



# Climate change and post-politics: Repoliticizing the present by imagining the future?



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 28 June 2013

Received in revised form 15 January 2014

### Keywords:

Climate justice  
Post-politics  
Repoliticization  
Direct action  
System change  
Jacques Rancière  
Chantal Mouffe  
Ernesto Laclau

## ABSTRACT

Several scholars have criticized the predominant post-political representations of our current era, particularly with regard to climate change. However, what happens when a movement explicitly aims at repoliticizing the present in an attempt to open a space for change? Combining scholar activism with theoretical insights from post-foundational political theorists, such as Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, this paper studies the paradoxical nature of the attempt to repoliticize climate change by Climate Justice Action (CJA), a grassroots movement that was set up before the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009. Comparing different repoliticization strategies, the paper shows how CJA exhibits core features of a Rancièrian political act, which makes visible what was previously invisible by starting from the postulate of equality. However, lacking an elaborate perspective on alternatives, both Rancière and CJA appear to be stuck in the present. Drawing on Mouffe and Laclau's discourse theory, the paper subsequently analyzes the nodal points of CJA's discourse that could function as inscription points for alternatives. Yet, these points appear to primarily intensify a *we/them* distinction. The result is a paradox: to create a space for imagining alternative futures, one must first fight post-political representations of the present. However, when politicization becomes an end in itself, the outreach of the movement, and therefore its capacity to repoliticize and stimulate the imagination of alternative futures, is constrained.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, an important debate has taken place in political theory concerning our current 'post-political' or 'post-democratic' condition (Crouch, 2004; Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2002b, 2005, 2006; Rancière, 1998; Žižek, 2000). Broadly speaking, this condition implies that predominant representations of society tend to be consensual or technocratic and thus make power, conflict and exclusion invisible. As Chantal Mouffe (2002a, pp. 33–34) has argued, this is a threat to democracy: 'Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation.'

This topic has also received significant attention in the fields of geography and ecology, primarily with regards to climate change, an issue that is particularly vulnerable to being represented in a post-political way, as Swyngedouw (2007, 2010a, 2013) has

shown. Many authors in these fields have focused on the post-political thesis, either to criticize it (e.g., Chatterton et al., 2013; Featherstone, 2013; Featherstone and Korf, 2012; North, 2010; Urry, 2011) or apply it to specific cases (e.g., Bettini, 2013; Brand et al., 2009; Celata and Sanna, 2012; Goeminne, 2010, 2012; Mason and Whitehead, 2012; Neal, 2013; Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010; Kenis and Mathijs, 2009, 2014). A question that has received much less attention, however, concerns what happens when an actor explicitly tries to repoliticize the present to realize the change that the actor has deemed necessary. This is the topic of the present paper: the study of the Climate Justice Action movement (CJA) as one of the most prominent movements in recent history that explicitly took issue with the consensual, post-political logic governing much of the debate on climate change.<sup>1</sup> CJA emerged

<sup>1</sup> CJA was launched as a network; however, throughout the meetings, activities and organized actions, it became more than that. CJA began to attract people who were not members of one of the founding organizations, and many activists started to identify with CJA as such. In the interviews we conducted, almost all activists spoke of CJA as 'a movement' with which they strongly identified. For that reason, we chose to describe CJA as a movement in this paper, even if it was originally constituted as a network.

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in the year prior to the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit and consisted of a broad range of groups and activists from around the world and especially from Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> After the summit, many CJA groups remained active, setting up various types of activities (e.g., actions around specific issues such as the investments by banks and companies in the exploitation of tar sands or shale gas and larger events such as climate camps), campaigning around the summits in Cancún, Durban and Qatar and engaging in a myriad of education and information initiatives. At the same time, the movement slowly disintegrated.

