



Universidade do Minho

Understanding collective (in)action on climate change: contributions of communication and critical social research

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18th Swiss Global Change Day, Bern, 11 April 2017



for Policy Innovations Transformative Change

Implementing the 2030 Agenda
for Sustainable Development



UNRISD
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

‘Transformative change (...) requires **changes in social structures and relations**, including **addressing** the growing economic and **political power of elites** and patterns of stratification (...) that can lock people (...) into disadvantage and **constrain their choices and agency.**’

‘[Requires] **both individual agency and collective action** by societies’

‘(...) active citizenship with **greater agency of civil society organizations and social movements.**’

‘It is clear that transformative change involves **multiple actors**, and **transparent and democratic political processes.**’

‘Collective action requires a consciousness of human agents whose policies or practices must be changed and a “we” who will help to bring the change about.’

W. Gamson, 1992, *Talking Politics*

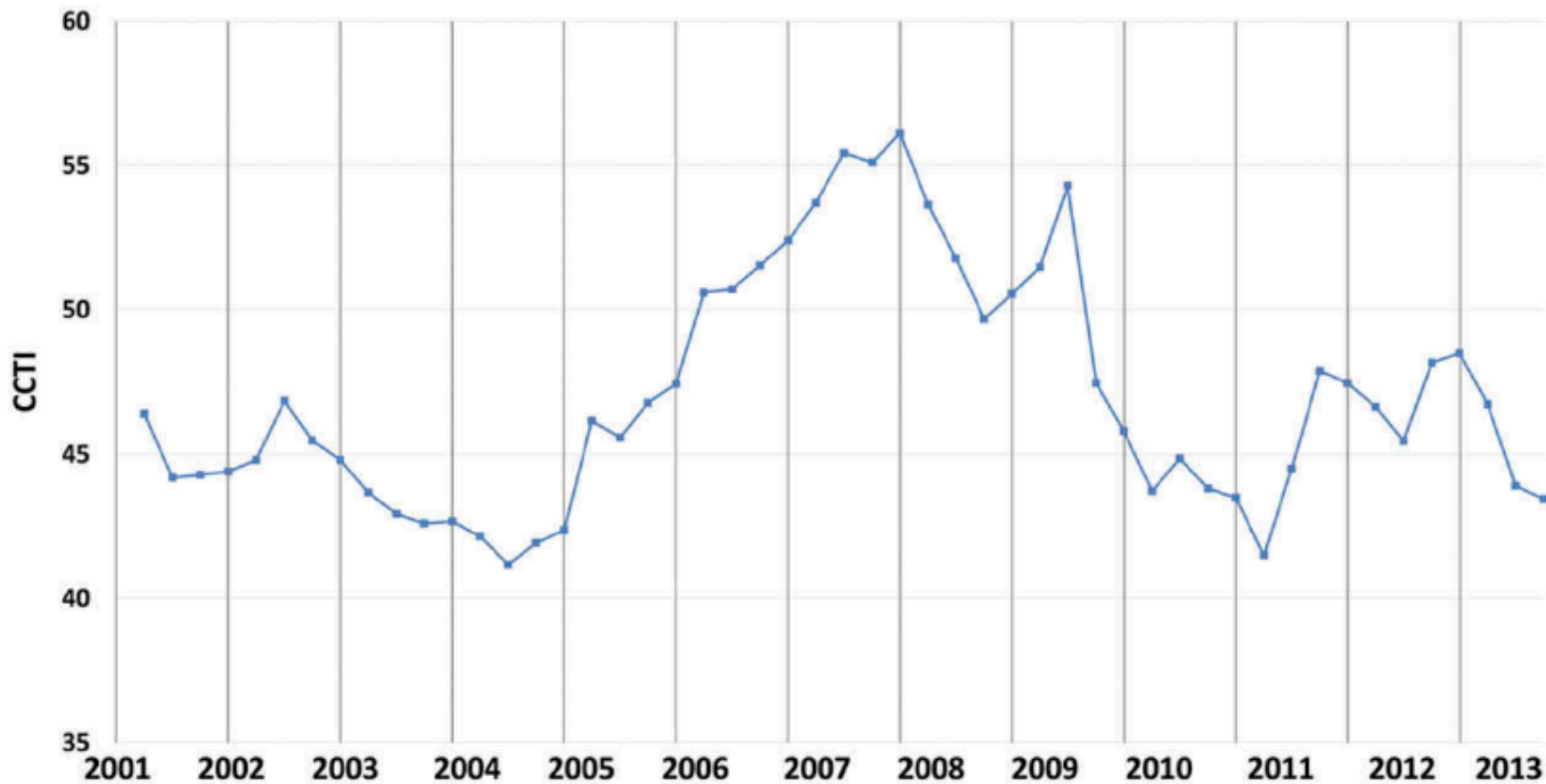
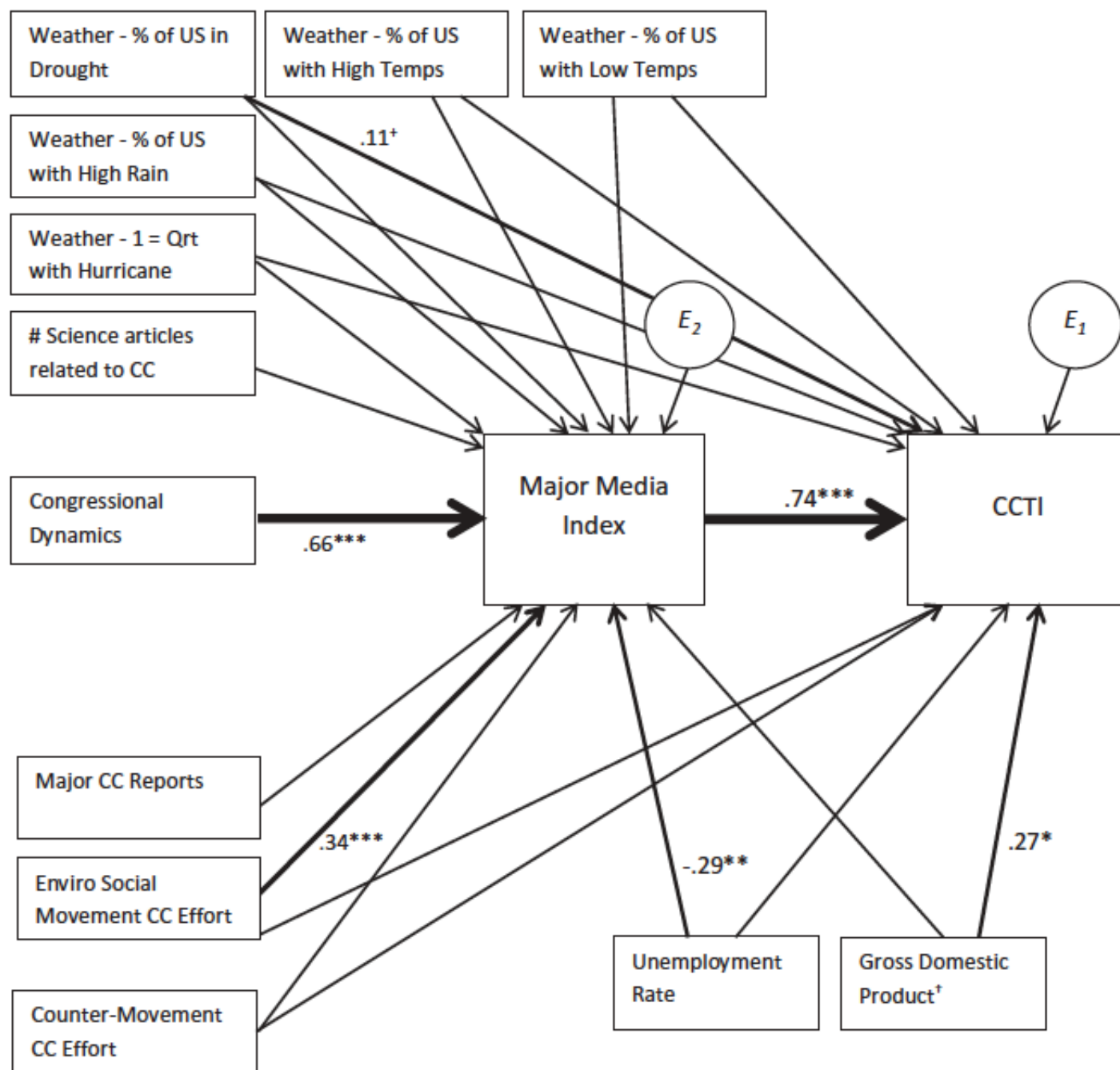


