Searching for ‘the political’ in environmental politics

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Abstract: Situating the ‘post-ecologist turn’ within the framework of post-politics, we not only investigate why environmental issues are so easily represented in consensual and technocratic terms, but also seek avenues for repoliticisation. We thereby try to avoid the pitfall of a voluntaristic or substantively normative approach to what repoliticisation can mean. By pointing to the subtle polemic on a metalevel which lurks beneath even the most consensual discourse, a potential starting point for repoliticisation is uncovered, which also enables a political re-reading of the ‘post-ecologist turn’. Finally, we argue that the same characteristics that make the environmental question liable to depoliticisation, can also turn it into a field of politicisation *par excellence*.

Keywords: the political, post-politics, post-ecologism, climate change, repoliticisation, hegemony

Introduction

‘Global warming is too serious for the world any longer to ignore its danger or split into opposing factions on it’, Tony Blair (2005) famously stated in a speech in 2005. Blair thus explicitly calls for a depoliticisation of climate change. Similarly, one of his well-known advisors, Anthony Giddens (2009, p. 114), argues: ‘(c)limate change should be lifted out of a right-left context, where it has no place […] there has to be agreement that the issue is so important and all-encompassing that the usual party conflicts should be suspended or muted’. Such statements are significant in several regards. They not only show how mainstream environmental concerns have become but they especially express how environmental questions, such as climate change, are at the same time depoliticised (Swyngedouw 2007, 2010a): if we want to effectively tackle the problem, it is argued, there ought to be consensus,

usually around managerial and technocratic solutions that remain within the parameters of what currently exists.

These depoliticised discourses, often put forward by defenders of the newly popular Green Economy project, are of course only the latest expression of a trend that has deeper historical roots. Over the last few decades, the discourse on environmental politics has shifted significantly: while many eco-political discourses in the 1970s focussed on a fundamental transformation of social structures, from the 1980s onwards they have increasingly been characterised by the search for greener versions of the modern, market and growth-oriented, liberal democratic model.[1] Typical examples include the advocacy of ecological modernisation (Mol and Spaargaren 2000, Spaargaren and Mol 1992), post-environmentalism (Buck 2013), the Green New Deal (Group 2008), Green Growth (OECD 2010) and the Green Economy (UNEP 2011, 2012).

One of the most forceful conceptualisations of this shift is Ingolfur Blühdorn's (2013) theory of the 'post-ecologist turn' (see also Blühdorn 1997, 2002). '(B)oth the ecologist critique of modernity and the ecologist belief in a comprehensively different society have become largely exhausted', Blühdorn argues (2013, p. 19). '(T)he historically radical and transformative elements of environmental movements and eco-political thought are blunted through mainstreaming and have been reconfigured by comprehensive cultural change' (Blühdorn and Welsh 2007, p. 185). Due to a modernisation-induced value and culture shift, the initial radical critique has been replaced by the attempt to use market-driven, industrial and growth-oriented policies. The result is a paradoxical situation: a general awareness of the seriousness of the environmental crisis is combined with what Blühdorn (2007b) calls 'the management of unsustainability': the attempt to sustain the unsustainable characteristics of current society. Indeed, what brings ecological modernisation, Green Growth, the Green Economy and a number of other contemporary environmental discourses together is their attempt to present themselves as taking the environmental crisis very seriously, while at the same time refraining from any fundamental questioning of existing social systems and structures (Blühdorn 2013). In other words, what is characteristic of current eco-political discourses is that they try to answer environmental concerns in a way that makes '[...] sure that things remain the same, that nothing really changes, that life (or at least our lives) can go on as before' (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012, p. 1973). Significantly, as we already suggested, these new eco-political discourses go together with a call for all-round cooperation and the rejection of conflict. Confronted with the urgency and scale of the challenge, it is argued, we no longer have the luxury to engage in time-consuming struggles that only hamper the cooperative action that is needed now. That is why these discourses can be called fundamentally post-political (Swyngedouw 2007, 2010a).

Blühdorn (2013, p. 16) makes a parallel diagnosis when he argues that recent shifts in eco-political discourses have their counterpart in simultaneous shifts in democratic politics: 'democratic values and the innovative modes of decentralised, participatory government [..] are metamorphosing into tools for managing the condition of sustained ecological and social unsustainability'. According to Blühdorn, the result is a condition of post-democracy.

