This is an author's draft of a chapter in Franzisca Weder, Larissa Krainer and Matthias Karmasin, eds. (2021) *The Sustainability Communication Reader*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Post-Political Communication and Sustainability

Philip Hammond

This chapter places the concept of sustainability in the context of recent discussions about the environment, particularly climate change, as a 'post-political' issue. For many years it was taken for granted that the aim of environmental campaigning was to build consensus (in terms of both scientific understanding and policy responses), but by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century some critics had started to argue that this approach was mistaken. The attempt to put the issue of climate change 'above' or 'beyond' politics began to look strangely self-defeating. Instead of producing decisive action and political engagement, the consensus-building strategy had resulted in a closing down of democratic debate and in political demobilisation (Machin 2013: 5). Although this problem was often seen in terms of particular communications strategies and campaigning approaches to the specific issue of climate change, it was also usually understood in the context of broader developments – as the 'emblematic case' of a more general post-political malaise (Swyngedouw 2013: 3). The mainstreaming and de-politicisation of climate change could be seen both as symptomatic of, and as reinforcing or even helping to cause, a more general hollowing out of politics and public life since the 1990s.

Today, on the cusp of the 2020s, although circumstances have changed in some important ways, the problem of the post-political has not gone away. In June 2019, for example, the British government passed a law committing the country to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.[1] This extraordinary and unprecedented move, which the then UK Chancellor predicted would cost more than £1 trillion,[2] had not been part of any political programme or manifesto offered to the public. Citizens had no opportunity to vote for it or even to debate it. Rather, the idea emerged from a quango (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation), the Committee on Climate Change, and passed straight to the statute books in a matter of weeks. The Committee on Climate Change was established in 2008 by the Climate Change Act, which had been passed by a Labour administration, while the 2019 net zero amendment to the Act was initiated by the Conservatives. The bipartisan consensus was not new, and nor was the outsourcing of policy-making to an unelected and unaccountable quango,[3] but both of these features of the 2019

legislation illustrate how climate change remains a post-political issue. Whatever one thinks of the overall policy goal, or of the specific measures likely to be involved (which remain uncertain at the time of writing in late 2019), the UK's net zero emissions law clearly bypassed the sorts of democratic deliberation and decision-making processes that would normally be expected to precede a government passing legislation with such far-reaching implications.

This chapter firstly explores the post-political context in more detail and considers how it relates to contemporary discussions of climate change, with a particular focus on campaigning and communication. Secondly, it discusses the concept of sustainability in relation to the post-political. The chapter argues that the broad acceptance of sustainability – its status as a virtually uncontested, 'motherhood-and-apple-pie' idea – can be understood as exemplifying the post-political condition identified by critics as foreclosing debate about possible alternative futures. Although environmentalism encompasses a spectrum of views, from the 'light green' mainstream to the deeper hues of radical ecologism, it has to confront the question of whether it aims to create simply a more 'sustainable' version of the current form of society, or whether it aspires to a larger social and economic transformation. If, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson, it remains easier to imagine end of world than the end of capitalism, then what role do the questions of climate change and sustainability play in relation to progressive radical politics?

Climate Change and the Post-Political

The post-political critique developed in the context of the significant elite attention and public prominence that the issue of climate change enjoyed in the mid-2000s. This was the era of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and the Live Earth concerts (2007); of the UK government-commissioned *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* (2006) and Leonardo DiCaprio's climate change documentary *The 11th Hour* (2007). News coverage of climate change, which had already been increasing steadily for several years (Anderson 2009: 168—9), rose by two and a half times between 2003 and 2006 in the US, and by four times in the UK (Boykoff and Roberts 2007: 6). The quality of news coverage changed too, as the balancing of 'duelling' opinions on the issue all but disappeared. By 2006, balanced coverage of climate change had fallen to just 3.3% in the American press and 0.41% in the British press, so that 96.7% of US coverage of the issue, and 99.59% of UK

coverage, emphasised anthropogenic causes of climate change (Boykoff 2007: 474). As Erik Swyngedouw (2010: 215) describes it, the consensus that emerged in the 2000s was 'largely shared by most political elites from a variety of positions, business leaders, activists and the scientific community', with the 'few remaining sceptics…increasingly marginalized as either maverick hardliners or conservative bullies'.

However, by the end of the decade, the building wave of interest had crashed in the disappointment of the UN Climate Change Conference at Copenhagen in December 2009.[4] As Chris Methmann puts it:

> The tremendous failure of the Copenhagen climate change summit… condenses all the paradoxes of present day global climate politics in one political event. Never before had so much attention been directed at global warming in the media, politics and society….Never before had a bigger summit dealt with climate change. Never before had one single political event been charged with so much hope. And never before had the disappointment been worse.
>
> (Methmann 2014: 1)

The disappointment led to questioning of the consensus-building approach, but some climate activists were already uneasy with it. Anneleen Kenis and Erik Mathijs (2014: 148, 152) highlight how Climate Justice Action (CJA), for example, 'explicitly took issue with the consensual, post-political logic governing much of the debate on climate change', designing campaign literature and activities for Copenhagen that 'aimed at "breaking" the consensus ideology of the climate summit and turning the spotlight to what was neglected in the hegemonic discourse'. The CJA activists ignored or dismissed many of the points that dominated the 'hegemonic climate discourse', adopting slogans such as 'forget shorter showers', or 'climate change is not an environmental issue', and argued instead that 'climate change is a symptom, capitalism the crisis' (2014: 151–2). Similarly, Andrew Bowman (2010: 173–4) describes how other 'radical climate activists…posited the climate crisis as an opportunity to create a more just and equitable future society', adopting slogans such as 'social change not climate change' and 'government and corporations are not the answer'.

