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What is This?

Apocalypse Forever?

Post-political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change

Erik Swyngedouw

Abstract

This article interrogates the relationship between two apparently disjointed themes: the consensual presentation and mainstreaming of the global problem of climate change on the one hand and the debate in political theory/philosophy that centers around the emergence and consolidation of a post-political and post-democratic condition on the other. The argument advanced in this article attempts to tease out this apparently paradoxical condition. On the one hand, the climate is seemingly politicized as never before and has been propelled high on the policy agenda. On the other hand, a number of increasingly influential political philosophers insist on how the post-politicization (or de-politicization) of the public sphere (in parallel and intertwined with processes of neoliberalization) have been key markers of the political process over the past few decades. We proceed in four steps. First, we briefly outline the basic contours of the argument and its premises. Second, we explore the ways in which the present climate conundrum is predominantly staged through the mobilization of particular apocalyptic imaginaries. Third, we argue that this specific (re-)presentation of climate change and its associated policies is sustained by decidedly populist gestures. Finally, we discuss how this particular choreographing of climate change is one of the arenas through which a post-political frame and post-democratic political configuration have been mediated.

Key words
climate change ■ environment ■ populism ■ post-democracy ■ post-politics

Climate Change and the Post-political

> A spectre is haunting the entire world: but it is not that of communism. . . . Climate change – no more, no less than nature's payback for what we are doing to our precious planet – is day by day now revealing itself. Not only in a welter of devastating scientific data and analysis but in the repeated extreme weather conditions to which we are all, directly or indirectly, regular observers, and, increasingly, victims. (Levene, 2005)

> The Labour Party's crowning achievement is the death of politics. There's nothing left to vote for. (Noel Gallagher, rock star, in *The Independent*, 11 November 2006: 37)

THIS ARTICLE interrogates the relationship between two apparently disjointed themes: the consensual presentation and mainstreaming of the global problem of climate change that presents a clear and present danger to civilization as we know it unless urgent and immediate remedial action is undertaken on the one hand, and the debate in political theory/philosophy that centers around the emergence and consolidation of a post-political and post-democratic condition on the other. While the former insists on the urgency of politically mediated actions to retrofit the global climate to a more benign and stable condition or, at least, on the need to engage in interventions that might mitigate some of its more dramatic socio-spatial and ecological consequences, the latter argues that the last few decades have been characterized by deepening processes of de-politicization characterized by the increasing evacuation of the proper political dimension from the public terrain as technocratic management and consensual policy-making has sutured the spaces of democratic politics.

We shall proceed in four steps. First, we shall briefly outline the basic contours of the argument and its premises. In a second part, we explore the ways in which the present climate conundrum is predominantly staged through the mobilization of particular apocalyptic imaginaries. In a third part, we shall explore how the specific (re)-presentation of climate change and its associated policies is sustained by decidedly populist gestures. In the final part, we shall argue that this particular choreographing of climate change is one of the arenas through which a post-political frame and post-democratic political configurations have been mediated. Throughout, we maintain that current hegemonic climate change policies ultimately reinforce processes of de-politicization and the socio-political status quo rather than, as some suggest and hope, offering a wedge that might contribute to achieving socio-ecologically more egalitarian transformations (Castree, 2009). We shall conclude with an appeal to rethink the properly political, to re-establish the horizon of democratic environmental politics.

The Argument

> Barbarism or Socialism. (K. Marx)

> Kyoto [Copenhagen] or the Apocalypse. (Green saying)

The argument advanced here attempts to interrogate this apparently paradoxical condition whereby the climate is politicized as never before while a group of increasingly influential political philosophers insist that the post-politicization of the public sphere (in parallel and intertwined with processes of neoliberalization) have been key markers of the political process over the past few decades.

Over the past decade or so, a widespread consensus has emerged over the state of nature and the precarious environmental conditions that may lead to the premature end of civilization as we know it (IPCC, 2007). The environmental conditions and, in particular, global climate change are increasingly staged as signalling a great danger, of epic dimensions, that, if unheeded, might radically perturb, if not announce the premature end of civilization before its sell-by date has passed. The imminent danger to the future of our common human and non-human world calls for radical changes in all manner of domains, from the way we produce and organize the transformation and socio-physical metabolism of nature to routines and cultures of consumption (for a standard review, see Giddens, 2009). A fragile consensus on both the 'nature' of the problem and the arrays of managerial and institutional technologies to mitigate the most dramatic consequences has been reached, despite differences of view, opinion or position (Hulme, 2009); a consensus that is now largely shared by most political elites from a variety of positions, business leaders, activists and the scientific community. The few remaining sceptics are increasingly marginalized as either maverick hardliners or conservative bullies.