Here we aim to contribute to this debate on the post-democratic shift in eco-political discourses by focusing on the problem of post-politics or depoliticisation. According to political theorists such as Claude Lefort (1988), the loss of the political is the central element threatening to undermine democracy. Indeed, the very condition of possibility of democracy is to make the political dimension of social relations and of our relation to 'nature' visible, and to turn it into the object of debate and conflict. Underlying the post-democratic trend in eco-political discourses, we will argue, is therefore a tendency towards post-politics. On the basis of the work of political theorists such as Jacques Rancière, Claude Lefort, Carl Schmitt, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, we aim to develop the tools to better conceptualise this post-political (and related post-democratic) development.

In our view, what Blühdorn calls the post-ecologist turn is a specific manifestation of a more general tendency to depict society in post-political terms. Yet, with regard to environmental discourses, this depoliticisation adopts specific forms. Therefore, we aim here to contribute to a better understanding of what depoliticisation with regard to environmental politics is about, and to explore the conditions for repoliticisation. Through this contribution, we also aim to think beyond the post-ecologist condition. Admittedly, Blühdorn's diagnosis is strong and comprehensive. Yet, as Derek Bell (2013, p. 14) has argued: 'We must, at least, hope that Blühdorn's diagnosis of the contemporary condition is incorrect, or that it is a condition that we can transcend'. Blühdorn's analysis has indeed been called pessimistic (Szerszynski 2007). The reason for this pessimism is perhaps that Blühdorn grounds his diagnosis in a deeper process of modernisation, which he analyses through the lens of Ronald Inglehart's theory of value shifts in modernity and Niklas Luhmann's thesis of increasing system differentiation. The disappearance of the conditions of possibility for a genuine ecologist politics results from this on-going modernisation process, Blühdorn suggests.

His sociological, rather than political, explanation of this shift has important implications. Does the attempt to provide a sociological foundation for the post-ecologist turn not reinforce this apparent pessimism? Is it not possible, and perhaps desirable, to develop a political interpretation of this turn, which at the same time explains the resulting depoliticisation, and makes it possible to think about repoliticisation? In his response to scholars who criticise his so-called pessimism, Blühdorn (2013, p. 17) argues that it is important to make a 'rigorous distinction between eco-political campaigning and socio-political analysis'. In other words, criticising the post-ecologist thesis from a voluntaristic or substantively normative point of view threatens to disregard the need to analyse the contemporary terrain of environmental politics in an unprejudiced way (see also Bell 2013, p. 12).

Following Blühdorn's warning, we will try to reconceptualise repoliticisation while at the same time avoiding the pitfall of a voluntaristic or normative standpoint. Here we develop a rather 'sober' descriptive-analytical conception of the political, which tries to circumvent any normative *a priori* and moves beyond conceptualisations of the political that start from a social subject (e.g. the 'excluded') and/or a normative principle (e.g. equality). We argue that such conceptualisations often unduly limit 'the political' to actions and discourses that have a

normative or emancipatory basis, and thus narrow the scope of what 'the political' can mean in the environmental domain.

In the next section, we will first discuss what the concept of 'the political' specifically means, and we will defend the thesis that there is indeed a problem of depoliticisation in current eco-political discourses. We then move on, in the third section, to pinpoint the crucial determinants that make these discourses more vulnerable to depoliticisation than discourses in other domains. The focus of the article, however, is on how we can find possible sources of (re)politicisation. Surveying the literature on post-politics, it seems to be easier to diagnose depoliticisation than to provide effective suggestions for overcoming it.

In order to rethink the conditions for repoliticising environmental issues, in the fourth section we point to a paradox that is present in many post-political discourses: in a subtle way, the latter are often significantly polemical. Depoliticisation, paradoxically, always entails a struggle, but then on a meta-level. Drawing on the analysis of this meta-struggle, we will in the fifth section shed new light on the post-ecologist turn, showing that it is based on a fundamentally political process of re-appropriation and meta-political struggle. On this basis, we argue in the final section that the same characteristics that make environmental issues so liable for depoliticisation could, interestingly, turn it into a field of politicisation *par excellence*, understood as a scene composed of a multiplicity of conflicting positions which can become visible and therefore contestable. The appearance of such a scene is of crucial importance for effective and democratic environmental change.

Post-politics

In his book *Climate Change and Society*, John Urry (2011, p. 90) takes issue with the thesis that we have entered a post-political era. There is a 'range of different politics surrounding changing climates', he states, referring as an example to direct protests such as climate camps, which sharply critique capitalism as one of the root causes of climate change. He points out that the public debate about climate change displays a variety of approaches and answers, and concludes that it is 'hard to argue that this huge array of different arguments is all "post-political"' (Urry 2011, p. 93).