This gets us to the heart of the debate about the post-political: whereas many campaigners had understood the environment, and specifically climate change, as issues which could help to build a compelling case for fundamental socio-economic transformation, in practice what Kenis and Mathijs (2014: 148) call the 'consensual, post-political logic governing much of the debate on climate change' offered no prospect of challenging the established order. Instead, according to Swyngedouw (2010: 219, 228), environmentalism was working as a 'new opium for the masses', playing the 'radically reactionary' role of forestalling 'the articulation of divergent, conflicting and alternative trajectories of future socio-environmental possibilities', and 'reproducing, if not solidifying, a liberal-capitalist order for which there seems to be no alternative'.

At one level this could be understood as a problem of representation (Kenis and Lievens 2014: 5), but that does not mean it is straightforward to address the issue. Critics have accurately identified problems with how climate change, and appropriate responses to it, are habitually framed in political and media discourse, but such framings have proven difficult to shift. One such framing is catastrophism – the 'continuous invocation of fear and danger' through 'apocalyptic rhetoric' (Swyngedouw 2010: 217–18). The Institute for Public Policy Research described this as 'climate porn': an 'alarmist repertoire' of 'death and doom' which is 'secretly thrilling' (Ereaut and Segnit 2006: 7). Critics have noted that such catastrophism can be counter-productive, since people are likely to feel paralysed rather than energised by it, but perhaps even worse is the fact that it implicitly reinforces a post-political outlook in which the urgency of impending climate apocalypse closes down debate about possible futures (Swyngedouw 2010: 218–19). Yet the attraction of catastrophism, and the implied importance and urgency that it carries, seems hard to resist. Kenis and Mathijs (2014: 153) note that even the CJA activists, who tried to avoid the depoliticising pressure of 'the clock ticking', were sometimes tempted into adopting an 'apocalyptic vision'.

A decade after the CJA's efforts at Copenhagen, catastrophism was dominating the language of climate change campaigning as never before. In 2016, psychologist Margaret Klein Salamon published a strategy document for The Climate Mobilization, an organisation she had founded two years earlier, titled *Leading the Public into Emergency Mode*. Salamon urged her fellow activists to reimagine environmental campaigning as a 'WWII-scale climate mobilization':

> [T]he climate movement must fully adopt the language of immediate crisis and existential danger. We must talk about climate change as threatening to cause the collapse of civilization, killing billions of people, and millions of species. These horrific outcomes await us during this century, possibly even in the first half of it if things truly slip out of control.
>
> (Salamon 2016)

By the time Salamon released an updated version of the document in May 2019, the British parliament had officially declared a climate emergency – the first national legislature in the world to do so.[5] Within a few weeks, Ireland, Portugal, France and Canada had done the same: by one estimate, by August '935 jurisdictions in 18 countries [had] declared a climate emergency'.[6] Also in May 2019, the *Guardian* newspaper adopted a new vocabulary, issuing editorial guidelines preferring 'climate emergency, crisis or breakdown' over the less worrying 'climate change', and favouring 'global heating' rather than 'global warming'.[7] In its 2019 version, Salamon's document was subtitled 'Introducing the Climate Emergency Movement', on the grounds that the strategy she had called for was now very much in evidence – represented most prominently by Extinction Rebellion, and by the 'school strikers' led by teenager Greta Thunberg. Both had adopted the 'emergency' language Salamon favoured, and had gained enormous publicity. Within a few months of being established, Extinction Rebellion had a book deal with Penguin, its campaign materials were being collected by the Victoria & Albert art museum, and the BBC had made a sympathetic documentary about the organisation.[8] The Corporation's Director General, Sir Tony Hall, even invited the group in for a meeting to 'examine the BBC's approach to reporting on the crisis and how it can lead the way with a suitably urgent response'.[9] Meanwhile, Thunberg echoed the opening lines of Salamon's (2016, 2019) report – 'Imagine there is a fire in your house' – in high-profile speeches in early 2019 to the World Economic Forum at Davos and the European Parliament in Strasbourg, as well as in media interviews.[10] The underlying post-political logic – to close down debate in favour of calling for urgent action – was the same as that of the consensus around catastrophism critiqued a decade earlier.

A second common framing discussed by analysts of the post-political is responsiblisation: the presentation of climate change as a matter of individual responsibility. As Anabela Carvalho and Tarla Rai Peterson (2012: 8) observe, for example, climate change communication initiatives often tend to address people as 'individual consumers', calling on them to 'modify some aspect of their energy-related

behavior', so that 'responsibility for climate change is individualized and the political realm is reduced to lifestyle choices'. This was the approach CJA activists were trying to counter in 2009 with their 'forget shorter showers' slogan. This type of framing is perhaps not as ubiquitous as it was before the 2008 financial crisis, when 'ethical consumerism' was very much in fashion (Littler 2009), yet it has not disappeared. Of course, it is to be expected that 'ethical' businesses sell us commodities on the basis that they are 'providing opportunities for consumers to literally and figuratively "buy in" to climate mitigation', and it is by now well established that this 'creates a false veneer of democratisation in the form of consumer choice' (Doyle et al. 2019).