This elevation of climate change and its consequences onto the terrain of public concern and policy has unfolded in parallel to the consolidation of a political condition that has evacuated dispute and disagreement from the spaces of public encounter to be replaced by a consensually established frame that interlocutors like Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe define as post-democratic or post-political (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2006; Žižek, 1999). This post-political frame is structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative. The corresponding mode of governmentality is structured around dialogical forms of consensus formation, technocratic management and problem-focused governance, sustained by populist discursive regimes (Swyngedouw, 2009). The post-political suturing of the terrain of the public encounter is, furthermore, institutionally choreographed in the form of post-democratic institutional configurations (Crouch, 2004; Marquand, 2004). I shall begin by accepting the transformation to a post-political and post-democratic configuration at face value. What I am concerned with in

this article is the historical production of such a post-political and post-democratic regime. I contend that the environmental question in general, and the climate change argument and how it is publicly staged in particular, has been and continues to be one of the markers through which post-politicization is wrought. In other words, the particular way in which the environmental condition has been elevated to a matter of public concern can be mobilized as a way of grappling with the contested formation of a post-political frame. The politics of climate change and, more generally, the concern with sustainability – I maintain – are not only expressive of such post-political and post-democratic organization, but have been among the key arenas through which the post-political frame is forged, configured and entrenched. This process of de-politicization – or the colonization of the political by politics/the police – which operates through elevating the state of nature onto the public terrain in thoroughly depoliticized ways calls for a reconsideration of what the political is, where it is located and how the democratic political can be recaptured.

The Desire for the Apocalypse and the Fetishization of CO_2

> It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. (Jameson, 2003: 73)

We shall start from the attractions of the apocalyptic imaginaries that infuse the climate change debate and through which much of the public concern with the climate change argument is sustained. The distinct millennialist discourse around the climate has co-produced a widespread consensus that the earth and many of its component parts are in an ecological bind that may short-circuit human and non-human life in the not too distant future if urgent and immediate action to retrofit nature to a more benign equilibrium is postponed for much longer. Irrespective of the particular views of Nature held by different individuals and social groups, consensus has emerged over the seriousness of the environmental condition and the precariousness of our socio-ecological balance (Swyngedouw, forthcoming). BP has re-branded itself as 'Beyond Petroleum' to certify its environmental credentials, Shell plays a more eco-sensitive tune, eco-activists of various political or ideological stripes and colours engage in direct action in the name of saving the planet, New Age post-materialists join the chorus that laments the irreversible decline of ecological amenities, eminent scientists enter the public domain to warn of pending ecological catastrophe, politicians try to outmanoeuvre each other in brandishing the ecological banner, and a wide range of policy initiatives and practices, performed under the motif of 'sustainability', are discussed, conceived and implemented at all geographical scales. Al Gore's evangelical film *An Inconvenient Truth* won him the Nobel Peace price, surely one of the most telling illustrations of how ecological matters are elevated to the terrain of a global humanitarian cause (see also Giddens, 2009). While there is certainly no agreement on what exactly Nature is and how to relate to it, there is a virtually unchallenged

consensus over the need to be more 'environmentally' sustainable if disaster is to be avoided; a climatic sustainability that centres around stabilizing the CO_2 content in the atmosphere (Boykoff et al., forthcoming).

This consensual framing is itself sustained by a particular scientific discourse.[1] The complex translation and articulation between what Bruno Latour (2004) would call matters of fact versus matters of concern has been thoroughly short-circuited. The changing atmospheric composition, marked by increasing levels of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, is largely caused by anthropogenic activity, primarily (although not exclusively) as a result of the burning of fossilized or captured CO_2 (in the form of oil, gas, coal, wood) and the disappearance of CO_2 sinks and their associated capture processes (through deforestation for example). These undisputed matters of fact are, without proper political intermediation, translated into matters of concern. The latter, of course, are eminently political in nature. Yet, in the climate change debate, the political nature of matters of concern is disavowed to the extent that the facts in themselves are elevated, through a short-circuiting procedure, on to the terrain of the political, where climate change is framed as a global humanitarian cause. The matters of concern are thereby relegated to a terrain beyond dispute, to one that does not permit dissensus or disagreement. Scientific expertise becomes the foundation and guarantee for properly constituted politics/ policies.