Urry is arguably right when he questions overly generalised depictions of the present as 'post-political'. However, when he suggests that post-politics is not an issue at all, he tends to miss what is truly at stake. Urry argues that the multiplicity of actors putting forward different analyses and answers to climate change proves that the environmental scene is (still) highly politicised. Political theorists such as Lefort (1988) or Mouffe (2006) would argue that the presence of this multiplicity is evident: the social is always torn by conflict, division and the exercise of power. Post-politics involves something else: it concerns whether or not the discourses through which the social is interpreted account for these realities – i.e., conflict, division and power - and make them visible. Fundamentally, depoliticisation is situated on the level of representation.

In order to understand what is at stake, it is important to heed the distinction made by many political theorists (Lefort 1988, Schmitt 1996, Rancière 1999, Mouffe 2006, Marchart

2007) between 'politics' and 'the political'. Leaving aside important differences for the moment, we can say that many of these authors understand 'politics' as referring to the conventional notion of politics as a differentiated sphere within society that is centred around the state. 'The political', in contrast, has a broader scope in that it refers to a symbolic or discursive order that represents the social in a particular way: 'the political' is a discourse that acknowledges the existence of conflict, power and division.

Schmitt (1996) was the first author to draw this distinction. In his book *The Concept of the Political*, he argues that the political cannot be defined in terms of the state, as it usually is, but that the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political. The latter, therefore, needs its own criterion, which, according to Schmitt, is the distinction between friend and enemy. He coins his concept of the political in order to analyse depoliticisation, which he sees as the result of discourses or symbolisations that conceal conflicts, decisions and power. For Schmitt, (re)politicisation is about openly declaring and disclosing friend/enemy distinctions: only when conflict is acknowledged and given a place can it be fought in a more or less orderly way.

A core question for theorists of the political is whether it is possible to get rid of power and conflict, or whether they are constitutive social realities. From a discourse-theoretical perspective, Laclau and Mouffe (2001, Mouffe 2006) have argued that there is no social relation that is not the product of power, because the social is always hegemonically constituted. Crucially, each hegemonic construction entails certain exclusions, which can generate forms of antagonism. Depoliticisation occurs when the exercise of hegemonic power and the antagonisms that result from it are covered up. When ecological modernisation discourses become hegemonic, for example, voices that formulate a radical criticism of technocracy tend to become excluded. With the increasing hegemony of green economy discourses, voices criticising the downsides of the marketisation of nature (for example through emission trading schemes), are at risk of remaining unheard.

In his influential interpretation of the concept of 'the political', Lefort (1986, 1988) argues that society does not have a spontaneous self-understanding, but always needs to be interpreted and symbolised. The political, in his view, is the symbolic order through which the social is interpreted, and therefore symbolically instituted. This interpretation generates a constitutive split in society: a division between representation and that which is represented. The loss of the political occurs in forms of ideology that do not recognise this division and the conflict that it can provoke. When the predominant representations of society no longer recognize their contingency, but are grounded in technical or natural necessity, for example, the space of the political is foreclosed.

Rancière (1999, 2007) adopts a more emancipatory view of politicisation. For him, political action is about making something visible that was previously invisible in what he calls the 'police order'. The police is a managerial practice of maintaining order whose logic is that there is nothing to see or hear beyond the dominant discourse, yet, its order is inevitably unequal and generates exclusions. Politics is about rupturing this order and making audible or visible what previously remained unheard or invisible. Specific to Rancière's approach is that

he seems to give the political act a normative content: a political act always happens on the assumption of the equality of each and every one. A typical example is Rosa Parks, who acted on the assumption that she was equal to all other Americans by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Many forms of environmental action follow this model. Think about activists who try to enter conference venues during climate summits, in order to take the floor and advocate a climate justice approach (Kenis and Mathijs, 2011), or indigenous groups who engage in direct action to stop mining projects (Bond 2012). They make a voice heard which was previously inaudible, and act as if they have an equal say as compared with much more powerful agents. By doing so, they not only expose the inegalitarianism, but also the contingency of the 'police' order. Even though political action always springs from a particular grief or demand, Rancière argues, it always has a universal dimension due to its egalitarian assumption.