Figure 2. Climate change threat index, 2001–2013.



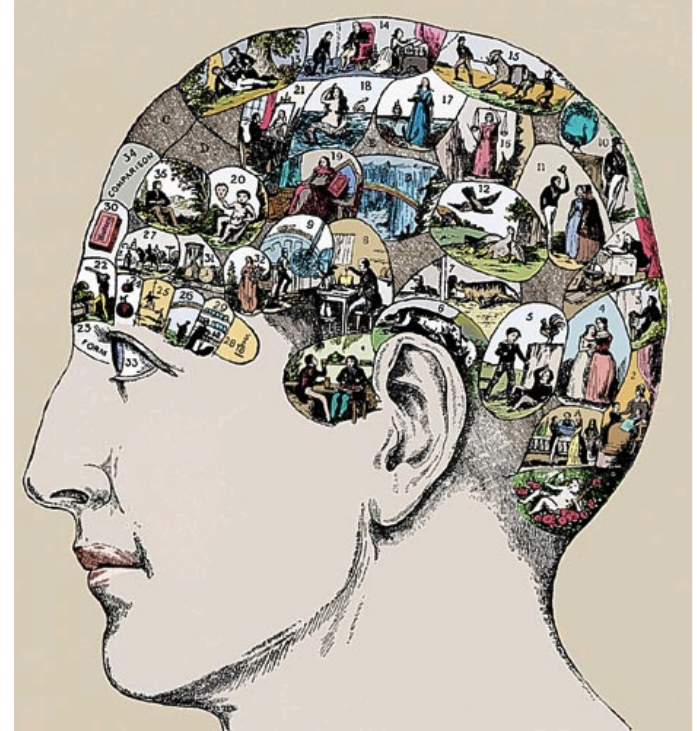
Carmichael &
Brulle, 2017

Figure 4. Full model and estimated parameters for the climate change threat index (CCTI).

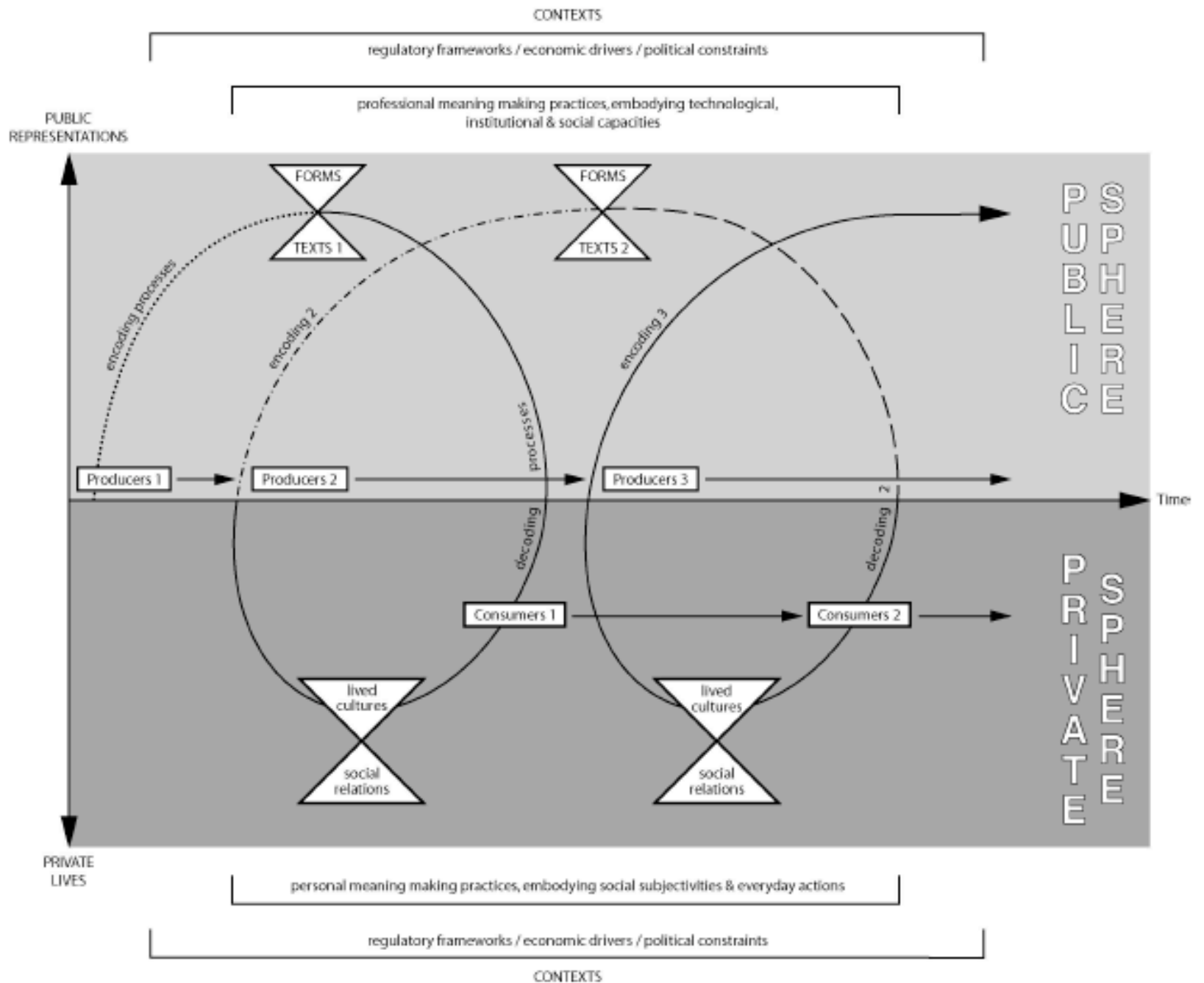


<http://tophdings.com/429564-planet-earth.html>

Media(ted) representations



<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-545448/From-blushing-laughter-fits-discover-REALLY-goes-heads.html>