In this consensual setting, environmental problems are generally staged as universally threatening to the survival of humankind, announcing the premature termination of civilization as we know it and sustained by what Mike Davis (1999) aptly called 'ecologies of fear'. The discursive matrix through which the contemporary meaning of the environmental condition is woven is one quilted systematically by the continuous invocation of fear and danger, the spectre of ecological annihilation or at least seriously distressed socio-ecological conditions for many people in the near future. 'Fear' is indeed the crucial node through which much of the current environmental narrative is woven, and continues to feed the concern with 'sustainability'. This cultivation of 'ecologies of fear', in turn, is sustained in part by a particular set of phantasmagorical imaginaries (Katz, 1995). The apocalyptic imaginary of a world without water, or at least with endemic water shortages, ravaged by hurricanes whose intensity is amplified by climate change; pictures of scorched land as global warming shifts the geopluvial regime and the spatial variability of droughts and floods; icebergs that disintegrate around the poles as ice melts into the sea, causing the sea level to rise; alarming reductions in biodiversity as species disappear or are threatened by extinction; post-apocalyptic images of waste lands reminiscent of the silent ecologies of the region around Chernobyl; the threat of peak-oil that, without proper management and technologically innovative foresight, would return society to a Stone Age existence; the devastation of wildfires, tsunamis, diseases like SARS, avian flu, Ebola or HIV, all these imaginaries of a Nature out of synch, destabilized, threatening and out of

control are paralleled by equally disturbing images of a society that continues piling up waste, pumping CO_2 into the atmosphere, deforesting the earth, etc. This is a process that Neil Smith appropriately refers to as 'nature-washing' (2008: 245). In sum, our ecological predicament is sutured by millennial fears, sustained by an apocalyptic rhetoric and representational tactics, and by a series of performative gestures signalling an overwhelming, mind-boggling danger, one that threatens to undermine the very coordinates of our everyday lives and routines, and may shake up the foundations of all we took and take for granted. Table 1 exemplifies some of the imaginaries that are continuously invoked.

Of course, apocalyptic imaginaries have been around for a long time as an integral part of Western thought, first of Christianity and later emerging as the underbelly of fast-forwarding technological modernization and its associated doomsday thinkers. However, present-day millennialism preaches an apocalypse without the promise of redemption. Saint John's biblical apocalypse, for example, found its redemption in God's infinite love. The proliferation of modern apocalyptic imaginaries also held up the promise of redemption: the horsemen of the apocalypse, whether riding under the name of the proletariat, technology or capitalism, could be tamed with appropriate political and social revolutions.

As Martin Jay argued, while traditional apocalyptic versions still held out the hope for redemption, for a 'second coming', for the promise of a 'new dawn', environmental apocalyptic imaginaries are 'leaving behind any hope of rebirth or renewal . . . in favour of an unquenchable fascination with being on the verge of an end that never comes' (1994: 33). The emergence of new

Table 1   Apocalyptic attractors

Global warming and ozone loss: Apocalypse soon
Sea levels likely to rise much faster than was predicted
Global warming is causing the Greenland ice cap to disintegrate far faster than
    anyone predicted
Global warming '30 times quicker than it used to be'
Climate change: On the edge
(all quotes from *The Independent*, 17 February 2006)

WATER WARS
(*The Independent*, 28 February 2006)

The Four Horsemen of Industrial Society: War, Over-population, Climate Change
and Peak Oil (published on 12 Jan. 2006 by *Energy Bulletin*)

Pentagon warns Bush of apocalyptic climate change by 2020
(*The Observer*, 22 February 2004)

We have less than 100 months to act.
(Prince Charles, March 2009)

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forms of millennialism around the environmental nexus is of a particular kind that promises neither redemption nor realization. As Klaus Scherpe (1987) insists, this is not simply apocalypse now, but apocalypse forever. It is a vision that does not suggest, prefigure or expect the necessity of an event that will alter history. Derrida (referring to the nuclear threat in the 1980s) sums this up most succinctly:

> . . . here, precisely, is announced – as promise or as threat – an apocalypse without apocalypse, an apocalypse without vision, without truth, without revelation . . . without message and without destination, without sender and without decidable addressee . . . an apocalypse beyond good and evil. (1992: 66)

The environmentally apocalyptic future, forever postponed, neither promises redemption nor does it possess a name; it is pure negativity.