Slavoj Žižek (2000) has strongly relied on both the work of Rancière and that of Laclau and Mouffe to coin his own notion of post-politics. According to Žižek, a situation becomes politicised when a particular demand [e.g. climate justice] starts to function as a metaphoric condensation of an opposition against a concrete other [e.g. advocates of the green economy], in such a way that this particular demand acquires a universal dimension (Žižek 2000, p. 204). Post-politics, in contrast, is when this us/them distinction disappears:

> In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists...) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus (Žižek 2000, p. 198).

What remains invisible in post-politics is the fact that a social order is fundamentally contingent, and that grounding a social order always generates exclusions, and therefore, antagonisms.

It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to go much deeper into these often sophisticated articulations of the difference between politics and the political and of the notions of post-politics and depoliticisation that can be inferred from them. What is important to stress here is that, in these different political theories, the political is each time of a symbolic nature, and entails a discourse that recognises and makes visible the reality of conflict, power and the contingency of society. The point of the matter is that if society is no longer understood as divided and liable to be contested through political means, this undermines its democratic nature in a fundamental way (Lefort 1988). Democracy is before all else the form of society that acknowledges that it does not have an ultimate foundation, and that it is characterised by indeterminacy and contingency (Marchart 2007).

Urry (2011) seems to have misunderstood this symbolic or discursive nature of the political, and therefore fails to appreciate what is at stake in the discussion of post-politics. This is most obvious when he speaks about the Transition Towns movement as being 'significantly political since it challenges the sedimented systems of twentieth-century carbon capitalism' (Urry 2011, p. 92). While it is true that the movement advocates a kind of radical

change in local communities, this is not sufficient to make it properly political. Indeed, the movement's stress on consensus-seeking, all-round cooperation and the psychology of change, as well as its aversion to conflict and its blindness to power relations in fact qualify it as an outstanding example of post-politics (Kenis and Mathijs 2009).

This does not mean there are no actors who genuinely try to repoliticise and build a counterhegemonic discourse; think for example about the 'climate justice' movement (Schlosberg 2013), mentioned above, which explicitly questions the new hegemonic discourse around the green economy (Mueller and Bullard 2011). However, the very existence of such forms of resistance does not disprove the critique of the post-political nature of hegemonic eco-political discourses. Similarly, the fact that there might be disagreement among international negotiators during UN summits about whether emissions trading rather than a carbon tax is the best suitable measure for putting a price on carbon does not disapprove the post-political thesis. Being largely of a technical and managerial nature, this is not the kind of conflict or debate that makes visible and therefore contestable the fundamental political principles in terms of which our society is instituted or organised.

The environment

Though post-political tendencies seem to permeate society as a whole today, post-politics seems to be particularly persistent in eco-political discourses (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2010a). In this section, we bring out some of the features of the latter that make it so liable to post-politics. This evidently brings us to question the notion of the 'environment' itself, a notion that, as many scholars have noticed, cannot easily be determined (e.g., Castree 2005, Swyngedouw 2007, 2010b, Morton 2007). As Noel Castree (2005, p. 8) explains, everyone will consider trees, butterflies or hurricanes to be part of 'nature' or the 'environment'. In their commonplace definitions, the 'environment' and 'nature' simply refer to the non-human world. However, a deeper examination shows that bounds are not that easy to demarcate. Castree gives the examples of Occidental's former Canvey Island site (a disused oil refinery that has turned into one of the most biodiverse sites in Western Europe) and biotechnical labs. Do these still belong to the 'environment'; are they 'nature', or not? Furthermore, as Castree (2005, p. 8) indicates, if one looks a little further, nature encompasses humans as well: '(a)t some level, our biological capacities condition what we are able to do at all stages of our lives. In this sense, nature is always already here – intimately a part of us – not just somewhere else or beyond us'. So much is clear: 'nature continues to be understood in a multitude of ways, many of them incompatible' (Castree 2005, p. xvii). Still, the term 'environment' suggests we are talking about something unambiguous, something 'out there' that surrounds us. This connotation does not appear out of thin air. It corresponds to the way 'nature' has been externalised throughout modern history (Adam 1998; Fitzsimmons 1989; Magdoff and Foster 2011).

The representation of nature as external to the social has important depoliticising effects since it makes the political nature of certain events and processes invisible, and

therefore, uncontestable. Think for example about the floods in Pakistan, the drought in Moscow in the summer of 2010, or hurricane Katrina. Should we consider them mere 'environmental' disasters (Žižek 2009b)? Imagine, in the case of Katrina, that there would have been better preparation (reinforcement work on the levées, evacuation of people at the announcement of the hurricane, targeted intervention after the hurricane); then large parts of the disaster could then have been avoided. Does this not show that 'nature' and 'society' are inextricably linked, and that misrecognising this link and externalising nature can be a royal road to post-politics? It seems significant that many Americans started to pray to God in order to save them from the flood instead of demanding political support.