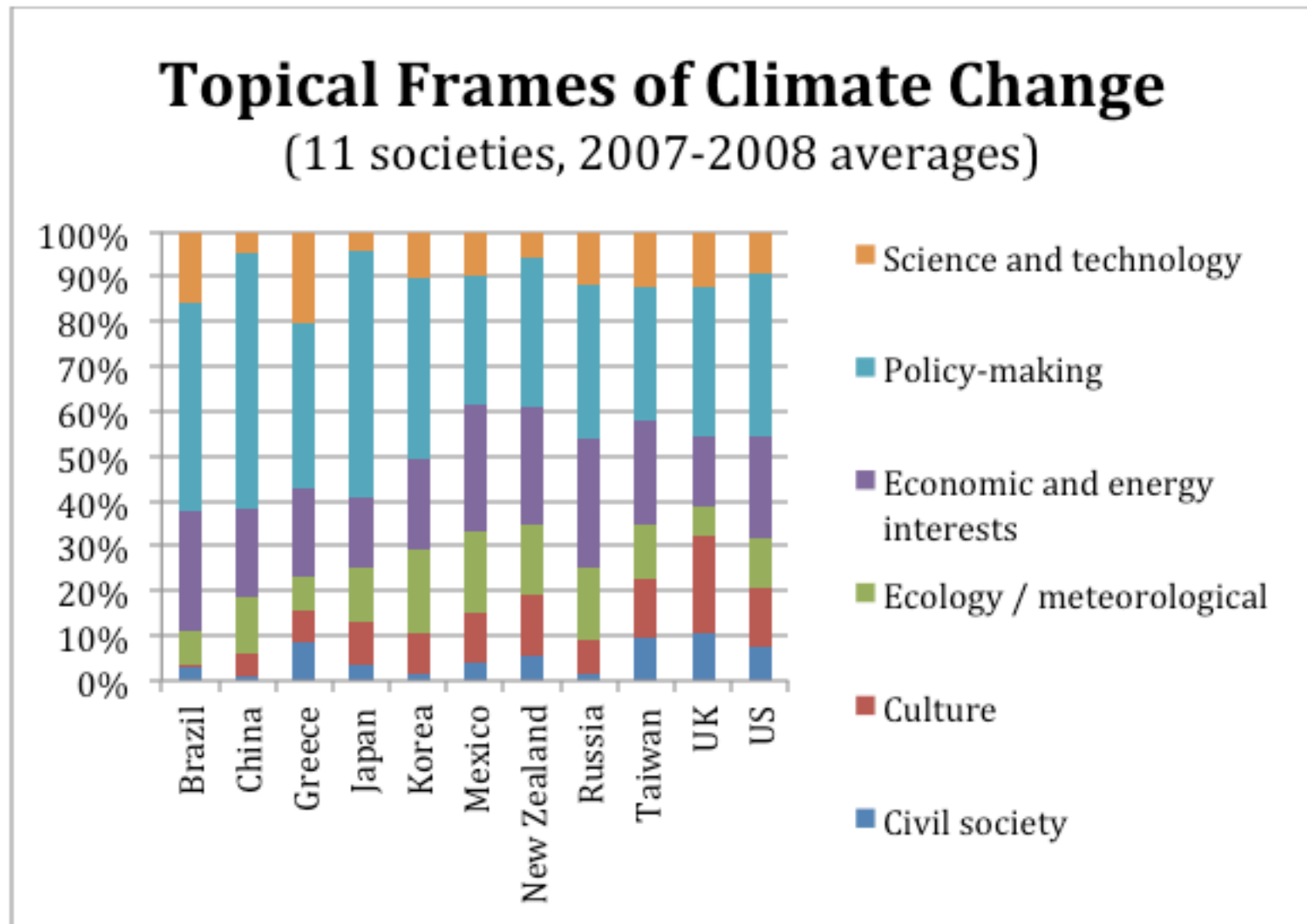


‘Language (...) is not merely a channel through which information about underlying mental states and behaviour or facts about the world are communicated. On the contrary, **language is a ‘machine’ that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world.** This also extends to the **constitution of social identities and social relations.**’

Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002



What about climate politics and collective (in)action?



Participant 1: When you see something along the lines of “The UN is having trouble coming to a conclusion” because [there are] 180 countries with conflicting priorities, nobody’s really taking it that seriously, and it doesn’t provide me any motivation to do anything whatsoever. It’s just, it’s depressing. Great, what next?

Participant 2: Yeah, like, if your government doesn’t want to do anything, then it’s like, “Why should I?”

Focus group 4



Research Paradigms in the Social Sciences

Positivist

- Focus on 'objective' dimensions
- Explanation; prediction and control

Interpretative

- Focus on meaning-making processes
- Understanding; reconstruction

Critical

- Concern with power relations and inequalities (domination, marginalization, exclusion, etc)
- Critique and transformation; restitution and emancipation

How has the meaning of climate change been socially constructed, reproduced and transformed, and how do discourses relate to different social practices?

What kinds of political identities and subjectivities have (media) discourses on climate change been constructing?