The attractions of such an apocalyptic imaginary are related to a series of characteristics. In contrast to standard left arguments about the apocalyptic dynamics of unbridled capitalism (Mike Davis is a great exemplar of this; see Davis, 1999, 2002), I would argue that sustaining and nurturing apocalyptic imaginaries is an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) for which the management of fear is a central leitmotif (Badiou, 2007). At the symbolic level, apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or displacing social conflict and antagonisms. As such, apocalyptic imaginations are decidedly populist and foreclose a proper political framing. Or, in other words, the presentation of climate change as a global humanitarian cause produces a thoroughly depoliticized imaginary, one that does not revolve around choosing one trajectory rather than another, one that is not articulated with specific political programs or socio-ecological project or revolutions. It is this sort of mobilization without political issue that led Alain Badiou to state that 'ecology is the new opium for the masses', whereby the nurturing of the promise of a more benign retrofitted climate exhausts the horizon of our aspirations and imaginations (Badiou, 2008; Žižek, 2008). We have to make sure that radical techno-managerial and socio-cultural transformations, organized within the horizons of a capitalist order that is beyond dispute, are initiated that retrofit the climate (Swyngedouw, forthcoming). In other words, we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation – 'the partition of the sensible' in Rancière's (1998) words, so that nothing really has to change.

The negative desire for an apocalypse that few really believe will realize itself (if we were to believe that the earth is really in the dismal state we are told it is in, we would not be sitting around writing and reading arcane academic journal articles) finds its positive injunction around a fetishist invocation of CO_2 as the 'thing' around which our environmental dreams, aspirations, contestations as well as policies crystallize. The '*point de*

capiton', the quilting point through which the signifying chain that weaves a discursive matrix of meaning and content for the climate change problematic, is CO_2, the *objet petit a* that simultaneously expresses our deepest fears and around which the desire for change, for a better socio-climatic world is expressed (see Stavrakakis, 1997, 2000; Swyngedouw, forthcoming).

The fetishist disavowal of the multiple and complex relations through which environmental changes unfold finds its completion in the double reductionism to this singular socio-chemical component (CO_2). The reification of complex processes to a thing-like object-cause in the form of a socio-chemical compound around which our environmental desires crystallize is furthermore inscribed with a particular social meaning and function through its enrolment as commodity in the processes of capital circulation and market exchange (Bumpus and Liverman, 2008; Liverman, 2009). The commodification of CO_2 – primarily via the Kyoto Protocol and various offsetting schemes – in turn, has triggered a rapidly growing derivatives market of futures and options. On the European climate exchange, for example, trade in CO_2 futures and options grew from zero in 2005 to 463 million tons in June 2009, with prices fluctuating from over 30 euro to less than 10 euro per ton over this time period.[2] The extraordinary complexity of state and regulatory procedures forcing the commodification of CO_2 exemplifies par excellence what Marx once defined as commodity fetishism:

> A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. (2004 [1867]: 163)

CO_2's functioning as a commodity (and financialized asset) is dependent on its insertion in a complex governance regime organized around a set of technologies of governance that revolve around reflexive risk-calculation, self-assessment, interest-negotiation and intermediation, accountancy rules and accountancy-based disciplining, detailed quantification and benchmarking of performance (Dean, 1999). The latter is politically choreographed and instituted by the Kyoto Protocol and related, through extraordinarily complex, institutional configurations, that is, the techno-managerial machinery of post-democratic governing.

The above potted summary of the uses of apocalyptic imaginaries, the science–politics short-circuiting and the privatization of the climate through the commodification of CO_2 is strictly parallel, I contend, with the deepening consolidation of a political populism that characterizes the present post-political condition (Žižek, 2006a). And that is what we shall turn to next.

Succumbing to the Populist Temptation

> If we do nothing, the consequences for every person on this earth will be severe and unprecedented – with vast numbers of environmental refugees, social instability and decimated economies: far worse than anything which we are seeing today. (Prince Charles, March 2009)[3]

Environmental politics and debates over 'sustainable' futures in the face of pending environmental catastrophe signal a range of populist maneuvers that infuse the post-political post-democratic condition. In this part, we shall chart the characteristics of populism (see, among others, Canovan, 1999; 2005; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Žižek, 2006a) as they are expressed in mainstream climate concerns. In other words, to the extent that consensual climate change imaginaries, arguments and policies reflect processes of de-politicization, the former are sustained by a series of decidedly populist gestures. Here, I shall summarize the particular ways in which climate change expresses some of the classic tenets of populism.