It could be argued that exactly this discursive separation of nature from society and the lack of reference to social relations make environmental issues so vulnerable for post-politics. From another perspective, this suggests that the repoliticisation of environmental issues requires the latter's connection to social issues. These are often more divisive and can be more easily politicised by relating them to an emancipatory discourses on equality, for example. Further elaborating upon the work of Rancière, both Swyngedouw (2010a) and Žižek (2008) suggest such a way out of post-politics.

In several of his articles, Swyngedouw (2007, 2009, 2010a) argues that one of the reasons why environmental questions are so easily depolicitised is because they lack a privileged subject of change. According to him, this distinguishes environmentalism from other 'social' movements, such as feminism, the civil rights movement or the labour movement. In the latter, the subject of oppression, struggle and change is easily identified: women, African-Americans or workers, respectively, are amongst the first to speak out about what is wrong and what needs to change. When these subjects appropriate democratic or emancipatory language (e.g., egalitarian discourse), their condition can be politicised and altered.

Swyngedouw is not alone in focusing on the role of the subject in processes of policitisation and depoliticisation. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) have equally argued that social movements produce new subjectivities that can politicise social relations or spaces that were not previously considered political, and through this, they can become the bearers of a process of radicalisation of democracy. Similarly, Schmitt (1996) has argued that if political action and thought is about conflict, decision and the exercise of power, the question of the subject is unavoidable. According to him, politics is even the realm of subjectivity *par excellence*.

But who is the subject that fights the environmental struggle? This is far from easy to answer. In some environmental circles, environmental disasters are portrayed as 'nature's' revenge for human pollution, but this is of course a very mystifying way of speaking (Chase 1991). Nature does not act, take revenge, or struggle. Someone has to speak about or in the name of nature for nature to become politically salient (Castree, 2005). Climate change has been taking place for many decades, but extensive scientific reports and numerous actions were required in order to bring visibility to the problem and to put it on the agenda. Environmental problems only exist as political problems to the extent that there are representations of them in the public sphere.

Environmental struggles are often not framed as emancipatory struggles of a particular subject, in contrast to feminism, the civil rights movement or labour struggle. They are about how we, or human society, relate to the planet. Since we all belong to the planet, everybody (or nobody?) seems to be in a position to speak in nature's name. As a result, environmental questions lend themselves easily to a discourse suggesting that 'we are all in this together' and that we, therefore, have to cooperate, create partnerships and reach consensus. If 'everyone together' is the subject of environmental questions, post-politics is the evident result (Swyngedouw 2007).

Žižek (2008, 2009a, p. 91) goes a step further by claiming that the repoliticisation of environmental questions is a matter not only of affirming political subjectivity but of redefining them as emancipatory struggles. He distinguishes four possible contemporary antagonisms that could lead to repoliticising the present. These are, summarily: the environmental crisis; the inappropriateness of private property principles for 'intellectual property'; new techno-scientific developments (especially in bio-genetics); and what he calls 'new forms of apartheid', or 'new walls and slums' that separate the 'Excluded' from the 'Included'. After elaborating on these four themes, Žižek (2008) states:

> In the series of the four antagonisms, the one between the Included and the Excluded is the crucial one, the point of reference for the others. Without it, all others lose their subversive edge: ecology turns into a 'problem of sustainable development', 'intellectual property' into a 'complex legal challenge', biogenetics into an 'ethical' issue.

In other words, the question of the excluded subject is the critical one, it forms the vantage point through which all the other questions should be approached and politicised.

Žižek thus turns environmental questions into emancipation struggles. The risk of such an approach, however, is that it creates other forms of depoliticisation. It starts from a normative idea of what politicisation should consist of – the struggle for equality for example. In this regard, Žižek's approach is vulnerable to the critique that Oliver Marchart (2007, p. 159) formulated against Rancière's notion of the political, upon which Žižek heavily relies. Marchart's critique is that Rancière relies on an 'emancipatory apriorism', and in this sense restricts the scope of what politicisation might consist of and unduly closes the openness and contingency that is inherent to 'the political'.

