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### Abstract

Deliberative mechanisms surrounding climate change politics in advanced democracies have, for some time, been at the mercy of ideological and political economic commitments. One need only to look at the banning of protests and marches during the 2015 COP21 international climate talks in Paris, or the historical risk assessments of violent international conflict linked to climate concerns by Germany and the US to see that the political institutionalization of climate change is pervasive. On the other hand, the discursive demarcation by climate science has consistently taken up two arguments in opposition to climate politics: (a) the view that political discourses on climate variability should rest on climatological models and the research of climate experts, and (b) that the climatological data itself serves as the impartial intermediary through which we can provide an empirical refutation to ideological rhetoric and economic influences on climate change politics. I contend that in the attempt to bridge the political and scientific camps we transpose a central feature in democratic climate deliberation—namely, the ontology of the citizen; who in the discursive bridge is relegated to a medium of exchange for both camps, rather than a commensurate party in the climatological discussion.

# Climate Discourse and the Ontology of the Citizen

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## Abstract

Deliberative mechanisms surrounding climate change politics in advanced democracies have, for some time, been at the mercy of ideological and political economic commitments. One need only to look at the banning of protests and marches during the 2015 COP21 international climate talks in Paris, or the historical risk assessments of violent international conflict linked to climate concerns by Germany and the US to see that the political institutionalization of climate change is pervasive. On the other hand, the discursive demarcation by climate science has consistently taken up two arguments in opposition to climate politics: (a) the view that political discourses on climate variability should rest on climatological models and the research of climate experts, and (b) that the climatological data itself serves as the impartial intermediary through which we can provide an empirical refutation to ideological rhetoric and economic influences on climate change politics. I contend that in the attempt to bridge the political and scientific camps we transpose a central feature in democratic climate deliberation—namely, the ontology of the citizen; who in the discursive bridge is relegated to a medium of exchange for both camps, rather than a commensurate party in the climatological discussion.

## Introduction

Deliberative mechanisms surrounding climate change politics in advanced democracies have, for some time, been at the mercy of ideological and political economic commitments. One need only to look at the banning of protests and marches during the 2015 COP21 international climate talks in Paris,<sup>1</sup> or the historical risk assessments of violent international conflict linked to climate concerns by Germany and the US<sup>2</sup> to see that the political institutionalization of climate change is pervasive. On the other hand, the discursive demarcation by climate science has consistently taken up two arguments in opposition to climate politics: (a) the view that political discourses on climate

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<sup>1</sup> Quinn, Ben. “COP21 Climate Marches in Paris Not Authorised following Attacks.” *The Guardian*. N.p., 18 Nov. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Lucke, Franziskus Von, Zehra Wellmann, and Thomas Diez. “What’s at Stake in Securitising Climate Change? Towards a Differentiated Approach.” *Geopolitics* 19.4 (2014): 857-84.

variability should rest on climatological models and the research of climate experts, and (b) that the climatological data itself serves as the impartial intermediary through which we can provide an empirical refutation to ideological rhetoric and economic influences on climate change politics. I contend that in the attempt to bridge the political and scientific camps we transpose a central feature in democratic climate deliberation—namely, the ontology of the citizen; who in the discursive bridge is relegated to a medium of exchange for both camps, rather than a commensurate party in the climatological discussion.

To give the ontological space of the citizen context it should first be observed that, in most scholarship cases, the agreed upon deliberative split in advanced democracies has circumscribed climate change into three operant categories: (1) the political, (2) the scientific, and (3) the public qua citizens. With respect to (1) and (2)—the primary parties of most climatological discourse—we have a division between political actors with specific ideological and economic interests, and climatologists who represent a knowledge set dominated by experts in the field. Yet, the parties that comprise (3) are perhaps the most difficult to discuss relative to terminological distinctions, as they receive different classificatory schemes by different authors. A more discreet approach to (3) is to assume “the public” is comprised of “ordinary citizens”, “lay persons”<sup>3</sup> and a diverse population otherwise outside the realm of discursively applicable expert knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Others look at the public or citizenry as a polyvocal and multilocal body of potential; one which can learn, grow, be empowered, etc. and can thus increase their degree of democratic-deliberative competency.<sup>5</sup> In both approaches to (3) it is apparent that the most critical players in democratic deliberation are the majority of democratic subjects who, by the nature of the aforementioned categorical structure, do not fall into categories (1) or (2).