What are the implications for collective action and, more specifically, for political consciousness and group identity?

My argument

Multiple discursive processes have hampered the development of citizens' 'consciousness of the possibility of change' and the constitution of a 'we' to carry it out ...:

- Universalization of responsibility
- Naturalization of (anthropogenic) climate change
- Social construction of the global scale as the 'right' locus for action
- Hegemony of sustainable development/ecological modernization discourses
- 'Consensus politics' on climate change

... contributing to climate change's post-political condition.

However, meanings and 'subject positions' are never fully fixed and change could happen

Sweden study

What do you think are the causes of climate change?

- I believe that it's we humans.
- It's humans, I believe.
- It's us. And all our needs.
- Our welfare.
- Mm. I think so too, actually.

(Four women, group G)

Os corais estão a morrer um pouco por todo o lado e a culpa é nossa

A Grande Barreira de Coral está mais em perigo do que nunca. E as más notícias não vêm só da Austrália: por outras partes do planeta há registo do fenómeno de branqueamento dos corais superficiais e da sua morte. As alterações climáticas são as principais responsáveis.

TERESA SERAFIM - 28 de Março de 2017, 8:17

1193
PARTILHAS



PUB



Translation:
Corals are dying everywhere
and it is our fault

I: ...Who is it that is responsible for this [dealing with climate change]?

- We are! Humanity!

...

- The personal level. It's at the personal level.
- Each and everyone one.

(Two women, group I)



Diffusion/dilution of
responsibility



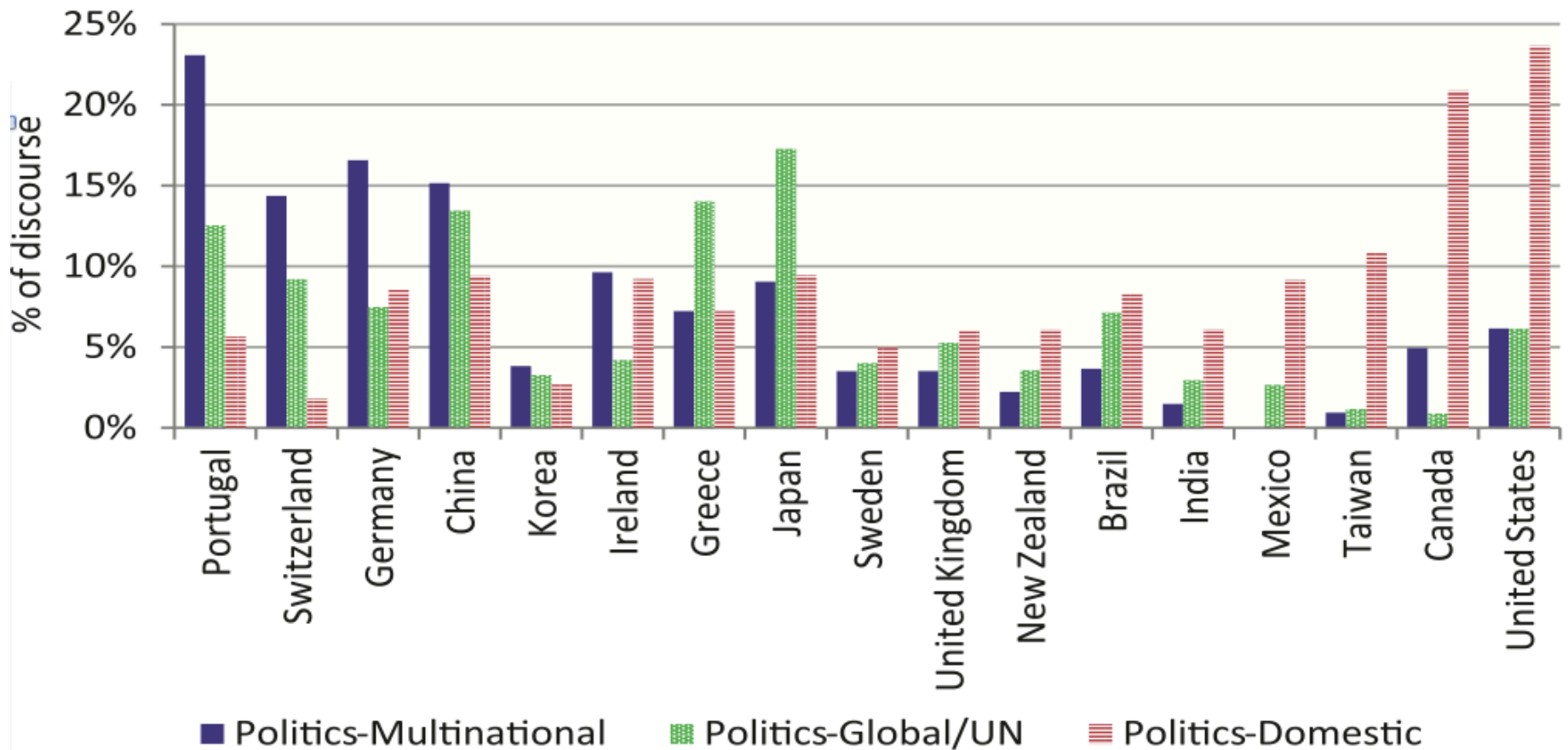
Individual micro-action to
'save the environment'