Without doubt, there are good reasons to repoliticise environmental questions by pointing to social subjects striving for equality and emancipation, thereby showing the intertwinement of environmental affairs and social relations. Think, for instance, about many eco-feminist movements (Mellor 1997), or about indigenous peoples striving for their rights confronted with nature conservation projects in a post-colonial constellation (Reimerson 2012) or fighting against the exploitation of tar sands (Nikiforuk 2008). More than others, these people are affected by environmental crises, and one could argue that a solution to those crises requires that they – in a genuinely emancipatory fashion – raise their voices and demand change.

By focusing on the social relations that cause environmental destruction, one not only acquires a view of possible subjects of change, but also of the objects of change. Indeed, the fact that environmental issues are so easily depoliticised should be attributed not only to the

fact that there is no privileged subject, but also to the fact that no specific objects appear as the evident focus for environmental change.[2] Strictly speaking, every single social relation, practice or event has an environmental impact. There is hardly a social practice that cannot be said to partake in the process of throughput, in which energy and matter is appropriated, and subsequently emitted in a deteriorated form (Foster et al. 2010). As all things have an environmental impact, the object of environmental concern is, in principle, everything. It is also in this sense that environmental issues differ from 'social' struggles. The peace movement provides a good illustration. On the one hand, the peace movement also lacks a clear *subject* of change: in this regard, it readily lends itself to a consensual and cooperative discourse suggesting 'we should all march together against war'. Yet, on the other hand, the peace movement has a precise *object* or opponent, namely, war and, more specifically, the actors engaged in and responsible for war. The same cannot be said so easily of many environmental questions.

That everything is or can be in principle the object of environmental change could lead to the conclusion that an extremely profound transformation is needed, one that embraces every human or social practice. In actual contemporary eco-political discourses, however, another conclusion dominates the scene. In the case of climate change, for example, what one opposes first and foremost are not necessarily specific, particularly polluting practices, let alone specific social actors who bear special responsibility for these. Rather, one opposes CO_2 as such, which is the by-product of almost all thinkable practices (even breathing). The result is a discourse of 'society versus CO_2' (Swyngedouw 2007, p. 27). The 'enemy' and every conflict are thus externalised. 'Act on CO_2' becomes the motto of this discourse, as a slogan used by the British government aptly summarises (Urry 2011, p. 90).

Policy options like emissions trading reinforce this approach, as they equalise all CO_2 emitted, whatever its source (Lohmann 2006, see also Descheneau 2012): the CO_2 emitted by a steel factory is rendered equal to that emitted by a hospital, by a wild camel in the remote regions of Australia, or by a tree being cut down. The CO_2 emission saved by building more efficient coal-fired power stations is equalised with that saved by building windmills. The fact that the latter is a step on the pathway to a sustainable energy system while the former remains within the fossil fuel model is no longer of any account. This equalisation prevents people from making conscious political choices or choosing priorities.

The foregoing seems to lead to an easy conclusion: if we want to repoliticise environmental issues, not only 'nature', but also every enmity and conflict should be 'internalised' again. Indeed, insofar as environmental crises are not crises of 'nature' but of society and how the latter relates to its 'natural' conditions (Foster et al. 2010), real solutions require social change. In other words, we should turn environmental crises into social ones.

As already suggested, however, such a move involves risks, even if it has many merits. While it is crucial to make the antagonisms that cut through 'the people' and their socially constructed relation with nature visible (Swyngedouw 2010a), [3] there is a risk that by upholding a normative, emancipatory conception of politicisation related to specific subject

positions, the space of ‘the political’ in environmental politics is unduly narrowed down, and we lose sight of other types of politicisation that might occur on this terrain.

Paradoxes

How, then, can we repoliticise environmental issues without turning them into mere social or normative issues? In order to address this question, let us first investigate a paradox that is present in post-political discourses. Emphasising over and over that we should reach consensus, or that certain technical or managerial solutions are neither politically left nor right (Giddens 2009, p. 114) but neutral, seems suspicious: even behind the most neutralising discourses seems to lurk a polemical dimension. What this means can be illuminated with the help of an insight from Schmitt (1996), for whom conflict is the essence of the political. In his book *The Concept of the Political*, he states that one cannot understand a discourse if one does not know whom it is affecting or targeting:

> Words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state, and so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term (Schmitt 1996, p. 30-31).