The rationale of highlighting this three-fold split is to draw attention to a problem we find in the scholarship of climate discourse: namely, that two elite parties in advanced democracies are often understood by researchers as having a vested interest and a defined jurisdiction in which they can enter into a deliberative schema or at least autonomously generate climate discourse. Meanwhile the third party—that of the citizen—is often times incongruent with, or defined in such a way that, excludes them from being immediately considered as equal deliberative members in discourse generation. The emphasis on the citizen—the comprising member of the public—is a consistent blind spot in the scholarship of deliberation based climate discourse, as most

<sup>3</sup> Whyte, Kyle Powys, and Robert P. Crease. “Trust, Expertise, and the Philosophy of Science.” *Synthese* 177.3 (2010), p. 415

<sup>4</sup> Moore, Alfred. “Democratic Reason, Democratic Faith, and the Problem of Expertise.” *Critical Review* 26.1-2 (2014): 101-14, p. 110-112

<sup>5</sup> Fischer, Frank. *Democracy and Expertise: Reorienting Policy Inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009; p. 96-100

writers tend to focus on the development of a discursive bridge between the political economic elites of climate politics and the academic elites of climate science.

### **Framework for the Political and Scientific Divide**

In order to draw attention to the ontological space of the deliberative citizen I will utilize one of the most comprehensive approaches to the climatological discursive divide, exemplified in the work of Hayley Stevenson and John Dryzek. In their recent paper “The Discursive Democratization of Global Climate Governance” (2012), they explore the possible reconciliation of the dividing line between the demands of sustaining climate politics in a deliberative democracy and the demands put forth by climate change scientists. Stevenson and Dryzek argue that only by attempting to find a common ground for discourse, can climate politics and climate science become an accessible deliberative space for all citizens in a “global public sphere.”<sup>6</sup> They conclude that there are several zones which political economic institutions and climate science can both interact in and ultimately share. These two seemingly disparate spheres of politics and science however are “polycentric” and subsequently necessitate a study of climate discourses common to both.<sup>7</sup>

Stevenson and Dryzek offer a compelling analysis and a nuanced solution to the deliberative split. In using them as the framework for my argument, it is worth noting that I do not disagree with either their overall methodology or the logical ordering of their argument—on the contrary I believe Stevenson and Dryzek are quite strong in these two areas. Where I do see a problem, however, is in their attempt to find a “discursive bridge” between climate politics and science. To restate the nature of the problem: even in this type of characterization of climate deliberation, the ontological role of the citizen is relegated to a medium of exchange. What Stevenson and Dryzek have done (like many other scholars<sup>8</sup>) is to pose a discursive formation that must pass through the commitments of political and academic elites prior to their introduction in the deliberative realm of citizens. The result, as we shall see, does little to advance the discourse beyond how the elite parties have conceived of the ontological role of the citizen. The scholarship, exemplified by Stevenson and Dryzek, consistently maintains a space for the citizen where they can act as a mere recipient or transmitter of knowledge rather than an equal participant in knowledge formation.

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<sup>6</sup> Stevenson, Hayley, and John S. Dryzek. “The Discursive Democratization of Global Climate Governance.” *Environmental Politics* 21.2 (2012). p. 193-194

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 204

<sup>8</sup> Pearce, Rebecca. “Climate Capitalism and Its Discontents.” *Global Environmental Politics* 14.1 (2014): 130-35.