First, the climate change conundrum is not only portrayed as global, but is constituted as a universal humanitarian threat. We are all potential victims. 'THE' Environment and 'THE' People, Humanity as a whole in a material and philosophical manner, are invoked and called into being. Humanity (as well as large parts of the non-human world) is under threat from climatic catastrophes. However, the 'people' here are not constituted as heterogeneous political subjects, but as universal victims, suffering from processes beyond their control. As such, populism cuts across the idiosyncrasies of different, heterogeneously constituted, differentially acting, and often antagonistic human and non-human 'natures'; it silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and disavows conflicts of interests by distilling a common threat or challenge to both Nature and Humanity. As Žižek puts it:

> . . . populism occurs when a series of particular 'democratic' demands [in this case, a good environment, a retro-fitted climate, a series of socio-environmentally mitigating actions] is enchained in a series of equivalences, and this enchainment produces 'people' as the universal political subject . . . and all different particular struggles and antagonisms appear as part of a global antagonistic struggle between 'us' (people) and 'them' [in this case 'it', i.e. CO_2]. (Žižek, 2006a: 553)

Second, this universalizing claim of the pending catastrophe is socially homogenizing. Although geographical and social differences in terms of effects are clearly recognized and detailed, these differences are generally mobilized to further reinforce the global threat that faces the whole of humankind (see Hulme, 2008). It is this sort of argumentation that led the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to infer that the poor will be hit first and hardest by climate change (IPCC, 2009), which is of course a correct assertion – the poor are by definition ill-equipped to deal with any sort of change beyond their control – but the

report continues that, therefore, in the name of the poor, climate change has to be tackled urgently.

A third characteristic of environmental apocalyptic thought is that it reinforces the nature–society dichotomy and the causal power of nature to derail civilizations. It is this process that Neil Smith refers to as 'nature-washing':

> Nature-washing is a process by which social transformations of nature are well enough acknowledged, but in which that socially changed nature becomes a new super determinant of our social fate. It might well be society's fault for changing nature, but it is the consequent power of that nature that brings on the apocalypse. The causal power of nature is not compromised but would seem to be augmented by social injections into that nature. (2008: 245)

While the part-anthropogenic process of the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is readily acknowledged, the related ecological problems are externalized as are the solutions. CO_2 becomes the fethishized stand-in for the totality of climate change calamities and, therefore, it suffices to reverse atmospheric CO_2 build-up to a negotiated idealized point in history, to return to climatic status quo ex-ante. An extraordinary techno-managerial apparatus is under way, ranging from new eco-technologies of a variety of kinds to unruly complex managerial and institutional configurations, with a view to producing a socio-ecological fix to make sure nothing really changes. Stabilizing the climate seems to be a condition for capitalist life as we know it to continue. Moreover, the mobilized mechanisms to arrive at this allegedly more benign (past) condition are actually those that produced the problem in the first place (commodification of nature – in this case CO_2), thereby radically disavowing the social relations and processes through which this hybrid socio-natural quasi-object (Latour, 1993; Swyngedouw, 2006) came into its problematic being. Populist discourse 'displaces social antagonism and constructs the enemy. In populism, the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity [excessive CO_2] (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice' (Žižek, 2006a: 555). The enemy is always externalized and objectified. Populism's fundamental fantasy, for Žižek, is that of 'intruders' who have *corrupted* the system. CO_2 stands here as the classic example of a fetishized and externalized foe that requires dealing with if sustainable climate futures are to be attained. Problems therefore are not the result of the 'system', of unevenly distributed power relations, of the networks of control and influence, of rampant injustices, or of a fatal flaw inscribed in the system, but are blamed on an outsider (Žižek, 2006a: 555). That is why the solution can be found in dealing with the 'pathological' phenomenon, the resolution for which resides in the system itself. It is not the system that is the problem, but its pathological syndrome (for which the cure is internal), that is posited as 'excess'. While CO_2 is externalized as the socio-climatic enemy, a potential cure in the guise of the Kyoto principles is generated

from within the market functioning of the system itself. The 'enemy' is, therefore, always vague, ambiguous, socially empty or vacuous (like 'CO_2'); the 'enemy' is a mere thing, not socially embodied, named and counted. While a proper analysis and politics would endorse the view that CO_2-as-crisis stands as the pathological symptom of the normal, one that expresses the excesses inscribed in the very normal functioning of the system (i.e. capitalism), the policy architecture around climate change insists that this 'excessive' state is not inscribed in the functioning of the system itself, but is an aberration that can be 'cured' by mobilizing the very inner dynamics and logic of the system (privatization of CO_2, commodification and market exchange via carbon and carbon-offset trading).

Fourth, populism is based on a politics of 'the people know best' (although the latter category remains often empty, unnamed), supported by a scientific technocracy assumed to be neutral, and advocates a direct relationship between people and political participation. It is assumed that this will lead to a good, if not optimal, solution, a view strangely at odds with the presumed radical openness, uncertainty and undecidability of the excessive risks associated with Beck's or Giddens' second modernity. The architecture of populist governing takes the form of stakeholder participation or forms of participatory governance that operates beyond the state and permits a form of self-management, self-organization and controlled self-disciplining (see Dean, 1999; Lemke, 1999), under the aegis of a non-disputed liberal-capitalist order.