Discursive process	Definition	Example from focus groups
Universalization	'A particular interest is represented as the interest of all.' (Thompson, 1990: 61)	'The climate threat concerns everybody'; 'it's everybody's problem'; 'it's everybody's responsibility.'
Naturalization	'A state of affairs which is a social and historical creation may be treated as a natural event or as the inevitable outcome of natural characteristics...' (Thompson, 1990, 66)	The anthropogenic factor as pure fact rather than a mixture of scientific facts and historical and cultural factors: 'It's so obvious that human beings <u>have</u> done this.'

But the 'we' of
collective action
needs a 'constitutive
outside'

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Scale of climate politics in the media



Social representations of the scale of climate change

Tabla 5. ¿Cuáles son los dos problemas más importantes, relacionados con el medio ambiente en...? (porcentajes, selección de los más citados).

Su pueblo o ciudad	2005	2007	España	2005	2007	El mundo	2005	2007
– La suciedad	17,1 (1)	14,8 (2)	– La contaminación atmosférica en general*	23,1 (1)	27,6 (1)	– La contaminación atmosférica en general*	22,9 (1)	25,5 (2)
– La contaminación atmosférica en general*	16,5 (2)	20,3 (3)	– La contaminación industrial	20,0 (2)	12,6 (3)	– El efecto invernadero (2005)/El cambio climático (2007)**	19,0 (2)	28,5 (1)
– El excesivo número de vehículos	14,9 (3)	13,6 (3)	– El excesivo número de vehículos	15,5 (3)	10,1 (5)	– La contaminación industrial	17,1 (3)	9,6 (3)
– La falta de equipamientos	14,1 (4)	8,2 (6)	– Los incendios forestales	9,3 (4)	8,4 (6)	– El excesivo número de vehículos	7,4 (4)	3,5 (7)
– El efecto invernadero (2005)/El cambio climático (2007)**	1,2 (16 de 23)	2,9 (14 de 27)	– El efecto invernadero (2005)/El cambio climático (2007)**	3,3 (11 de 23)	6,7 (7 de 27)	– La tala de árboles (2005)/La destrucción de bosques y selvas (2007)**	6,0 (5)	5,3 (5)

Fuentes: CIS (2005, nº 2.590) y CIS (2007, nº 2.682). Respuestas espontáneas. El número entre paréntesis indica el orden que ocupan por porcentaje de citaciones.

* En 2007 el CIS desdobló la categoría «la contaminación atmosférica en general» en dos: «la contaminación atmosférica» y la «contaminación en general»; aquí hemos optado por sumarla a efectos de comparar los resultados con los obtenidos en 2005.

** En 2007 es la primera vez que el CIS utiliza el concepto «cambio climático» en lugar de «efecto invernadero» en su clasificación de los problemas ambientales.

Hegemony of sustainable development/ecological modernization discourses – suppression of transformative discourses

‘[British newspapers] put forward solutions to climate change that are in-tune with a light-touch version of ‘sustainable development’ or (...) a ‘carbon consensus’.

Saunders, Grasson & Price, 2012

Techno-managerial discourses

- Promote (hope in) technological solutions
- Advance market-based approaches and ‘green consumption’
- Expert-led
- Narrow and exclusionary language of numbers, models and legal jargon