## Stevenson and Dryzek: A Restatement

Stevenson and Dryzek begin their paper with an institutional divide. The two parties on either side of this divide are comprised of *political economic institutions* on the one hand, and *climate science institutions* on the other. It should be observed that these are not the terms Stevenson and Dryzek employ; rather they describe the former party in terms of political actors, administrative bodies, and economic influences via markets and corporations. The latter party is described in monolithic and otherwise homogenous terms (“climate science”, “scientist”, etc.). The implicit assumption by the authors is that there exists a shared field of study in climatology and the data across the discipline is—for the most part—commonly accepted both in terms of methodology and results. As was stated in the introduction: both of these categorizations are common in the scholarship; they both fall under the classification of what some have called “technical knowledge” or a type of knowledge in deliberative democracy, that through either consensus or policy, grants those who attain it a level of expertise.<sup>9</sup>

The bifurcated view of climate sciences as a united force opposite the more actor-centered politics is not an uncommon one. “One of the most striking features of recent debates about climate change is the disconnect between the organization of economic activity and the accumulating body of science pointing to potentially devastating consequences,” wrote Levy and Spicer.<sup>10</sup> They go on to contend that the complex multiplicity of views in economic and political discourse should begin to find a common social ontology on par with the consistency of the “accumulating body of science” that is climatology. Roman Felli observes that discursive contradictions in proposed solutions via climate change data act as a foundation from which we can index the political economic strategies of entities like international trade unions. As such, argues Felli, political economic organizations tend to have “overlapping strategies” rather than collaborative data.<sup>11</sup> In both cases the political economic institutions are seen as disjointed or merely market focused whereas climate science—as peer-reviewed and consensus based—is more unified in its conclusions. On the basis of these two different approaches to climatology, there is a distinct need for a common discourse to be established.

While Stevenson and Dryzek do not elaborate on the monolithic nature of climate science they do suppose that as far as political economic institutions treat climate change: “there is no ‘nodal’ discourse...”<sup>12</sup> As such, they emphasize that the primary

<sup>9</sup> Fischer, Frank p. 138-142

<sup>10</sup> Levy, D. L., and A. Spicer. “Contested Imaginaries and the Cultural Political Economy of Climate Change.” *Organization* 20.5 (2013): p. 659

<sup>11</sup> Felli, Roman. “An Alternative Socio-ecological Strategy? International Trade Unions’ Engagement with Climate Change.” *Review of International Political Economy* 21.2 (2013): p. 378-381

<sup>12</sup> Stevenson, Hayley, and John S. Dryzek, p. 20

space for bridging these two institutions is in “democratic enclaves.”<sup>13</sup> These enclaves—which represent limited spaces for competence to develop “prior to engagement with other discourses”—serve as the initial stage for disparate discourses to eventually interact with each other. By bringing the beginnings of discourse formation to prominence, the respective enclaves of each institution can begin to reflect and contest one another on equal footing. This contestation subsequently yields an interstice whereby the divide between climate science institutions and political economic institutions can begin to provide the mechanisms of deliberation through an inclusive and mutual acknowledgement of each other’s jurisdiction and field of knowledge.

Stevenson and Dryzek argue that if climate politics and climate science are to construct a discursive bridge thereby rectifying their divide, they must do so by finding areas of intersection already present within their (A) “...ontology of discourse” (B) “Assumptions about natural relationships” (C) “Agents and their motives.” And (D) “Key metaphors and rhetorical devices.”<sup>14</sup> Through analysis of these four areas, we can begin to look at discourse generation and where it is shared across the respective parties in climate deliberation. With this process of bridging, we can focus on linkages in the use of terms like “legitimacy, accountability, fairness, and representation...” and their use by democratic actors and observers. This focus on linked terms is important because “[t]hese terms... provide the basic vocabulary of democracy.”<sup>15</sup>