What is perhaps less obvious is that even when campaigns set out to address us as citizens, they quickly devolve into imagining us primarily as individual consumers. Even large-scale initiatives at the national and international level tend to conceive of popular 'involvement', not in terms of voting on the direction of policy or even on specific actions (since that is generally put beyond democratic debate), but rather in terms of self-auditing our personal shopping and lifestyle choices. Typically, people are invited to sign a petition to lobby their representatives (often the very people eliciting such 'lobbying'), or to sign a pledge of some sort. The Climate Neutral Now initiative, for example, launched by the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2015, calls on 'companies, organizations, [and] individuals, i.e. consumers' to 'measure, reduce and offset' their CO_2 emissions. The explanatory aside casting individuals as 'consumers' is revealing, although the campaign does formally address people as 'citizens'. Clicking the 'I am a citizen' link on the organisation's website leads to a 'Climate Pledge' where people can promise to measure their own CO_2 emissions using an online calculator, to reduce those emissions, and to offset them using the UN Certified Emissions Reductions scheme. Acting as a citizen, in other words, quickly translates into acting as a self-conscious consumer, and Climate Neutral Now proceeds to offer many recommendations for how to make better consumer choices, including buying an electric car, turning off lights and using low-energy bulbs, eating less meat and, inevitably, taking shorter (and cooler) showers.[11]

It is this sort of approach that leads Peter Berglez and Ulrika Olausson (2014: 57) to characterise climate change as an 'ideological discourse' which works to 'preclude…critical questioning of the predominant socio-political order'. In their study

of public attitudes to the issue, they attempt to uncover the 'ideological processes that generate the consensual, post-political condition of climate change' (2014: 60):

> one gradually gets drawn into a discourse that already seems to have become 'standard', a socially accepted way of talking and thinking about climate change, and an established trend somewhere else: in the media, in commercials, at work, in education, in everyday parlance, and in politically correct conversation. This discourse is endowed with certain standard environmental concepts such as recycling and organic food, but also with related practices such as the 'right way' of cleaning, consuming, driving, and so forth.
>
> (Berglez and Olausson 2014: 65)

The more that climate change is understood in this way, as imposing an etiquette of correct choices and ethical behaviour, 'the more protected it becomes from critical questioning' (2014: 65). Instead, they argue, 'anxiety and fear become normal aspects of everyday subjectivity, generating constant micro-actions, such as recycling' (2014: 68). This does not lead to any 'radical political transformation of present society' or 'pose any challenge to the capitalist system', but instead has the opposite effect of 'reinforcing this very order' (2014: 68).

Although it matters how climate change is framed, however, the problem is not simply one of representation. Rather, the common discursive repertoires of catastrophism and responsiblisation should be understood as symptomatic of a deeper problem: a crisis of political agency. This is the real meaning of the post-political: it is an attempt to describe what has happened to public life in Western societies since the end of the Cold War. As Slavoj Žižek (2000: 198) describes, there has been a 'degeneration of the political', in which 'the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats' seeking a 'more or less universal consensus'. Such a world, he argues, 'presents itself as post-political in the sense that there is some kind of a basic social pact that elementary social decisions are no longer discussed as political decisions' but are instead 'turned into simple decisions of gesture and of administration' (Žižek in Deichmann et al. 2002: 3). The seemingly incongruous combination of apocalyptic fears and small-scale individual actions makes sense against this backdrop, where political agency has become difficult to enact or even to imagine. The post-political discourses of climate change could be

understood, indeed, as different ways of projecting that sense of powerlessness and lack of agency. Either we are under threat of extinction and have no time for the deliberations and disagreements of normal politics; or we are inwardly-focussed, making a therapeutic project of our own small choices and behaviours. Or perhaps, as Engin Isin (2004: 229, 225) suggests, as 'neurotic citizens' we experience both: feeling 'anxious, under stress and increasingly insecure' as we are 'charged with saving the environment' through our 'everyday habits'.

Sustainable Capitalism?

'Sustainability' is also a target for critics of the post-political. Swyngedouw (2007: 20, 23), for instance, notes that the 'fantasy of "sustainability"' enjoys the support of everyone from Greenpeace to George Bush and from the Pope to the World Bank, with disagreement limited to matters of tactical and technical detail. Moreover, he argues (2007: 30), it introduces 'new forms of autocratic governance-beyond-the-state' which work through 'disembedded networks (like "the Kyoto Protocol"; "the Dublin Statement", the "Rio Summit", etc.…)'. Similarly, Ingolfur Blühdorn and Michael Deflorian (2019: 1) analyse 'new modes of collaborative governance', which are 'commonly presented as more democratic' but which in reality are 'neither inclusive nor egalitarian'. These 'decentralized, flexible, and participatory network approaches', they argue, are 'set up to facilitate collaboration and consensus and, therefore, systematically eclipse all matters of fundamental disagreement and potentially irreconcilable conflict'. The post-political critique of sustainability, in essence, is that it appears to offer the prospect of change while actually allowing the continuation of 'business as usual' and contributing to the further 'hollowing out' of democracy (Swyngedouw 2007: 20, 30). For Blühdorn and Deflorian (2019: 5), the discourse of sustainability and the 'new forms of environmental governance' it entails only 'co-opt' people, mobilising them as 'an additional resource for the legitimation and stabilization of the established order' (2019: 2). Ultimately, sustainability is post-political because it does not disturb (and indeed further cements) the consensus that has been 'built around the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism as an economic system' (Swyngedouw 2007: 24).

