



# After a decade of critique: neoliberal environmentalism, discourse analysis and the promotion of climate-protecting behaviour in the workplace



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## ABSTRACT

In a 2004 special issue of *Geoforum*, McCarthy and Prudham argued that the connections between neoliberalism and the environment had been underexplored in critical scholarship. In an attempt to address this gap, the special issue reflected on a number of different case studies and set the stage for a decade of analysis and critique. This paper aims to contribute to the increasing body of literature by presenting a detailed theoretical analysis of neoliberal environmentalism and its role in modern society. Specifically, the paper focuses on one particular environmental issue – climate change – and uses it to categorise six discourses that either conform to the principles of neoliberalism (reformist) or reject neoliberal ideas (revolutionary). Drawing on interviews with designated ‘climate champions’ (individuals who are given responsibility for promoting climate protecting behaviour) in large corporations, the paper then demonstrates how this kind of typological framework might be applied to the analysis of neoliberal environmentalism in the ‘real world’. The paper finds that neoliberalism played a very influential role in the promotion of climate protecting behaviour in the workplace. However, there was also some limited evidence of resistance in the form of revolutionary discourses and ideas. Going forwards, the typological framework may provide a valuable analytical tool to assess the dominance and resistance of neoliberal environmentalism in the modern world.

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## 1. Introduction

In a 2004 special issue of *Geoforum*, McCarthy and Prudham (and their co-contributors) explored ‘neoliberal nature and the nature of neoliberalism’, focusing on ‘connections between neoliberalism, environmental change, and environmental politics’ (p. 275). Starting from the premise that these connections had been underexplored in critical scholarship (particularly in industrial nations), the special issue outlined the ‘identifiable dimensions’ of neoliberalism (e.g., prioritisation of the self-regulating market, antagonism towards state interference and the sovereignty of the individual) (p. 276) and included studies on the privatisation of environmental resources (Mansfield, 2004), the environmental dangers of neoliberal regulatory reforms (Prudham, 2004) and specific responses to neoliberal environmental governance (Hollander, 2004). Reflecting on these empirical studies, McCarthy and Prudham (2004, p. 281) concluded that ‘under the self-regulating market of liberal capital-

ism, market signals alone are necessarily insufficient in governing the allocation of nature to meet economic and competing social demands (e.g. for clean drinking water) because nature in its various forms is not a commodity, that is, not produced for sale’. Fundamentally, the very nature of neoliberalism prevented it from dealing effectively with environmental problems.

Over the past decade, many other studies have considered the relationship between neoliberalism and the environment, focusing on issues such as the privatisation of environmental resources (Bakker, 2007), emissions trading (Cooper and Rosin, 2014) and the individualisation of responsibility (Kent, 2009). A lot of this work has considered the role of neoliberalism in a specific area and presented a critical analysis of the approach. Other scholars have offered alternatives to neoliberalism, arguing that environmental issues should be considered in terms of justice (Caney, 2008), the intrinsic value of nature (Haigh and Griffiths, 2009) or new definitions of growth and progress (Seyfang, 2005).

This paper aims to contribute to the current body of literature by taking a different approach to the analysis of neoliberal environmentalism. It does not offer a critique of neoliberal approaches or advocate an alternative way to deal with environmental problems.

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Rather, it focuses on one specific environmental issue – climate change – and uses it to present a detailed theoretical analysis of neoliberal environmentalism. Focusing on one particular gap identified by McCarthy and Prudham (2004, p. 275), the research considers the ‘various parallels and tensions between neoliberalism and environmentalism as ideologies [and] discourses’. How is the problem of climate change framed and responded to in the context of a dominant neoliberal discourse? Specifically, it attempts to provide a more nuanced account of neoliberalism and the environment by ‘mapping’ six different discourses of climate change, three that adhere to neoliberal principles (reformist) and three that do not (revolutionary). The paper then uses a case study to illustrate how this typological framework might be applied to the analysis of neoliberal environmentalism in the context of everyday life.

According to the fifth assessment report from the IPCC (2014, p. 8) climate change is one of the most significant environmental threats to the future of humanity with an ever increasing likelihood of ‘severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems’. Understandably, the problem has received a lot of attention in policy, business and civil society and, as such, it provides an appropriate context for the theoretical analysis of neoliberal environmental governance and the identification of this governance in the ‘real world’. The case study draws on interviews with designated ‘climate champions’ (individuals who are given responsibility for promoting climate protecting behaviour) in large corporations and investigates how the champions use different climate discourses to encourage behaviour change amongst their colleagues.