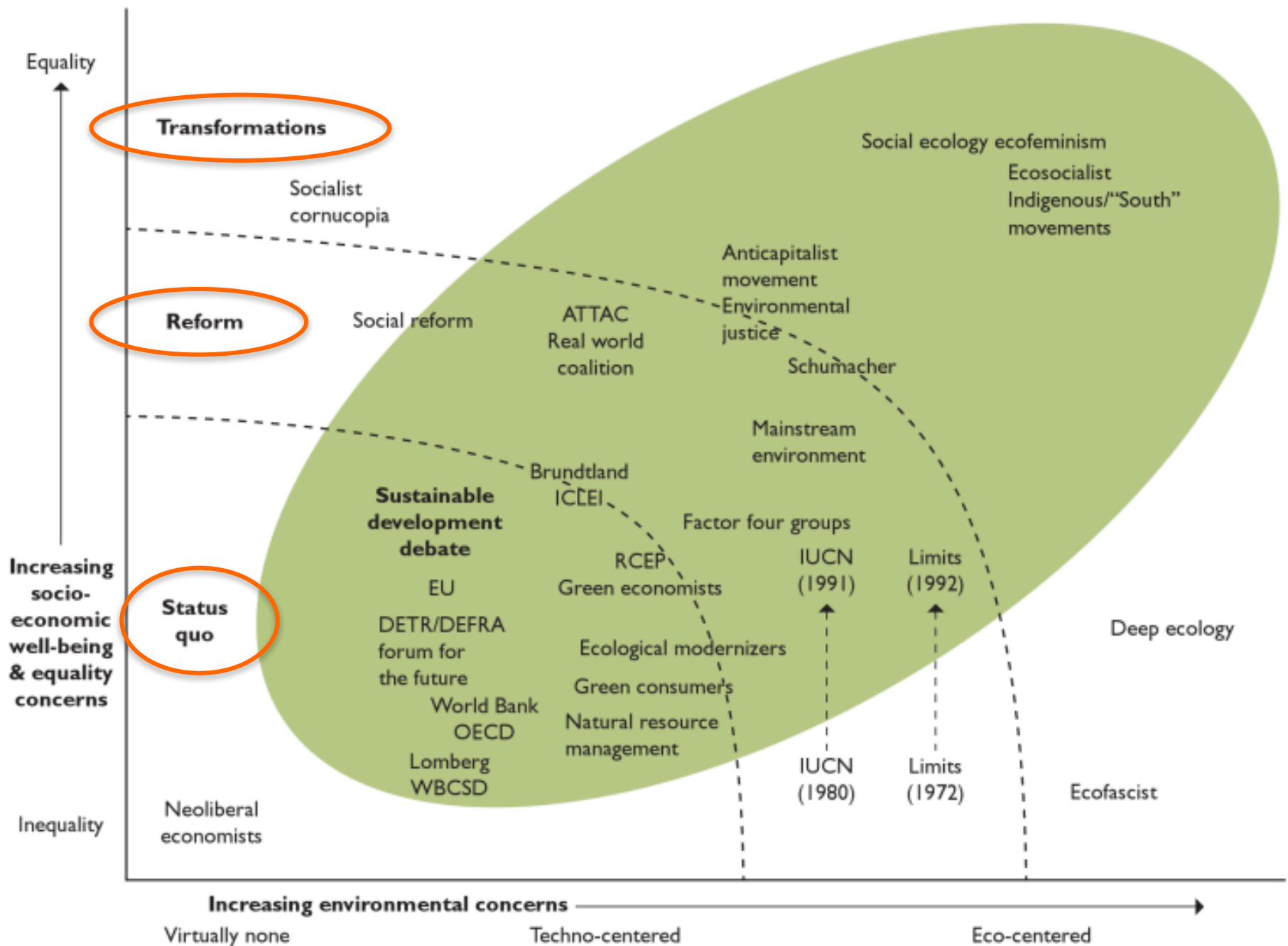
The Green Economy



<https://niskanencenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/global-economy.jpg>

‘[The UK media have] restricted the debate on climate change mitigation scenarios by relying on calculation and monetization of emissions as the starting point.’

Koteyko, 2012



‘Consensus politics’

International organizations such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank have claimed to embark on ‘climate protection’ while remaining silent about their role in causing the problem.

‘Climate protection as an empty signifier’

Methmann, 2010

e.g. The World Bank has called for ‘low carbon growth strategies’ and the WTO has argued that the ‘increase in income that trade brings about can lead society to demand better environmental quality’

De-politicization of climate politics & climate communication



Environmental Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fenp20>

Searching for 'the political' in environmental politics

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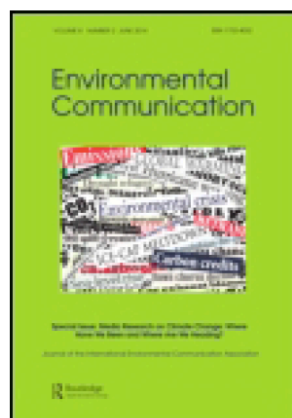
Published online: 14 Jan 2014.

The Non-political Politics of Climate Change

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Environmental Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/renc20>

Democratic Debate and Mediated Discourses on Climate Change: From Consensus to De/politicization

Yves Pepermans & Pieter Maesele

Published online: 08 May 2014.

Climate change's post-political condition

- 'Consensus' views (but consensuses are always limited)
- No conflicting viewpoints about future direction of society
- No confrontation between 'real' alternatives towards sustainable futures
- Obscuring structural and historical causes – precludes critical inquiry
- Lack of democratic, plural debate

...

⇒ Is UNRISD's proposed transformative change of social and political relations doomed?