So broad is this consensus, that it often turns out to encompass ostensibly radical environmentalists. In the run-up to the 2009 Copenhagen summit, for example, the BBC broadcast a special edition of its *Newsnight* programme asking whether

environmentalism was ‘too conservative’, because it was unwilling to embrace high-tech solutions such as nuclear power, or ‘too radical’ because of its anti-capitalist stance.[12] Franny Armstrong, director of the campaigning film *The Age of Stupid* (2009), was interviewed as a representative of the ‘radical’ tendency, and was asked whether the solution to climate change was ‘basically smashing capitalism’. Her response was that the solution was for ‘everybody, whether that’s individuals, businesses, the military, the monarchy, to commit to cutting their emissions by 10%…in 2010’. This was the objective of the 10:10 campaign that Armstrong had founded, and which, she claimed, had already attracted support from ‘10,000 businesses’. Fast forward ten years, and the new radical campaign, Extinction Rebellion, had by April 2019 reportedly received £50,000 in donations from hedge funds.[13] A group of business people wrote to *The Times* expressing their ‘support for the Extinction Rebellion (XR) agenda’, and the organisation set up a special ‘XR Business’ website to facilitate their involvement.[14] Three months later it received around £500,000 from a ‘group of wealthy US philanthropists and investors’ who were reportedly ‘using their contacts among the global mega-rich to get “a hundred times” more in the weeks and months ahead’.[15] Such willing compromises seem to justify the view that sustainability really just means sustainable capitalism.

Yet there is a real divergence of outlook between mainstream and radical perspectives – it is just that it is not as sharp as might first appear, and it does not reduce to a neat pro- vs. anti-capitalist division. The way it appears is that mainstream environmental policy is a means to the end of continued economic growth. As former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, for example, argued in a famous 1988 speech: ‘Stable prosperity can be achieved throughout the world provided the environment is nurtured and safeguarded’.[16] Thatcher was endorsing the outlook of the Bruntland Report, published the previous year, that: ‘a new era of economic growth can be attained, one based on policies that sustain and expand the Earth's resource base’ (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: chapter 1, §7). It is not difficult to see why this approach might be criticised as ‘market environmentalism’ (Ervine 2013: 110) or the ‘financialisation of Nature’ (Spash 2016: 931). As against this, more radical approaches vehemently reject ‘business as usual’. Naomi Klein (2011), for example, advocates breaking ‘every rule in the free-market playbook’, and calls for ‘deep changes…not just to our energy consumption but to the underlying logic of our economic system’. Although the argument often plays out in these terms, they are misleading: mainstream environmentalism, institutionalised in international agreements and protocols, is not

mere ‘greenwashing’; and radical perspectives are not as ‘anti-capitalist’ as they usually claim to be.

The ‘revolutionary meaning of climate change’ (Klein 2011) actually translates into a reform programme to constrain economic growth and consumption. Her argument is that capitalism must be scaled back, made fairer and more local, regulated and curbed in the interests of minimising human impacts on the natural environment:

> We will need to rebuild the public sphere, reverse privatizations, relocalize large parts of economies, scale back overconsumption, bring back long-term planning, heavily regulate and tax corporations, maybe even nationalize some of them, cut military spending and recognize our debts to the global South.
>
> (Klein 2011)

The ideal future, she argues, would be ‘to return to a lifestyle similar to the one we had in the 1970s’ (2014: 91). This somewhat bathetic ‘revolutionary’ vision flows from the fact that Klein does not see the social relations of capitalism as the core problem to be addressed. Rather, she understands the issue as an ‘expansionist, extractive mindset’ and the ‘overconsumption of natural resources’ (Klein 2011). While more radical versions of sustainability imply a far-reaching reorganisation of social and economic life, the nature of the future that is envisaged, and the identity of the political actors that would bring it about, remain unclear. As Swyngedouw argues:

> the sustainable future desired by ‘sustainability’ pundits has no name. While alternative futures in the past were named and counted (for example, communism, socialism, anarchism, libertarianism, liberalism), the desired sustainable environmental future has no name and no process, only a state or condition.
>
> (Swyngedou 2007: 27)

This may help to explain why there is sometimes a felt need to enlist businesses or billionaire philanthropists, or why citizen involvement can quickly turn into an inward-focussed project of ‘ethical’ individual choices. What is at stake here is, again, a problem of political agency. But this is not simply a tactical or pragmatic matter: it could be said to be built in to the ecological world-view, which distrusts modernist conceptions of the human subject and its relationship to the world as object.