Fifth, populist tactics do not identify a privileged subject of change (like the proletariat for Marxists, women for feminists or the 'creative class' for competitive capitalism), but instead invoke a common condition or predicament, the need for common humanity-wide action, mutual collaboration and cooperation. There are no internal social tensions or internal generative conflicts; the 'people', in this case global humanity, are called into being as political subject, thereby disavowing the radical heterogeneity and antagonisms that cut through 'the people'. It is exactly this constitutive split of the people, the recognition of radically differentiated if not opposed social, political or ecological desires, that calls the proper democratic political into being.

Sixth, populist demands are always addressed to the elites. Populism as a project addresses demands to the ruling elites (getting rid of immigrants, saving the climate . . .); it is not about replacing the elites, but calling on the elites to undertake action. The ecological problem is no exception. It does not invite a transformation of the existing socio-ecological order but calls on the elites to undertake action such that nothing really has to change, so that life can basically go on as before. In this sense, environmental populism is inherently reactionary, a key ideological support structure for securing the socio-political status quo. It is inherently non-political and non-partisan. A Gramscian 'passive revolution' has taken place over the past few years, whereby the elites have not only acknowledged the climate conundrum and, thereby, answered the call of the 'people' to take the climate

seriously, but are moving rapidly to convince the world that, indeed, capitalism can not only solve the climate riddle but also that capitalism can make a new climate by unmaking the one it has co-produced over the past few hundred years through a series of extraordinary techno-natural and eco-managerial fixes. Not only do the elites take these particular demands of the people seriously, it also mobilizes them in ways that serve their purposes.

Seventh, no proper names are assigned to a post-political populist politics (Badiou, 2005). Post-political populism is associated with a politics of not naming, in the sense of giving a definite or proper name to its domain or field of action. Only 'empty' signifiers like 'climate change policy', 'bio-diversity policy' or a vacuous 'sustainable policy' replace the proper names of politics. These proper names, according to Rancière (1998; see also Badiou, 2005), are what constitute a genuine democracy, that is, a space where the unnamed, the uncounted and, consequently, unsymbolized become named and counted. Consider, for example, how class struggle in the 19th and 20th century was exactly about naming the proletariat, its counting, symbolization, narration and consequent entry into the techno-machinery of the state. In the 20th century, feminist politics became named through the narration, activism and symbolization of 'woman' as a political category. And, for capitalism, the 'creative class' is the revolutionary subject that sustains its creatively destructive transformations. Climate change has no positively embodied name or signifier; it does not call a political subject into being that stands in for the universality of egalitarian democratic demands. In other words, the future of a globally warmer world has no proper name. In contrast to other signifiers that signal a positively embodied content with respect to the future (like socialism, communism, liberalism), an ecologically and climatologically different future world is only captured in its negativity; a pure negativity without promises of redemption, without a positive injunction that 'transcends'/sublimates negativity and without proper subject. The realization of this apocalyptic promise is forever postponed, the never-land of tomorrow's unfulfilled and unfulfillable promises. Yet the gaze on tomorrow permits recasting social, political and other pressing issues today as future conditions that can be retroactively re-scripted as a techno-managerial issue.

The final characteristic of populism takes this absence of a positively embodied signifier further. As particular demands are expressed (get rid of immigrants, reduce CO_2) that remain particular, populism forecloses universalization as a positive socio-environmental injunction or project. In other words, the environmental problem does not posit a positive and named socio-environmental situation, an embodied vision, a desire that awaits realization, a fiction to be realized. In that sense, populism does not solve problems, it moves them elsewhere. Consider, for example, the current argument over how the nuclear option is again portrayed as a possible and realistic option to secure a sustainable energy future and as an alternative to deal both with CO_2 emissions and peak-oil. The redemption of our CO_2 quagmire is found in replacing the socio-ecologically excessive presence of

CO_2 with another socio-natural object, U235/238, and the inevitable production of all manner of socio-natural transuranic elements. The nuclear 'fix' is now increasingly staged (and will undoubtedly be implemented) as one of the possible remedies to save both climate and capital. It hardly arouses expectations for a better and ecologically sound society.

We are now in a position to situate this argument within the broader debate about the changing nature of politics, particularly in the global North, the tactics and processes of de-politicization, and the emergence of a post-political and post-democratic frame. This is what we shall turn to next.