To further appreciate the bridging solution, it is worth noting that Stevenson and Dryzek actually think of the citizen as ontologically prior to discourse generation. What they propose is that the citizen, as a discursive body, is already an equal partner in climate change deliberation—the problem is that the citizen is commonly, what Whyte and Crease call, an “unrecognized contributor.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the citizen has as much potential for discursive bridging as climate science or climate politics, but goes unrecognized by those two elite parties due to their non-expert status. Stevenson and Dryzek’s solution strikes right at the heart of the issue by looking for discursive patterns in the citizens qua democratic subjects that can be bridged with climate science and politics. By looking for preliminary discourses shared between the political, the scientific, and the public citizen we can bring each party together in a deliberative schema that still allows us to make decisions about climate change without doing away with the value of democratic mechanisms.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 202

<sup>14</sup> Stevenson, Hayley, and John S. Dryzek, p. 193

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 189

<sup>16</sup> Whyte, Kyle Powys, and Robert P. Crease, p. 415-418

## Citizen as Medium of Exchange

There are two central problems in Stevenson and Dryzek's ontology of the citizen. The first is the transposition of the *role* of the citizen and second in the available *space* that the citizen occupies in climate change deliberation. Climate science and politics intersect in certain areas of discourse—these areas of intersection are valuable as they serve as the substructure from which bridges between the parties can be constructed. As was observed above, the role of citizen in this process is pre-supposed as an equal participant, but they are equal only in the sense that they participate in discourse—not in their capacity for discourse generation. To clarify: the role of citizen is understood to be that of the non-expert, whose knowledge is immediately accessible to anyone including political economic actors and scientists. Whereas the role of scientists can be understood by their capacity to “compel action” and the role of the political economic actor to enact and directly alter policy<sup>17</sup>—the citizen can lay no direct claim to either of the roles due to a lack of expertise.

The ontological space that Stevenson and Dryzek leave for the citizen is the ‘bridge’ itself. The scholarship on climate deliberation has constructed the polarized nature of climatology discourse such that there no immediate connection between science and politics absent a medium. By recognizing and exploring a discursive gap between their different approaches to climatology, politics and climate science have, in effect, articulated an ontological space for the citizen to occupy. The citizen serves as the medium of knowledge exchange between the climate scientists and the policy makers or the ideologues and those academics seen as pushing their research agenda. The discourse of the citizenry can be informed by scientific knowledge and can subsequently inform political economic actors in democracies. In other cases, the knowledge of the citizen can strengthen scientific claims with local knowledge which will then be presented to the political community.<sup>18</sup>

The citizen, ontologically speaking, is conceived of as an informant and informer to climate science discourse—they are relegated to a medium of exchange for knowledge. Citizens can be informed by climate science experts if and when they view said scientific experts as credible and trustworthy, and this knowledge can then be carried forward into democratic participation.<sup>19</sup> Political economic institutions can use citizens as informants, determining the content of their discourse to better assess policy changes and ideological commitments. The bridge between science and politics in climate deliberation sets up a political economics of climatology, in which the citizen can be understood as an indicator for both elite parties to communicate discursive

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<sup>17</sup> Briggie, A. “Review: Questioning Expertise.” *Social Studies of Science* 38.3 (2008): p. 466-467

<sup>18</sup> Whyte, Kyle Powys, and Robert P. Crease, p. 417; 422-423

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.412-413



objectives to the other. The deliberative space left for citizens is constructed at the point of intersection between climate science and politics, and that space transposes the ontologically prior notion of the citizen body into democratic subjects who cannot see themselves as the nucleus of democratic deliberation at all.

There is a clear difficulty in grasping how any sort of bridge between political economic institutions and climate science would allow citizens to recognize themselves as the central or even equal participants in discourse. One alternative argument put forth by Pepermans & Maesele suggests that democratic subjects can always be understood as participants in some type of mediated discourse; or at least they participate in the public and private institutions that are constructing the discourse which they interact with.<sup>20</sup> Anabela Carvalho took this argument further in 2010; suggesting that the very basis for how subjects see themselves as democratic citizens within a climate change debate is dependent on media influences (a subset of political economic institutions).<sup>21</sup> For both of these authors however, the key feature of participation for the democratic subject is in their ability to recognize potential deliberation through mediation—which is antecedently no different than a medium for exchange.