Hence, Klein rejects large-scale techno-scientific environmental intervention as 'hubris' (2014: 75), and traces current problems back to early-modern science: the seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon is the 'patron saint' of 'extractivism' (2014: 170). In this view, the 'roots of the climate crisis date back to core civilizational myths on which post-Enlightenment Western culture is founded – myths about humanity's duty to dominate [the] natural world'. We need to reject those myths, she argues, give up the 'illusion of total power and control', and 'accept (even embrace) being but one porous part of the world, rather than its master or machinist, as Bacon long ago promised' (2014: 175). As she acknowledges, such ecological thinking is also a 'profound challenge' to the 'extractivist left' (2014: 176–8). Whereas historically the left-wing alternative was generally about increasing material wealth and prosperity, with capitalism understood as a barrier to such progress, in Klein's argument it is modernity itself that is at fault. Once the problem is understood in this way – as rooted in Enlightenment ideas about scientific knowledge and human progress – the necessity of overcoming social limits is replaced with an imperative to respect natural limits. Indeed, in this sense, the subjective anti-capitalism of a radical like Klein comes very close to the sort of apology for capitalism that ecologism provided in the recession of the early 1970s, when *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1974), commissioned by the Club of Rome (co-founded by Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei), argued that it was nature, rather than capitalism, that limited wealth and prosperity.

A somewhat similar view was articulated in the Bruntland Report, which argued that whereas, in the past, concern had focused on 'the impacts of economic growth upon the environment', now attention needed to shift to considering 'the impacts of ecological stress…upon our economic prospects' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: chapter 4, §15). This was the flip side of its implicitly instrumental view of environmental protection as necessary for continued growth: poor economic prospects were implicitly attributed to 'ecological stress'. Whatever its pragmatic attractions for the elite – in terms of opening up new markets in carbon trading and offsetting, or using environmental policy to regulate and limit the growth of developing economies – the ideological aspects of 'green capitalism' (Heartfield 2008) may ultimately be even more important. In the context of the initial rise of climate change as a public issue in the late 1980s and early 1990s, two related aspects of this ideological dimension stand out as still being relevant today:

the incorporation of genuinely ecological themes into mainstream political discourse, and the use of the environment as a source of meaning for Western elites.

Thatcher is widely acknowledged as one of the first world leaders to have put climate change on the public agenda in the late 1980s,[17] and, unlikely as it may seem, her speeches from that era articulate ideas that would not be out of place in an article by Naomi Klein. In a major speech to the UN General Assembly in 1989 Thatcher argued that we must 'find a way in which we can live with nature, and not dominate nature'; and that we should accept that 'we are not, that we must not try to be, the lords of all we survey'. Describing the nineteenth century as 'a time when men and women felt growing confidence that we could not only understand the natural world but we could master it, too', she argued that 'Today, we have learned rather more humility and respect for the balance of nature'.[18] Addressing the World Climate Conference a year later, Thatcher suggested that it was necessary to rethink the goal of human progress:

> For two centuries, since the Age of the Enlightenment, we assumed that whatever the advance of science, whatever the economic development, whatever the increase in human numbers, the world would go on much the same. That was progress. And that was what we wanted. Now we know that this is no longer true. We have become more and more aware of the growing imbalance between our species and other species, between population and resources, between humankind and the natural order of which we are part….We must remember our duty to Nature before it is too late.[19]

Thatcher's adoption of these ecological themes was a striking departure in mainstream political discourse: it indicated that the problematisation of political agency confronts the establishment as well as its radical critics.

The environment – and specifically, climate change – was seized on by some political figures in this era as offering a new sense of purpose in a post-Cold War world where the familiar reference points of international relations and domestic Left/Right politics looked suddenly uncertain. A 1991 report by the Club of Rome expressed this shift very clearly. Noting that 'the two political ideologies which have dominated this century no longer exist', it described a 'vacuum' in which 'both the order and objectives in society are being eroded' by popular 'indifference, scepticism, or outright rejection of governments and political parties' (King and Schneider 1991:

68, 74). The report observed that 'men and women need a common motivation…a common adversary against whom they can organize themselves and act', and suggested that 'pollution, the threat of global warming, water shortages, famine and the like, would fit the bill' in providing a new 'common enemy against whom we can unite'. In exactly this spirit, Thatcher noted in her 1989 UN speech that although the recent thaw in relations with the Soviet Union had 'brought the promise of a new dawn, of new hope' to international affairs, just at the moment when 'conventional, political dangers…appear to be receding', another danger presented itself: 'the prospect of irretrievable damage to the atmosphere, to the oceans, to earth itself'. She therefore proposed that the UN should 'prolong the role of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change' in order that it could underpin international protocols and regulations to combat the problem – a challenge, she said, that was 'as great as for any disarmament treaty', necessitating 'a vast international, co-operative effort'.[20] Similarly, in her speech to the 1990 World Climate Conference, she argued that 'Our ability to come together to stop or limit damage to the world's environment will be perhaps the greatest test of how far we can act as a world community'.[21] The issue was framed in a similar way around the same time by Al Gore. Accepting the US Vice-Presidential nomination in 1992, Gore reflected that while people elsewhere had recently 'torn down the Berlin Wall, brought communism to its knees and forced a racist government in South Africa to turn away from apartheid', in America people were suffering a 'crisis of the spirit'. Environmentalism, he thought, offered a potential solution to this malaise: 'The task of saving the earth's environment must and will become the central organizing principle of the post Cold War World'.[22]