The Post-political and Post-democratic Condition

'Well, my dear Adeimantus, what is the nature of tyranny? It's obvious, I suppose, that it arises out of democracy.' (Plato, 2003)

Consensually established concerns, like climate change, structured around ecologies of fear and sustained by a universalizing populist discourse express and sustain the deepening of a post-political condition. The latter is, in turn, institutionalized through forms of post-democratic governing. Post-politics is marked by the predominance of a managerial logic in all aspects of life, the reduction of the political to administration where decision-making is increasingly considered to be a question of expert knowledge and not of political position. It is accompanied by the diffusion of governance into a host of non-state or quasi-state institutional forms and actors, and fosters consensual understandings of political action and the particularization of political demands.

Post-politics refers to a politics in which ideological or dissensual contestation and struggles are replaced by techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration, 'whereby the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives is the primary goal' (Žižek, 2008). Whereas the proper democratic political recognizes the constitutive split of the people, the inherent antagonisms and heterogeneities that cut through the social, while presuming the equality of each and everyone qua speaking beings, the post-political disavows these antagonisms by displacing conflict and disagreement on to the terrain of consensually manageable problems, expert knowledge and interest intermediation (Swyngedouw, 2009a). 'Doing politics' is reduced to a form of institutionalized social management and to the mobilization of governmental technologies, where difficulties and problems are dealt with by administrative and techno-organizational means (Nancy, cited in Marchart, 2007: 68). In other words, politics as policy-making (*la politique* or politics/police) has sutured the space of the political as expressions of disagreement/dissensus (*le politique* or the political) (Dikeç, 2005). Such a post-political arrangement signals a de-politicized (in the sense of the disappearance of the democratic agonistic struggle over the content and direction of socio-ecological life) public space where administrative governance defines the zero-level of politics (see Marquand, 2004;

Swyngedouw, 2009b). Proper political choice as the agonistic confrontation of competing visions of a different socio-ecological order is foreclosed as the space of the political, or sutured by totalizing threats that permit only one choice or direction, one that can be 'managed' through dialogical consensual practices (Mouffe, 2005).

Post-politics rejects ideological divisions and the explicit universalization of particular political demands (Žižek, 1999: 198). Post-politics is thus about the administration (policing) of social, economic, ecological or other issues, and it remains, of course, fully within the realm of the possible, of existing social relations, which are 'the partition of the sensible' (Rancière, 2001). 'The ultimate sign of post-politics in all Western countries', Žižek (2002: 303) argues, 'is the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension.'

> In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists . . .) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Post-politics thus emphasizes the need to leave old ideological visions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people's concrete needs and demands into account. (Žižek, 1999: 198)

> The political (the space of litigation in which the excluded can protest the wrong/injustice done to them) [is] foreclosed. . . . It is crucial to perceive . . . the post-political suspension of the political in the reduction of the state to a mere police agent servicing the (consensually established) needs of market forces and multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism. (Žižek, 1998: 997)

Post-politics refuses politicization in the classical Greek sense, that is, as the metaphorical universalization of particular demands, which aims at 'more' than the negotiation of interests. Politics becomes something one can do without making decisions that divide and separate (Thomson, 2003). Difficulties and problems, which are generally staged and accepted as problematic, have to be dealt with by means of compromise and the production of consensus. The key feature of consensus is 'the annulment of dissensus . . . the "end of politics"' (Rancière, 2001: §32). Of course, this post-political world eludes choice and freedom (other than those tolerated by the consensus) and effaces the properly political from the spaces of public encounter. For Rancière (1998), this disavowal of the political and the staging of politics as a form of consensual management of the givens of the situation is one of the tactics through which spaces of conflict and antagonism are smoothed over and displaced.

This 'retreat of the political' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1997) and its replacement by consensual policing arrangements is organized through

post-democratic institutions of governance, like the Kyoto Protocol and other public–private bodies that increasingly replace the political institutions of government (see Crouch, 2004). Post-democratic institutional arrangements are the performative expression of a post-political condition. For Rancière (1998: 102): 'Postdemocracy is . . . a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, the miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests.' Urbaniti defines these post-democratic institutions of 'governance-beyond-the-state' as follows:

> Governance entails an explicit reference to 'mechanisms' or 'organized' and 'coordinated activities' appropriate to the solution of some specific problems. Unlike government, governance refers to 'policies' rather than 'politics'. . . . Its recipients are not 'the people' as collective political subject, but 'the population' that can be affected by global issues such as the environment, migration, or the use of natural resources. (Urbinati, 2003: 80)

This post-democratic constitution reconfigures the act of governing to a stakeholder-based arrangement of multi-scalar governance in which the traditional state operates institutionally together with experts, NGOs and other 'responsible' partners (while 'irresponsible' partners are excluded). They operate with a generally accepted consensus of a global and largely (neo)liberal capitalism, the right of individual choice, an ecological awareness and the necessity to continue this, to sustain the state of the situation. Discussion and dispute are tolerated, even encouraged, in so far as the general frame is not contested.

