undermined (Hulme, 2015).

The "Sustainable Development" discourse does not consider the environment as purely economic. However, the human domination of nature is assumed, thus presenting the sustainable management of the environment in the economic interest of current and future generations, as achievable. Again, cost-benefit analyses with an assumed win-win outcome are used to justify and naturalize engagement facilitated by the discourse. While adding social variables, the logic remains the same as presented by the completely environment economizing discourses (Wanner, 2014). Justifying actions taken based on calculations, hides and accustoms

the values that underly this reasoning, aligning with the capitalist status quo. No discursive space is offered to question these structures, thus reflecting apolitical engagement.

Balancing power or beating the structure: Reformist and radical climate change action

Another discourse identifies existing power imbalances among actors as determining the political, social, and economic processes underlying environmental crises, and climate change specifically (Flanagan & Raphael, 2022, p. 8). Particularizing blame, the discourse moves beyond the ones analyzed thus far, calling for and legitimizing political and social action by identifying and opposing those responsible. Regarding climate change, especially the corporate energy sector is supposed to be targeted (Flanagan & Raphael, 2022, p. 9). Proposed climate change action comes in form of re-thinking public policy to revoke the business and corporate energy sector's power. Because powerful agents and not the capitalist structure itself is targeted, this kind of responsive action is reformist in nature, despite involving critical notions.

Conventional understandings are questioned and agents accelerating climate change opposed (Flanagan & Raphael, 2022, p. 9). Even though the critical approach does not necessarily translate into the scrutinizing of the capitalist system, discursive space is offered to critique and obstruct important agents and processes (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 125). Possibly accumulating to the identification of patterns and the underlying structure, the engagement facilitated can be considered political in character. But preoccupied with power imbalances within the system, the discursive space offered to imagine beyond the structural status quo, is lacking radicality.

Lastly, different variations of a "Green Radicalism" discourse exist, some giving more significance to green consciousness-building, others focused on political change targeted at economic and social structures (Dryzek, 2005, p. 203). Only the most extreme forms of this discourse perceive effective responses to climate change as unachievable under the existing socio-economic system, thus propose and legitimize system change (Dryzek, 2005, p. 225). Achieving a post-capitalist society is the action proposed and legitimized within this discourse. The engagement with climate change facilitated within this discourse is political and radically imaginative because the capitalist status quo transcended.

Altogether, a seeming plurality of environmental discourses give meaning to climate change and responsive action to it. But as assessed, these predominately legitimize climate change action reformist in character. Importantly, engagement facilitated by the discourses themselves

is largely apolitical. This apoliticality displays itself as non-confrontationality concerning the capitalist status quo and non-imagination regarding alternatives (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 128).

Apolitical engagement with climate change, and the forces that impair

As analyzed, only the extreme variant of the "Green radicalism" discourse, aligning with eco-socialist understandings, both involves political engagement with climate change and legitimizes radical action. Academic notions deeming meaningful solutions to the climate crisis unachievable within the present socio-economic system of capitalism are becoming prevalent (Weber, 2015, p. 567). But apparently this does not translate into the way climate change is predominantly interpreted and discussed. The critical perspective adopted here helps to illuminate how structural conditions of capitalism impair the judgement between environmental discourses (Dryzek, 2022, p. 13). Introducing an Gramscian understanding of cultural hegemony, discursive functions organized by a common sense are explained to work at the hand of capitalist maintenance. Hindering political engagement with climate change, and radical responsive action to it, is considered an aspect of upholding capitalist workings.

Cultural hegemony and a common sense organizing social discourses

The perpetuation of capitalism and the accompanying domination of nature is given reason by referring to socio-control structures in form of cultural hegemony. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony considers social action as (re-)producing capitalist hegemony (Stoddart, 2007, p. 201). Thus, hegemony does not merely follow from material domination and a societal ideology reflecting the interests of the capitalist class, as assumed by classical Marxism (Stoddart, 2007, p. 192). Instead, hegemony in Gramscian terms incorporates coercive and consent-creating capabilities (Stoddart, 2007, pp. 200-201). Hegemony is therefore constructed through dialectical processes between the socio-cultural and the material sphere (Donoghue, 2018, p. 5). This more open-ended and dialectic perception of hegemony renders it continually contested, incomplete and historically contingent (Stoddart, 2007, p. 202).

Requiring some form of social unity favoring the dominant class, common sense is considered an important ideational aspect of cultural hegemonic power (Donoghue, 2018, p. 4). This common sense is theorized to guide heterogenous understandings of the world (Stoddart, 2007, p. 201). A view "inherited from the past", it stems from the material base, thus capitalist relations of production and consumption (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333). But rather than being a

coherent body of thought, it describes an organizing mechanism or process of internalizing and normalizing ideas in line with a worldview stabilizing capitalist workings (Donoghue, 2018, p. 4).

Theorized as reproducing "moral and political passivity", this commonsensical view is contributing to the maintenance of the capitalist system (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333). Language being a facet of the exercise of power, and a reflection of how cultural hegemonic power operates, the common sense is theorized as organizing social discourses in a way that social unity in the capitalist interest is developed and sustained (Ives, 2005, pp. 74-75). Organizing the framework for action that discourses are an aspect of, the common sense leaves room for a plurality of environmental discourses to exist but underlies their organization, thus conditions their dominance in the public sphere. This explains why a radical discourse has not become dominant.