Political discourses, he argues, always have a polemical thrust, and their meaning can be truly understood only when this polemical dimension is disclosed. Even though certain discourses do not refer to a concrete opponent, there is always one, at least implicitly. A humanitarian discourse, for example, always entails an implicit reference to something or someone that lies outside humanity, to an inhuman being, a radical enemy that has to be crushed (Lievens 2010, 2012). From this perspective, it is possible to engage in a symptomatic reading of post-political discourses that argue for all-round cooperation and consensus-seeking. From a Schmittian perspective, the repeated invocation of the need for consensus would appear meaningless if there were no other strategies or discourses that reject consensus-seeking. The political meaning of discourses arguing for cooperation can only be revealed by pointing to the implicit opponent they aim to polemically affect, namely, discourses that openly advocate the need for a more conflictual approach. Discourses stating that the conflict approach is obsolete and that we all ought to work together are, in a paradoxical fashion, very polemical.

‘There is a war between the ones who say there is a war and the ones who say there isn’t’, Leonard Cohen sang in 1974. He thus adequately captured the metaconflict that is at stake here. Many post-political discourses would be utterly meaningless in the absence of an opponent on this meta-level. It makes perhaps more sense, therefore, to consider post-politics as a type of discourse that, despite itself, takes sides and engages in conflict. This conflict is situated on a meta-level, but it is a conflict nevertheless. Its opponent is not a particular agent, but the conflict approach as such. The relevance for revealing this meta-conflict is that it can provide the conditions for repoliticising supposedly post-political discourses and for moving beyond pessimistic diagnoses of post-politics. It enables a kind of reversal of perspectives, through which we are able to see politicisation as a potentiality within post-politics. After all, even the discourse about the need for consensus against an externalised enemy such as CO_2

subtly refers to yet another enemy. This approach can also help to deconstruct post-political representations in the framework of the post-ecologist turn.

The post-ecologist turn as a hegemonic struggle

We can now return to Blühdorn's 'pessimistic' account of post-ecological politics. While agreeing with the basic tenets of his analysis, we would like to suggest a political re-reading of the process that has led to this post-ecological condition. The question is whether the post-ecologist turn cannot better be described in terms of struggle, defeat and victory rather than as a fatal result of the process of modernisation.

A famous remark by William Morris, the 19th century utopian socialist, hints at a possible alternative description of the roots of this shift. In his novel *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris writes: 'Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and then it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name' (Morris 1886). This seems to be exactly what is at stake in the shift towards post-ecological politics: political and economic elites have appropriated and even recuperated environmental concerns of genuine environmental movements, but in so doing fundamentally transformed these concerns. Significantly, Blühdorn and Welsh point to such a logic of recuperation when they argue (2007, p. 192) that 'sustainable development has been appropriated by established political parties and re-spun in such a way that the state/corporate nexus, operating through deepening public-private partnerships, emerges as the central means of delivering sustainability'. What happened, indeed, was a 'selective mainstreaming and post-ecologist reframing of environmental concerns' (Blühdorn and Welsh 2007, p. 195).

Interestingly, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000) have used Morris' quote to refer to the complex process through which constituted powers appropriate ideas, practices and demands from resistance movements, translate them, and use them in order to restructure their own modes of operation.[4] We could argue that ecological modernisation, green growth or the green economy partake of the same logic: economic or political elites appropriate and translate environmental concerns and integrate them within a process of technocratic and market-oriented modernisation (Mueller and Passadakis 2010, Mueller and Bullard 2011, Kenis and Lievens 2012). What is at stake here is not an inexorable social process but one that is fundamentally political: it is a struggle for hegemony; in other words, a struggle through which central elements of eco-political discourse are appropriated and integrated within a specific political project (Mouffe 1979).

Significantly, however, the political success of economic and political elites in appropriating environmental concerns and integrating them within a market-driven and technocratic project has to a large extent been conditional upon rendering invisible the very hegemonic struggle that underlies this shift. In other words, the new eco-political discourses could only be effective to the extent that the stakes of this shift became invisible or were depoliticised. The technocratic or neutral self-description of ecological modernisation or the green economy have thus been a crucial element of the hegemonic process.

