

The Ideological Potential of Climate Change: (Post) Politics in the Age of Global Warming

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Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation are recurring topics in today's debates about politics and public life. Because of their nature, these issues are inherently international. As it is usually said, pollution does not respect national borders. The damage caused by one country will not be restrained there, but will eventually affect other neighbouring and non-neighbouring countries. Hence, states and international organisations have engaged in the debate and tried to provide global solutions, such as the Paris Agreement (United Nations Climate Change 2018). International Relations (IR) scholars are not indifferent to this discussion. For instance, Walker (1995: 178) considers environmental dangers as part of the contemporary processes of acceleration that question state sovereignty, which is at the core of the traditional accounts on internal politics and international relations. Climate change can be understood then as a danger that threatens national and international security and requires solutions that exceed the state, hence showing the inconsistencies in our contemporary articulation of power based on the principle of state sovereignty.

In line with this debate, this paper aims to answer the following question: "Does an understanding of climate change as an ideological tool have explanatory power in IR?" By answering this question, I want to show how climate change has been built discursively as an important instrument in the preservation, reinforcement and expansion of the neoliberal system in the international sphere, which may shift to a possible "global governmentality". My hypothesis is that only by considering climate change as an ideological tool we can explain these dynamics.

Governmentality has been an upcoming topic in the discipline of IR. Governmentality are the practices by which the state exert control over its citizen in contemporary societies. Following Foucault, governmentality will always be "neoliberal governmentality" as the specific form of control that is brought by the neoliberal turn on all social spheres. This turn emphasises individual liberties, making it difficult for the state to justify its governing actions. Neoliberal governmentality solves this problem by creating an

“indirect” way of control, by producing subjects who are controlled by their sense of responsibility (towards family, the nation, etc.) (Joseph, 2010). Some authors are arguing that this process is happening in the international sphere (Neumann and Sending, 2007).

To illustrate how climate change as a discursive mechanism works I will first focus on how global warming is mobilised as an ideology by the state to reinforce the neoliberal system. The main idea will be that although climate change argues for global solutions (thus apparently debilitating the states), it could actually mean giving more power to some states, in the sense of a global neoliberal governmentality, that hegemonic states impose over the others.

Climate change, sovereignty and governmentality

The ideological potential of climate change can be put into relation with multiple concepts in IR. Here I will examine two because of space constraints: state sovereignty and global governmentality. To understand how they relate, it is fundamental to understand first the literature on the post-political turn within the debate around climate change, as it has contributed to weaken the concept of “state sovereignty” and might open the doors towards an alarming global governmentality.

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In recent years, a flourishing literature has conceptualised the politics of climate change across Western liberal democracies

along the lines of the theory of the post-political. Political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek, argue that in recent decades, Western liberal democracies have been subjected to a condition “in which the political - understood as the space of contestation and agonistic engagement - is increasingly colonised by politics - understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics and cosmopolitan liberalism” (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014: 6). These authors argue that while politics centred on consensus-making seem to indicate a sign of democratic maturity, they may often repress the expression of alternative vistas, as it is the case when a certain ideology becomes hegemonic (Mouffe, 2005).

Drawing on these insights, Eric Swyngedouw (2010) argues that the integration of environmental movements in the arena of mainstream politics has only been made possible through the elimination of their deeply political nature, that is to say, their ability to foster the confrontation of antagonistic standpoints over the socio-political arrangements which ought to form the basis of society. Political debates over the validity of structural economic arrangements which produce environmental degradation in general, and climate change in particular, are replaced by the sanitised

politics of “techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration” (Swyngedouw, 2010).

A clear manifestation of the depoliticisation of environmental politics is their claim to transcend political -that is, partisan- divisions: green parties and environmental movements since the 1980s have taken pride in not taking a position in the traditional left-right cleavage. This is a key element of the “technocratisation” and therefore, depoliticisation, of climate change. Ideological confrontations are swept as emotional, irrational and consequently, irrelevant. Transcending partisan divisions becomes a sign of rationality, which is deemed the key ingredient of consensual climate governance. But the claim of technocratic politics to transcend ideological confrontation in virtue of their rationality is deceptive: it is in fact an ideological position in itself, which supports certain relations of power and calls for the objective or value-free character of what is subjective and biased (Schmitt, 2008, cited in Kenis and Livens, 2015). Claims for non-ideological climate politics are in fact very ideological: they contribute to support a liberal, expert-driven governance of the climate, at the expense of participative democracy.

Climate change is used to consolidate the existing structures, instead of

“enhancing the democratic political content of socio-environmental construction by means of identifying the strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more egalitarian mode of producing natures can be achieved.” (Swyngedouw, 2013: 7)

By pointing at the technicity of the question, debates about structural changes are silenced by questions on how to manage or deal with climate change. By not leaving space for these debates, this dynamic favours the existing structure: not talking about alternatives is the same as maintaining the current system. This is an example of how depoliticisation contributes to empowering more the hegemonic order.