Discourses collectively depoliticizing climate change; consensual meaning given

As discussed, scientization, moralization, individualization, and economization of climate change, render engagement facilitated by the separate discourses apolitical. Expanding on these insights, the collective working of the discourses illuminates how meanings given reflect organization by a common sense. This contributes to the naturalization of capitalism and passiveness concerning climate change (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 128). The claim is made that the concerted discourses, conditioned by the common sense, create a form of consensus on climate change, despite the illusory of plurality regarding meanings given (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 255).

Meanings given to nature, becoming "generalized and homogenized, is the gesture par excellence of depoliticization, of placing nature outside the political, [thus] the field of public dispute, contestation and disagreement" (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 259). Therefore, the issue to address remains socially empty, homogenized, and not embedded in capitalist structure. Collectively depoliticizing the issue, consensus is created and alternative or opposing views become silenced (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 127). Generally, for an alternative to be perceived an option, it must connect and resonate with people's existing understandings and realities (Hale, 2010). Radical discourses facilitating political engagement do not echo capitalist material realities, or commonsensical social facts. Therefore, the post-political situation is theorized to reduce the political to the consensual sphere and climate change action remains

within the realm of existing structural relations (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 266). Engagement takes place as "non-conflict", thus not separating the apolitical consensus, but securing social unity and maintaining capitalist hegemony (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 266). Climate change actions are reactionary and reformist, not solving the crisis but moving it around, contributing to an "ideological support structure securing the status quo" (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 270). In other words, the antithesis to the capitalist common sense becomes absorbed (Gramsci, 1971, p. 110).

The need for dissent and discursive opportunities to re-politicize climate change

As formulated, a key function of consensus is the revocation of dissensus (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 266). People become "passive spectators instead of active participants" thus not articulating and creating alternative futures transcending nature-human relationships characteristic of the capitalist status quo (Carvalho & Peterson, 2012). The plurality of apolitical meanings given to climate change are essentially a facet of the inability to identify and express the capitalist structure as the root of the climate crisis and hinderance to its solution (Swyngedouw, 2011, pp. 261-262). To revitalize political engagement with climate change, debate and room for disagreement is needed (Hulme, 2015). Adversarial politics, battles over imagining and articulating diverse socio-environmental futures, are required (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 267).

Despite being conditioned by a common sense, discursive workings are not impenetrable and as social facts always up for change (Dryzek, 2022, p. 22). To consider an external structure as entirely determining would itself be a "post-political gesture" (Legget, 2013). Thus, even though discourses are entangled in the structural workings of capitalist domination, the ability to change what humans have created, is assumed, and applied to the discursive sphere (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 5, 17). To underline the importance of discourses and the possibilities herein, Gramsci's concept of "war of position" is considered (Donoghue, 2018, p. 11). The notion is that a socio-political basis must be established before a "war of maneuver", the classic model of revolting against the capitalist class, is achievable (Donoghue, 2018, p. 11). This is in line with Fraser's (2021, pp. 126-127) eco-socialist insight, considering a new eco-political common sense, trans-environmental and anti-capitalist in character, as needed to counter capitalist hegemony and bring about eco-societal transformation. Here, discourse can play an important role in contributing to win this war of position (Donoghue, 2018, p. 11-12).

To re-politicize climate change, discursive space to assess, question and critique dominant environmental discourses needs to be offered (Swyngedouw, 2011). In this way, the apolitical consensus might become divided and alternative human-nature relationships than the ones conditioned by a capitalist consensus, perceived, discursively articulated, and therefore radically re-imagined. Applying insights of this paper to theorize about a discourse like this, can be considered the academic implication offered. Not necessarily proposing and legitimizing radical climate change action but facilitating political discursive space to assess and counter existing discourses, should be seen as a possibility for eco-socialists. Discourses themselves facilitating political engagement with climate change and proposing radical actions, do not resonate enough with present material and ideational conditions of the capitalist system. A discourse of "Radical Imaginature" offers an opportunity for eco-socialists to lay the discursive groundwork for their goals to be perceived as alternatives to the status quo.

Conclusion

To conclude, environmental discourses predominantly facilitate apolitical engagement with climate change and conditioned by a capitalist common sense, contribute to a depoliticizing consensus, underlying hitherto deficient responsive action. This can be seen as an instance of social forces maintaining the capitalist status quo, constituting to a framework hindering counter-hegemonic action. Present insights may be considered an eco-socialist extension to theories assessing discursive opportunities to re-politicize climate change. Radically re-imagining the human-nature relationship within a discursive space, that is truly political, thus inviting dissent and debate, poses an opportunity. Not aimed at legitimizing system change, but facilitating imaginatively radical and political engagement, this is less determining than eco-socialist activist ideals. But it should be perceived as an opportunity to lay the ideational groundwork for proposed alternatives to resonate. These ideas may be taken up and extended by scholarship assessing micro-workings of discourses. Emancipatory opportunities for environmental discourses within the existing capitalist structure, and the conditions for them to resonate need to be elaborated upon. Here, the opportunity exists to offer theoretical insights not only on discourses facilitating political engagement with climate change but also bringing about imaginative and political subjectivities. Therefore, human-nature relationships could not only be re-imagined but re-built.

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