Not only are radical dissent, critique and fundamental conflict being evacuated from the political arena (and relegated to the terrain of 'extra-political' and unauthorized violence), but also the parameters of democratic governing itself are being shifted, announcing new forms of governmentality, in which traditional disciplinary society is transfigured into a society of control through democratically disembedded networks (like 'the Kyoto Protocol'; 'the Dublin Statement', the 'Rio Summit', etc. . . .).

Conclusion: Re-thinking the Political Environment

> Against thoughts of the end and catastrophe, I believe it is possible and necessary to oppose a thought of political precariousness. (Rancière, 2004: 8)

We have argued that the particular framing of climate change and its associated populist politics as outlined above forecloses (or at least attempts to do so) politicization and evacuates dissent through the formation of a particular regime of environmental governance that revolves around consensus, agreement, participatory negotiation of different interests and technocratic expert management in the context of a non-disputed management of market-based socio-economic organization. Even a cursory analysis of 'green politics', whether from the perspective of environmental movements

(like Greenpeace) or environmental parties (the German Greens are a classic case), over the past few decades would signal their rapid transformation from engaging in a politics of contestation, organized action, radical disagreement and developing visionary alternatives to their integration into stakeholder-based negotiation arrangements aimed at delivering a negotiated policy.

A consensual post-politics emerges here, one that either eliminates fundamental conflict or elevates it to antithetical ultra-politics. The consensual times we are currently living in have thus eliminated a genuine political space of disagreement. These post-political climate change policies rest on the following foundations. First, the social and ecological problems caused by modernity/capitalism are external side-effects; they are not an inherent and integral part of the relations of liberal politics and capitalist economies. Second, a strictly populist politics emerges here; one that elevates the interest of an imaginary 'the People', Nature, or 'the environment' to the level of the universal, rather than opening spaces that permit the universalization of the claims of particular socio-natures, environments, or social groups or classes. Third, these side-effects are constituted as global, universal and threatening. Fourth, the 'enemy' or the target of concern is continuously externalized and becomes socially disembodied, is always vague, ambiguous, unnamed and uncounted, and ultimately empty. Fifth, the target of concern can be managed through a consensual dialogical politics whereby demands become depoliticized and politics naturalized within a given socio-ecological order for which there is ostensibly no real alternative (Swyngedouw, 2007).

The post-political environmental consensus, therefore, is one that is radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting and alternative trajectories of future socio-environmental possibilities and of human–human and human–nature articulations and assemblages. It holds on to a harmonious view of Nature that can be recaptured while reproducing, if not solidifying, a liberal-capitalist order for which there seems to be no alternative. Much of the sustainability argument has evacuated the politics of the possible, the radical contestation of alternative future socio-environmental possibilities and socio-natural arrangements, and has silenced the antagonisms and conflicts that are constitutive of our socio-natural orders by externalizing conflict. It is inherently reactionary. As Badiou (2005) argues, 'proper' politics must revolve around the construction of great new fictions that create real possibilities for constructing different socio-environmental futures. To the extent that the current post-political condition that combines apocalyptic environmental visions with a hegemonic neoliberal view of social ordering constitutes one particular fiction (one that in fact forecloses dissent, conflict and the possibility of a different future), there is an urgent need for different stories and fictions that can be mobilized for realization (Brand et al., 2009). This requires foregrounding and naming different socio-environmental futures and recognizing conflict, difference and struggle over the naming and trajectories of these

futures. Socio-environmental conflict, therefore, should not be subsumed under the homogenizing mantle of a populist environmentalist-sustainability discourse, but should be legitimized as constitutive of a democratic order. This, of course, turns the climate question into a question of democracy and its meaning. It asserts the horizon of a recuperated democracy as the terrain (space) for expressing conflict, for nurturing agonistic debate and disagreement, and, most importantly, for the naming of different possible socio-environmental futures.

Notes

1. Of course, the politics of climate science itself should not be ignored, but this is beyond the scope of the present article. For a discussion of the politics of climate science, see Demeritt (2001).

2. See URL (consulted July 2009): www.ecx.eu

3. Speech by HRH the Prince of Wales at La Moneda Palace, Santiago, Chile, 9 March 2009; URL (consulted January 2010): http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/ speechesandarticles/a_speech_by_hrh_the_prince_of_wales_at_la_moneda_palace_ sant_1398538628.html

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