This logic has some similarities to the delimitations that Walker finds between the national and the international sphere. For the author, based on the principle state sovereignty, a spatial and temporal delimitation have been dominating our understanding of politics. Whereas in the inside (nation-state) it is possible to reach a future, progress is achievable; on the outside (the international sphere), this progress is unthinkable, there is only the present, the contingent relations between the different conflictive states (Walker, 1990). This is why we have the division between “political theory” and “international relations”, because it is possible to do *politics* within the state, but outside of it, there is only violence and contingent *relations*.

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The process of depoliticisation reinforced by climate change discourse affects both the national and the international. Not only it substitutes political debates between different states, assuming that “we should all work in the same direction” to end climate change, it also does so within the nations, where alternatives discourses that propose structural changes as the solution to the problem are deemed irresponsible and optimistic-thinking. Walker refers to the challenges of climate change as having the potential to question the division between inside and outside because states by themselves cannot face these global risks. This raises the question of if we can uphold this distinction between the two dimensions, in the face of this “processes of acceleration” (Walker, 1990).

However, by considering the ideological potential of climate change, I find another way in which this distinction is challenged. The depoliticisation process that it brings affects both the inside and the outside. National political movements that stand for alternatives solutions to climate change by proposing structural changes are deemed irresponsible and not helpful, given the “urgency” of the matter. This could point to a possible “global governance” that after the division between national and international is surpassed, could be in charge of managing the danger of climate change holistically, as a sort of “Climate Leviathan” (Mann and Wainwright, 2018).

This last point should bring us to a discussion about governmentality, as the type of global governance that would be created. Theorists like Neumann and Sending (2007) have claimed that the use of Foucault’s concept could be useful to explain the contemporary international order. However, this has been criticised by Joseph (2010), who through clarifying the Foucauldian term, states the problems that employing it in the international sphere has.

Briefly, he claims that the specific governmentality referred by Neumann and Sending is the neoliberal one (citizens are auto-governed by the responsibilities that are (re)produced in them, not directly by violent actions of the governing state) and; that for Foucault governmentality is inherently related to a state that uses it. Because of these two points, we cannot talk about global governmentality: since neoliberal logic is not dominant in all states, some states are not exercising neoliberal governmentality by and for themselves (Joseph, 2010). The possible neoliberal governmentality that citizens of these states are experiencing is not from their state, but comes from foreign powers. Hence it cannot be called governmentality. However, if we consider some characteristics of the concept of “imperialism”, it could be argued that this “governmentality” exercised upon citizens from non-neoliberal is imposed by other (hegemonic) states. How?

Climate change as an ideological tool can set the foundations for a global government. The reasoning is as it follows: we need to fight climate change, and because it is a global problem, we need a global solution; since it is an urgent matter, we need someone to manage the hazard efficiently. Thus, we need a global technocracy. This global government will not be created from

scratch. As Mann and Wainwright suggest, this global Leviathan will be created by hegemonic powers (Neumann and Sending, 2007: 151). Because of the hegemonic position of neoliberal states, it is not difficult to imagine that their neoliberal governmentality would be transferred to this global state/Climate Leviathan.

If we are to follow this idea, then the hints of neoliberal governmentality that Neumann and Sending see in non-neoliberal states could be the first sparks or symptoms of this global neoliberal governmentality. Furthermore, going back to the first section, markets, by imposing green economy based production on these countries are actually (re)producing this ideology of responsibility towards ecological issues. In neo-Marxist terms, they are exporting the structures that will allow for the ideological superstructure that in turn, will legitimise and consolidate the structure. The difference between imperialism and this neoliberal governmentality would be the type of control that it exercises over its citizens. Instead of direct physical control, it would be self-governing through the responsibilities that the ideological discourse of climate change creates.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued how the ideological potential of climate change can be a powerful explanatory concept for the contemporary international system. Looking at the global political organisation, the discourse has contributed to the depoliticization process, with two consequences: 1) it does not allow for a significant political debate that would entail a structural transformation which perpetuates the existing system and; 2) it brings closer the national and the international, blurring the difference through equalising both spheres as depoliticised spaces where management of the is the only concern. This can lead to a justification for a global neoliberal governmentality that will be imposed (directly or through indirect pressure) from hegemonic states to the others.

Through these reasonings, and without forgetting that climate change is a reality that as a society we need to face, I affirm that it can be used as an ideology to consolidate the existing system or even strengthen its neoliberal dynamics. Hence, if we want to analyse these dynamics that are happening in international relations, we need to acknowledge the ideological dimension of the discourse on global warming.

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