Conclusion

From the perspective of a Conservative politician such as Thatcher or a Democrat like Gore, then, the challenge of tackling environmental problems could be seen as a 'test' for international cooperation, an 'organising principle' for international action, a potential new source of meaning and purpose for the emerging post-Cold War order. Domestically, too, in the context of the post-Cold War 'crisis of meaning' (Laïdi 1998), there was much talk of a 'democratic deficit' and 'post-democracy' (Crouch 2004), as political life became hollowed out and there was a widespread disengagement from public life. What has become clearer more recently, though, is that this ideological dimension of environmentalism is primarily important in terms of intra-elite cohesion.

In the late 2010s, new forms of populist politics seemed to presage a re-engagement of the masses with public life, but in new and unpredictable ways. Whereas in the 1990s and 2000s the aim seemed to be to re-engage and cohere Western societies with a new sense of mission against the common 'enemy' of CO_2, now the issue of climate change appears to work more as marker of elite virtue. The August 2019 'Google Camp', for example, brought together billionaires, celebrities, politicians and royalty to discuss the issue of climate change, at an estimated cost of $20 million.[23] Participants travelled to a Sicilian resort via luxury yachts and 114 private jets in order to discuss their concern for the environment. It was a striking illustration of the socio-economic shift that Joel Kotkin (2014: 8) identifies as having led to the rise to power of a new 'Oligarchy' of the super-rich, whose wealth and power is based in the increasingly important high-tech digital economy; and whose influence is boosted by a new cultural and intellectual 'Clerisy', engaged in 'persuading, instructing, and regulating the rest of society' on issues such as climate change and sustainability. In this context, it needs to be asked whether climate change really can be re-posed as an issue for progressive politics, in the way that many activists and campaigners have assumed.

This chapter has argued that at the core of the problem of the post-political is a failure of agency – that the apparent difficulty of imagining large-scale social and political transformation results from a diminished view of the human subject. We are invited to understand ourselves as vulnerable, neurotic subjects engaged in reflexive self-monitoring rather than hubristically attempting to shape the object world through outward-facing engagement and action. This is why, as Žižek argues, an 'ecology of fear' has:

> every chance of developing into the predominant form of ideology of global capitalism, a new opium for the masses replacing the declining religion: it takes over the old religion's fundamental function, that of having an unquestionable authority which can impose limits. The lesson this ecology is constantly hammering away at is our finitude: we are not Cartesian subjects extracted from reality, we are finite beings embedded in a biosphere which vastly transcends our horizon.
>
> (Žižek 2008: 439)

Ecological perspectives, whether advanced by conservatives or self-styled radicals, tend give expression to this anti-humanist viewpoint rather than challenging it.

According to the Club of Rome, the 'real enemy…is humanity itself' (King and Schneider 1991: 75); or as Thatcher put it, 'the main threat to our environment is more and more people, and their activities'.[24] There is now an increasing number of writers rejecting the mis-association of socialism with anti-consumerism (Landa 2018, Varul 2013), and reclaiming arguments for economic growth and technological progress for the Left (Phillips 2019, Symons 2019). But supposed radicals who, in contrast, are suspicious of technological and scientific progress, and hostile to attempts to master or control nature rather than respecting natural limits, are part of the problem rather than a solution to it.

Questions

- What alternative framings of climate change and sustainability could challenge the post-political consensus?

- How far can sustainability be reconciled with modernist ideas of progress? Would such a reconciliation be desirable?

- Is the 'post-political' period of technocratic governance now ending, with the rise of populism?

Further Reading

- Hammond, Philip (2018) *Climate Change and Post-Political Communication*. London: Routledge.

- Hulme, Mike (2009) *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Phillips, Leigh (2015) *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts*. London: Zero Books.

- Wilson, Japhy and Erik Swyngedouw, eds. (2014) *The Post-Political and its Discontents*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

References

Anderson, Alison (2009) Media, Politics and Climate Change: Towards a New Research Agenda, *Sociology Compass*, 3(2): 166–82.

Berglez, Peter and Ulrika Olausson (2014) The Post-political Condition of Climate Change: An Ideology Approach, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 25(1): 54–71.

Blühdorn, Ingolfur and Michael Deflorian (2019) The Collaborative Management of Sustained Unsustainability: On the Performance of Participatory Forms of Environmental Governance, *Sustainability*, 11(4), doi.org/10.3390/su11041189.

Bowman, Andrew (2010) Are We Armed Only with Peer-Reviewed Science? The Scientization of Politics in the Radical Environmental Movement, in Stefan Skrimshire (ed.) *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*. London: Continuum.

Boykoff, Maxwell T. (2007) Flogging a dead norm? Newspaper coverage of anthropogenic climate change in the United States and United Kingdom from 2003 to 2006, *Area*, 39(4): 470–81.

Boykoff, Maxwell T. and J. Timmons Roberts (2007) Media Coverage of Climate Change: Current Trends, Strengths, Weaknesses, United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report* background paper, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/boykoff_maxwell_and_roberts_j._timmons.pdf.