Searching for re-politicizing communication practices



<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/mar/02/climate-camp-disbanded>



<http://systemchangenotclimatechange.org/>



http://www.theenergycollective.com/sites/theenergycollective.com/files/imagepicker/69592/pic2_436.jpg



<http://groups.globaljustice.org.uk/manchestercentral/files/2011/11/climate-justice.jpg>

CLIMATE CHANGE POLITICS



Communication and Public Engagement

EDITED BY

ANABELA CARVALHO AND TARLA RAI PETERSON

CHAPTER 1

REINVENTING THE POLITICAL

HOW CLIMATE CHANGE CAN BREATHE
NEW LIFE INTO CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES

*Anabela Carvalho and
Tarla Rai Peterson*

TEETERING ON THE EDGE

Scientific research increasingly indicates that climate change presents enormous threats to life as humankind knows it (e.g., Kiehl, 2011; Shakhova et al., 2010; Vermeer & Rahmstorf, 2009) but despite the economic slump of the last few years, the levels of greenhouse gas emissions continue to grow. Existing policies seem insignificant in the face of what is required to avert the worst impacts of climate change, and national and international politics appear to be plagued by perpetual impasse. While humanity stands on the edge of disaster, the main problem is a political one.

Climate change politics may involve more stakeholders than any other issue: Governments play a key part but so do international organizations, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). More-

Canada study

I've grown quite cynical and jaded over time, and it just makes me sad to think about climate change and I don't think anything's happening.

Group 1

We have the ability, we just don't take action. We're apathetic....We just don't do anything together about it. But I think we have the ability if we actually started now, to work on it.

Group 5

You have to do more than just tell them there's a problem. You have to give them the idea they have some way to do something about it.

Group 3



http://30c1be84fhqj3xa1lmsckme.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/cache/2015/10/shepard_faurey_global_warming_print/866293997.jpg

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BRITISH COLUMBIANS WHO MATTER Kevin Washbrook makes coal a burning issue

WENDY STUECK

VANCOUVER — The Globe and Mail

Published Monday, Aug. 12, 2013 8:00AM EDT

Last updated Monday, Aug. 12, 2013 8:00AM EDT

15 Comments



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For decades, coal was shipped by the millions of tonnes from the Lower Mainland without it drawing much attention.

If people noticed the massive Westshore Terminals at Roberts Bank, it was likely in passing as they drove to catch a ferry at Tsawwassen.

Coal shipments from Neptune Terminals in North Vancouver were similarly low-key, part of routine operations at a terminal that has been handling potash, coal and vegetable oil since 1970.

‘Participants were especially excited by stories of what one might call *entrepreneurial activism* or *everyday heroism* — that is, tales of people who, through their own initiative, creativity and volition, open up new spaces for political engagement, both for themselves and for others.

[The] combination of revelation (“I had no idea?”) with agency (“I want to join this party”) is much easier to generate in a local context.

(...) the most important effect of news about climate activism was to disrupt, if only for a moment, the cynicism that otherwise dominates how we think, feel and act with respect to climate change.’

ADVANCED REVIEW

Communication practices and political engagement with climate change: a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we call for a refocusing of research on citizens' political engagement with climate change. In doing so, we argue that communication practices not only help create the conditions for political engagement but they also comprise the modes of such engagement. Our argument proceeds in four steps. First, we review the literature on public engagement with climate change, concluding that there is a lack of attention to issues regarding the political. Consequently, we make the case for a refocusing of research on political engagement. Second, we explain how the notion of political subjectivity helps us to understand the relation between communication practices and engagement with the politics of climate change. Third, we discuss examples of dominant communication practices that constrain citizen political engagement by depoliticizing climate change, and alternative communication practices that have the potential to politicize. We end by outlining the many research questions that relate to the study of political engagement with climate change.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 October 2015
Accepted 5 August 2016

KEYWORDS

Climate change;
communication practices;
political engagement;
political subjectivity; de/
politicization; citizens

Researching communication practices and possibilities for citizen political engagement with climate change

Introduction

For a number of years, social and political scientists have been debating the increasing distance that appears to separate citizens from the realm of politics. Participation in political processes of various types has been waning, trust in political systems is at disturbingly low levels in many democracies, and social research has identified a widespread sense of disillusion and disconnect toward most things political (e.g. Stoker, 2006). Despite these trends, new forms of citizen engagement with collective matters have been developing in different spaces. Often emerging in arenas shaped by new information and communication technologies, modes of activism are variable in terms of organization, expression and involvement of participants (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Postill, 2014). Furthermore, the last decade has seen some of the largest and longest "real life" street protests in history, such as the so-called Arab Spring and the Occupy movement.

A wealth of survey studies has shown widespread awareness and concern about climate change (Capstick, Whitmarsh, Poortinga, Pidgeon, & Upham, 2015) but little is known about the ways people relate to the problem's politics. The few existing studies suggest that citizens have low levels of knowledge and perceive formal political structures as rather inaccessible to them (Meira Cartea, Arto Blanco, & Montero Souto, 2009). Despite the fact that climate change poses enormous threats to human societies, most citizens appear to feel disconnected from the processes and spaces that

Research challenges

E.g.

Which (media) discourses offer alternative forms of agency and redefine the roles and rights of non-dominant social actors in the politics of climate change?

When and how do individuals and groups develop critical interpretations of the dominant discourses and engage in the production of alternative discourses?

How do organizational conditions and knowledges weigh in on communication practices that defy the political 'common sense'?

What discursive space do those discourses acquire?

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