These mediated discourses, unlike the arguments of Stevenson and Dryzek, do not take the citizen as ontologically prior to the process. Rather, they concern themselves with constructing a discourse outside of citizens or beyond them. The intention of this exogenous discourse is that the citizen can refer back to either the process of discourse production or the content of the discourse itself to understand their role and space in the deliberation process. Divorced from the center of the debate in these cases, the democratic subject relies on the mutual recognition and contestation of academic and political economic elites.<sup>22</sup> As Carvalho notes this fact should not dissuade democratic citizens from participating in the politics of climate change—quite the opposite. Rather citizens should take to “informal political participation and citizen mobilization” via protest, online petitions, etc.<sup>23</sup> In other words: instead of being a participant in the process of bridging separate discourse or even the subject of the discourse itself—democratic subjects should take to creating their own discourse (a virtual enclave of sorts).

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<sup>20</sup> Pepermans, Yves, and Pieter Maesele. “Democratic Debate and Mediated Discourses on Climate Change: From Consensus to De/politicization.” *Environmental Communication* 8.2 (2014): 216-32.

<sup>21</sup> Carvalho, Anabela. “Media(ted)discourses and Climate Change: A Focus on Political Subjectivity and (dis)engagement.” *WIREs Clim Chang Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* (2010) p. 172-174

<sup>22</sup> Pearse, Rebecca p.132-133

<sup>23</sup> Carvalho, p. 173

The claims of Carvalho, et al. do little to assuage my concerns about the ontological conception of the citizen in discourse generation. Are we to assume that citizens should aspire to create these sorts of outlier discourses with intent that they will one day form a more equitable bridge between political economic institutions and climate science? Even if we are to conclude that the aforementioned aspiration should be the objective of democratic deliberation by citizen-spawned discourses, the bridge between the elite parties has demarcated the content of climate discourse into the same expert-oriented camps. The knowledge generated by the two elite parties has still has no use for an ontological element other than an exchange medium. By constructing a bridge between shared discourse generation—this time absent the citizen as a primary consideration—we would be left with prompting the citizen to find a set of adherent discourses within the conjoined space, or (should they wish to be “unmediated”) find a yet unclaimed locus of discourse beyond the ever expanding grid of shared climate science and political economic deliberation.

## Conclusion

Charles Taylor famously wrote that democratic societies are necessarily exclusionary:

What is the source of this thrust toward exclusion? We might put it this way: Democracy is inclusive because it is the government of all the people; but paradoxically, this is also the reason that democracy tends toward exclusion. The exclusion is a by-product of the need, in self-governing societies, of a high degree of cohesion. Democratic states need something like a common identity.<sup>24</sup>

What Taylor had in mind was that by attempting to bridge the dynamic identities, political commitments, and autonomy of citizens; democratic societies run the risk of subverting the very inclusivity that makes them democratic in the first place. Stevenson and Dryzek have attempted just this: in looking for common ground between political economic institutions and climate science institutions (and only incidentally the citizen), they have constructed a shared space for discourse generation which excludes those incapable of generating independent discourse. By establishing the discursive bridge, Stevenson and Dryzek exposed an ontology of the citizen as a medium for exchange.

Undoubtedly, knowledge exchange in democratic deliberation may well still be useful, but the resulting discourse from that knowledge will promote deliberative mechanisms in which the political economic institutions and climate science can construct new discursive bridges for the citizen to traverse. The ontology of the citizen is transposed into a *type* of participant in climate deliberation; a participant who either must find their

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, Charles. “The Dynamics of Democratic Exclusion.” *Journal of Democracy* 9.4 (1998): 143-56.

own non-expert discourse to generate or must simply rely on either party as an informant or their informer.