Carvalho, Anabela and Tarla Rai Peterson (2012) Reinventing the Political, in Anabela Carvalho and Tarla Rai Peterson (eds.) *Climate Change Politics: Communication and Public Engagement*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.

Crouch, Colin (2004) *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.

Deichmann, Thomas, Sabine Reul and Slavoj Žižek (2002) About war and the missing centre in politics, *Eurozine*, 15 March, www.eurozine.com/about-war-and-the-missing-center-in-politics/?pdf.

Doyle, Julie, Nathan Farrell and Michael K. Goodman (2019) The cultural politics of climate branding, *Climatic Change*, published online 16 July, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02487-6.

Ereaut, Gill and Nat Segnit (2006) *Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better?* London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

Ervine, Kate (2013) Al Gore as Carbon Warrior: The Politics of Inaction, in Gavin Fridell and Martijn Konings (eds.) *Age of Icons: Exploring Philanthrocapitalism in the Contemporary World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Heartfield, James (2008) *Green Capitalism*. London: Open Mute.

Isin, Engin F. (2004) The Neurotic Citizen, *Citizenship Studies*, 8(3): 217–35.

Kenis, Anneleen and Matthias Lievens (2014) Searching for ‘the political’ in environmental politics, *Environmental Politics*, 23(4), DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2013.870067.

Kenis, Anneleen and Erik Mathijs (2014) Climate change and post-politics: Repoliticizing the present by imagining the future? *Geoforum*, 52: 148–-56.

King, Alexander and Bertrand Schneider (1991) *The First Global Revolution: A Report by the Council of the Club of Rome*. London: Simon & Schuster.

Klein, Naomi (2011) Capitalism vs. the Climate, *The Nation*, 9 November, www.thenation.com/article/capitalism-vs-climate/.

Klein, Naomi (2014) *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. London: Penguin.

Kotkin, Joel (2014) *The New Class Conflict*. Candor, NY: Telos Press.

Laïdi, Zaki (1998) *A World Without Meaning*. London: Routledge.

Landa, Ishay (2018) The Negation of Abnegation, *Historical Materialism*, 26(1): 3–36.

Littler, Jo (2009) *Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Machin, Amanda (2013) *Negotiating Climate Change: Radical Democracy and the Illusion of Consensus*. London: Zed Books.

Meadows, Donella H., Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers and William W. Behrens III (1974) *The Limits to Growth: A report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. London: Pan.

Methmann, Chris (2014) *We are all green now: Hegemony, governmentality and fantasy in the global climate polity* (PhD diss.). Hamburg: Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, http://d-nb.info/1050818407/34.

Phillips, Leigh (2019) The Degrowth Delusion, *Open Democracy*, 30 August, www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/degrowth-delusion/.

Salamon, Margaret Klein (2016) *Leading the Public into Emergency Mode: A New Strategy for the Climate Movement*. Online: The Climate Mobilization, http://theclimatepsychologist.com/leading-the-public-into-emergency-mode-a-new-strategy-for-the-climate-movement/.

Salamon, Margaret Klein (2019) *Leading the Public into Emergency Mode: Introducing the Climate Emergency Movement*. Online: The Climate Mobilization, www.theclimatemobilization.org/emergency-mode.

Spash, Clive L. (2016) This Changes Nothing: The Paris Agreement to Ignore Reality, *Globalizations*, 13(6): 928–33.

Swyngedouw, Erik (2007) Impossible 'Sustainability' and the Post-Political Condition, in David Gibbs and Rob Krueger (eds.) *The Sustainable Development Paradox*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Swyngedouw, Erik (2010) Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27(2–3): 213–32.

Swyngedouw, Erik (2013) The Non-political Politics of Climate Change, *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographie*s, 12(1): 1–8.

Symons, Jonathan (2019) *Ecomodernism: Technology, Politics and the Climate Crisis*. Cambridge: Polity.

Varul, Matthias Zick (2013) Towards a consumerist critique of capitalism, *Ephemera*, 13(2): 293–315.

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) *Our Common Future* (The Bruntland Report), United Nations, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf.

Žižek, Slavoj (2000) *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

Žižek, Slavoj (2008) *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London: Verso.

Notes

[1] UK becomes first major economy to pass net zero emissions law, www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-

[2] UK net zero emissions target will ‘cost more than £1tn’, *Financial Times*, 5 June 2019, www.ft.com/content/036a5596-87a7-11e9-a028-86cea8523dc2.

[3] In the run-up to the 2015 UK general election, for example, all three of Britain’s main political parties signed a joint pledge to fight climate change regardless of who won. See: Party leaders make joint climate commitment, *BBC News*, 14 February 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-31456161. On the issue of quangos, see: Quangos: key issues for the 2010 Parliament, www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/key-issues-for-the-new-parliament/decentralisation-of-power/quangos/.

[4] On the failure of the summit, see for example: Low targets, goals dropped: Copenhagen ends in failure, *Guardian*, 19 December 2009, www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/dec/18/copenhagen-deal.

[5] UK Parliament declares climate change emergency, *BBC News*, 1 May 2019, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-48126677.