Yet, symptomatically, a remainder of this hegemonic struggle inevitably pops up. Is not the invocation of the need for consensus and the recurring arguments against conflict approaches and against the need for making difficult choices and trade-offs a significant form of struggle on a meta-level? The quotes from Blair and Giddens at the beginning of this discussion are significant examples of this. Similarly, the advocates of the green economy are at pains to reject the idea that addressing environmental crises requires difficult trade-offs and that this might entail sharp conflicts. The (in)famous slogan 'People Planet Profit' that is central to many green economy discourses precisely suggests it is possible to reconcile these very different values, and thus to evade conflicts between them. It is 'a myth', the UNEP report on the green economy argues, for example, 'that there is an inescapable trade-off between environmental sustainability and economic progress' (UNEP 2011, p. 16). 'People, planet, profit is the mantra already adopted by many companies in the pursuit of corporate sustainability', Achim Steiner, under-secretary of UNEP, states, 'but if we are to truly transform the economic paradigm then it needs to be adopted by many, many more' (UNEP 2012). Significantly, all these statements do not primarily state that there is consensus or reconciliation, but invoke the very need for consensus, and subtly hint at invisible others who think conflict, trade-offs, difficult decisions and power struggles are perhaps inevitable.[5]

Beyond post-politics?

The argument developed in the previous sections opens the door for a repoliticisation of environmental questions that does not necessarily require a reference to a particular subject and its emancipatory struggle. In this section, we want to argue that, paradoxically, environmental questions are not only easily depoliticised, but in an interesting and paradoxical way, also have the potential for a kind of politicisation *par excellence*.

Importantly, two conclusions can follow from the observation that environmental issues lack an undisputable subject and object of change. On the one hand, it can support the idea that we are all in this together, that we should therefore collaborate, and that, for example in the case of climate change, CO_2 is the common externalised 'enemy' to which we are all opposed. On the other hand, however, it can broaden the terrain for hegemonic struggle around the appropriation and translation of environmental concerns. If everything can be the object of environmental action, there can be an all-round struggle over what ought to be the proper object of this action. Furthermore, if everybody can constitute herself as the subject of this question, there is no a priori exclusion of who can present herself as the bearer of a project that can overcome environmental crises. This potentially allows for the most radical forms of political plurality and politicisation imaginable. Hegemonic struggle and politicisation can then appear in their purest form.

Of these two possible conclusions, the first tends to be predominant, but nevertheless remains unstable, representing a kind of political struggle in disguise. In a subtle way, active attempts to depoliticise exhibit or reveal that which they want to cover up. In this sense, the repoliticisation of eco-political discourses should start by confronting these discourses with their own political assumptions, thus turning them against themselves.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this discussion, we argued that recent shifts in eco-political discourses, as they have been theorised, amongst others, in terms of the 'post-ecologist turn', are part of a broader post-political trend. Pointing to the possibility of a political re-interpretation of the post-ecologist turn, we have argued that the latter is perhaps not merely the consequence of ongoing and unavoidable modernisation processes, but that it at least partly results from a hegemonic re-appropriation and translation of environmental concerns, while this hegemonic process is at the same time concealed. The very fact that this concealment is never complete, as the invocation of the need for consensus reveals an underlying polemic, allows us to move beyond pessimistic accounts of the current predicament of environmental politics. Indeed, the presence of this polemic in disguise shows that, more fundamentally, a political process is at stake, and the revelation of this fact can provide the starting point for a repoliticisation of the environmental sphere.

Significantly, environmental questions are not only easily depoliticised, as we have shown, but could also become the terrain of politicisation *par excellence*: because everyone can appropriate these questions and give them a specific content, a genuinely political space of plurality can appear, where conflict, contingency and power can become visible and contestable as such. Because repoliticisation brings different voices to the fore and shows the contingency of current societal structures, this is not only intrinsically important from a democratic point of view, but also helps to open the door for real and effective change.

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[1] Of course, the field of discourses on environmental politics has always consisted of a variety of currents, differing, amongst other things, in terms of the extent to which they thought it would be possible to reach environmental progress within the boundaries of the existing form of society. Nevertheless, as Blühdorn (2013) aptly shows, there

is a significant difference between discourses on environmental politics that are predominant now, and discourses of some decennia ago.

[2] We thank Gareth Dale for his inspiring input during a seminar in Leuven on this issue.

[3] Erik Swyngedouw strongly warns against the reduction of the political to the social, but at the same time he follows the Rancierian approach to repoliticisation and, as a result, also tends to end up with a form of emancipatory apriorism.

[4] Antonio Gramsci (1998, p. 106) has understood such processes as ‘passive revolutions’.

[5] Blühdorn (2007a) argues that current self-descriptions of society lead to forms of self-deception. Discourses of change are used in order to retain the unsustainable status quo. However, the very invocation of the need for consensus betrays society’s divided nature, as a result of which self-deception can only be partly successful.