The paper is divided into six sections. Following on from the introduction, section two locates the study in existing literature on discourse analysis and the environment and considers the key components of a climate discourse. Section three draws on these proposed components to present a theoretical account of neoliberalism and six specific climate discourses (three reformist and three revolutionary). Section four turns to the case study and outlines the context of the research as well as the methods of data collection. Using the theoretical account of climate discourse, section five then presents the empirical analysis. It identifies the various climate discourses by considering how the champions promoted climate-protecting behaviour in the workplace. The paper ends with a discussion and some concluding remarks about neoliberal environmentalism in the context of the theoretical and empirical material (Section 6).

Overall, the study demonstrates that neoliberal environmentalism can incorporate a plurality of distinctions and contestations. The issue of climate change can be framed in a multitude of different ways (both neoliberal and anti-neoliberal) and all six climate discourses could be identified in the case study, although reformist components played a much stronger role in the champions’ accounts. The climate champion initiatives were heavily influenced by neoliberal discourse and this might point to a wider trend in modern environmental governance. Going forwards, the typological framework could be usefully applied to a number of different contexts in order to assess the continued dominance and effects of neoliberal environmentalism. If neoliberalism is an ‘insufficient’ way to deal with environmental problems it is important to understand how it is operating in the modern world. The paper therefore contributes to current work on neoliberal environmentalism in three main ways: (a) it demonstrates how core neoliberal ideology can constitute different environmental discourses (in this case discourses of climate change), (b) it illustrates how the different discourses might play out in a specific empirical setting (the climate champion case study) and (c) it provides a useful ‘tool’ for the continued analysis of neoliberal environmentalism.

## 2. Analysing discourses of climate change

Discourse is defined as ‘a shared meaning of phenomena’ (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2006, p. 51) or ‘a shared way of apprehending the world’ (Dryzek, 1997, p. 8). Thus, by drawing on a particular discourse, individuals can form a mutual understanding of what a problem is and how it can/should be dealt with. However, according to Carabine (2001, p. 275), we cannot simply choose from an infinite range of different discourses because ‘some discourses are more powerful than others and have more authority or validity... dominant discourses tell us the “truth” about how we can and should respond to a particular issue. It is widely accepted that neoliberalism is one such dominant discourse (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Barnett, 2005). Neoliberal ideology (a system of ideas and ideals) informs neoliberal discourse (a particular way of apprehending the world) and the purpose of the current study is to investigate how different approaches to climate change are influenced by neoliberal discourse. Is neoliberalism viewed as part of the problem (revolutionary) or part of the solution (reformist)?

In the context of environmentalism, discourse analysis has already been widely used. Many studies have considered the relationship between discourse and the environment (Hajer, 1995; Feindt and Oels, 2005; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005) or climate change more specifically (Lindseth, 2004; Methmann, 2010). In addition, several studies have investigated the relationship between climate discourse and neoliberalism (Slocum, 2004; Swaffield and Bell, 2012). However, none of these studies provide a detailed theoretical analysis of the ‘parallels and tensions between neoliberalism and environmentalism’ (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004, p. 275). The paper sets out to address this gap in the literature through the identification of different climate discourses in the context of neoliberalism. But how do we identify a particular climate discourse and distinguish it from others? Dryzek (1997) provides one of the most detailed examples of this kind of analysis in an environmental context. He contends that, ‘in order to see why and how these discourses have developed, and to what effect, it is necessary to pin down their content more precisely’ (p. 15). Analysis requires a close examination of the basic components that make up a discourse. Dryzek identifies nine environmental discourses and analyses each one of them on the basis of four fundamental features (p. 18) (see Table 1).

The ‘basic entities’ are ‘the “ontology” of a discourse’ (p. 16). These are the things that ‘exist’ in a particular account of the world. For example, some discourses will recognise ‘humans’ while others will recognise ‘males’ and ‘females’. Some discourses will acknowledge the existence of the eco-system as an entity in its own right; other discourses will consider an eco-system solely as a resource. ‘Assumptions about natural relationships’ are assertions about, for example, the co-operative nature of human beings in social systems or the conflict inherent in the market. ‘Agents and their motives’ considers the actors that play a role in a discourse. For example, Dryzek talks about ‘rational consumers’, ‘enlightened elites’ and ‘virtuous citizens’ (p. 17). Finally, Dryzek highlights the importance of the metaphors and rhetorical devices being used in discourses. These include, for example, ‘spaceship earth’ and the ‘war against nature’ (p. 17). These four basic components can then be used to analyse any given (environmental) discourse.

**Table 1**  
Components of an environmental discourse.

Basic entities recognised or constructed
Assumptions about natural relationships
Agents and their motives
Key metaphors and other rhetorical devices

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