[6] Climate emergency declarations in 935 jurisdictions and local governments cover 206 million citizens, *Climate Emergency Declaration*, 7 August, https://climateemergencydeclaration.org/climate-emergency-declarations-cover-15-million-citizens/. Other like-minded activists joined Salamon's emergency call and claimed their share of the credit for it. See: Margaret Hender, Climate Emergency Declaration Timeline, *Cedamia*, May 2019, www.cedamia.org/ced-timeline/.

[7] The *Guardian* noted that the lexicon of other organisations had also shifted, including the adoption of the term 'climate crisis' by United Nations secretary general António Guterres. See: Why the Guardian is changing the language it uses about the environment, *Guardian*, 17 May 2019, www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/17/why-the-guardian-is-changing-the-language-it-uses-about-the-environment.

[8] Extinction Rebellion rushes activists' handbook This Is Not a Drill into print, *Guardian*, 26 April 2019, www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/26/extinction-rebellion-rushes-activists-handbook-this-is-not-a-drill-into-print; V&A to display collection of Extinction Rebellion artefacts, *Guardian*, 26 July 2019, www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/26/va-to-display-collection-of-extinction-rebellion-artefacts; Extinction Rebellion: Last Chance to Save the World? BBC1, 17 Jul 2019, www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p07fvjfs/extinction-rebellion-last-chance-to-save-the-world. Salamon herself promoted Extinction Rebellion's international expansion from autumn 2018 – see: Extinction Rebellion Goes Global With Call For Net Zero Emission By 2025, *The Energy Mix*, 26 November 2018, https://theenergymix.com/2018/11/26/extinction-rebellion-goes-global-with-call-for-net-zero-emission-by-2025/.

[9] Tomorrow – Extinction Rebellion to meet BBC management, *Extinction Rebellion*, 17 July 2019, https://rebellion.earth/2019/07/17/tomorrow-extinction-rebellion-to-meet-bbc-management-friday-requiem-for-a-dead-planet-protest-to-call-on-uk-newspapers-to-tell-the-truth.

[10] 'Our house is on fire': Greta Thunberg, 16, urges leaders to act on climate, *Guardian*, 25 January 2019, www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate; Greta Thunberg urges MEPs to 'panic like the house is on fire', *Euractiv*, 16 April 2019, www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/news/greta-thunberg-urges-meps-to-panic-like-the-house-is-on-fire/; Climate change activist Greta Thunberg: 'Listen to climate scientists', *BBC News*, 23 April 2019, www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-48018034/climate-change-activist-greta-thunberg-listen-to-climate-scientists.

[11] Climate Neutral Now, *UNFCCC*, 2019, https://unfccc.int/climate-action/climate-neutral-now; I am a Citizen, *UNFCCC*, 2019, https://unfccc.int/climate-action/climate-neutral-now/i-am-a-citizen; Reducing Emissions: Individuals, *UNFCCC*, 2019, https://unfccc.int/climate-action/climate-neutral-now/i-am-a-citizen/reductions-ind. The pledge is available at https://climatepledge.global. At the time of writing, it had 4,551 signatories.

[12] Greens on Trial, *Newsnight*, BBC2, 14 October 2009.

[13] Extinction Rebellion founder Gail Bradbrook: 'We're making people's lives miserable but they are talking about the issues', *Times*, 19 April 2019, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-re-making-people-s-lives-miserable-but-they-are-talking-about-the-issues-d9hxcp53z.

[14] The site was at https://xrbusiness.org/ but was later taken down, apparently in response to exposés by other environmentalists who saw it as compromising Extinction Rebellion's integrity. See, for example, Rebellion Extinction: A Capitalist Scam To Hijack Our Resistance, *Winter Oak*, 23 April 2019, https://winteroak.org.uk/2019/04/23/rebellion-extinction-a-capitalist-scam-to-hijack-our-resistance/; and Cory Morningstar, Extinction Rebellion Training, Or How To Control Radical Resistance From The 'Obstructive Left', *Wrong Kind of Green*, 6 May

2019, www.wrongkindofgreen.org/2019/05/06/extinction-rebellion-training-or-how-to-control-radical-resistance-from-the-obstructive-left/.

[15] US philanthropists vow to raise millions for climate activists, *Guardian*, 12 July 2019, www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/12/us-philanthropists-vow-to-raise-millions-for-climate-activists.

[16] Speech to the Royal Society, 27 September 1988, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107346.

[17] See, for example, Mike Hulme, Climate Change is 25 Years Old, *Climate News Network*, 27 September 2013, www.climatenewsnetwork.net/tag/margaret-thatcher/.

[18] Speech to United Nations General Assembly, 8 November 1989, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107817.

[19] Speech at 2nd World Climate Conference, 6 November 1990, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108237.

[20] Speech to United Nations General Assembly, 8 November 1989, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107817.

[21] Speech at 2nd World Climate Conference, 6 November 1990, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108237.

[22] 1992 VP Acceptance DNC, New York, July 16 1992, *Speeches USA*, www.speeches-usa.com/Transcripts/al_gore-1992dnc.htm.

[23] Is Travelling to Google's Climate Change Conference by Private Jet Hypocritical?, *Euronews*, 1 August 2019, www.euronews.com/living/2019/08/01/is-travelling-to-google-climate-change-conference-by-private-jet-hypocritical.

[24] Speech to United Nations General Assembly, 8 November 1989, *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/1078.