Interestingly, CJA did not merely advocate a specific cause, as all social movements do: CJA also targeted post-politics as an obstacle for promoting this cause, and this difference is what makes it such a relevant object of study. CJA criticized the fact that in a post-political condition, alternative voices are at risk of remaining unheard. The movement did not merely wage a concrete political struggle about a specific issue, but it also engaged in a type of meta-struggle for genuine political struggle and disagreement to even become possible and visible (Kenis and Lievens, 2014a). Thus, it aimed to create a space in which political plurality, power differentials, conflicts and oppositions would become visible, and it considered this condition to be essential for tackling climate change in an effective, democratic and socially just way. In this way, CJA attempted to repoliticize the debate on climate change, and it was quite explicit concerning this goal (COP15zine, 2009).

In this paper, we will attempt to spell out the difficulties and obstacles that confront such an endeavor. We elaborate two possible strategies of repoliticization: one based on the work of Jacques Rancière and the other on the writings of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. On the basis of our involvement as scholar activists within the movement, we will discuss CJA's practices and discourses from the perspective of these two strategies and spell out the challenges and obstacles the movement was confronted with in its attempt to repoliticize the public sphere. We will pay particular attention to the role of visioning the future as a crucial element in any attempt to repoliticize the present. The paper concludes by analyzing the paradoxical nature of CJA's project to repoliticize in the context of post-politics, which helps to explain its relative failure.

## 2. Research design

Our research combined a theoretical exploration of strategies for repoliticization with scholar activism or action research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Reason and Bradbury, 2008; the *Autonomous Geographies Collective*, 2010), the confrontation between which allowed us to assess these strategies on the basis of the actual experiences and discourses of an existing movement.

As scholar activists involved with CJA, we involved in a movement with others, which required us to set up meetings, engage in strategic debates and actions and perform practical tasks while at the same time, clearly identifying ourselves as scholars.<sup>3</sup> Concretely, we attended more than 40 meetings, activities, demonstrations and actions, both in Belgium and internationally, and actively contributed to organizing and promoting these activities. This involvement took place in the year prior to, during and after the climate summit in Copenhagen (including an international

preparation weekend in Copenhagen in October 2009 and a stay of ten days during the Copenhagen summit itself), spanning the lifetime of the movement's relatively short and active existence. After the Copenhagen summit, we closely followed the activities of the movement but did not remain as actively involved. However, we analyzed an extensive range of leaflets, press releases, booklets and other materials spread by the movement, and to complete our data triangulation, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with activists who were actively engaged in the Belgian wing of CJA and 20 in-depth interviews with activists from Transition Towns, another grassroots climate movement that arose in the same period in Belgium and had an attitude similar to CJA regarding conventional environmental approaches, although it opted for a much more depoliticized trajectory than CJA.<sup>4</sup> The latter interviews made it possible to add an outsider's point of view, as one of the central questions during the interviews with Transition Towns members was how they perceived CJA. Although CJA was organized on the national level in Belgium, all activists we interviewed were from its Flemish contingent. We opted for 'maximum variation sampling' to discover the most comprehensive spectrum of backgrounds and viewpoints within the movement (Patton, 2002). The interviewees were of various ages, education and ideological backgrounds. We also attempted to include a maximum range of opinions and positions as they were articulated during meetings, actions and activities. Eleven female and nine male activists were interviewed. Of course, the 'sample' was also influenced by the activists' willingness to be interviewed. However, only two activists refused. In qualitative research, whose goal is not to arrive at generalized statements, samples do not necessarily have to be representative. However, because of the relatively small number of people who were actively involved in CJA, our sample could be observed as quite representative of the voices and perspectives that existed among the Flemish CJA activists.

The interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that focused on the subject's motivations to engage in CJA, the characteristics of CJA, the similarities and differences between CJA and other movements, opinions on root causes of climate change, alternatives and strategies, and more specifically, on COP 15, direct action, violence, companies, politicians and the choice for consensus decision making (several of these topics fall outside the scope of this paper). All interviews lasted between one and two hours and were digitally recorded, fully transcribed, coded and analyzed in detail with the help of the software program NVIVO® (Doncaster, Victoria, Australia).

The use of interviews in combination with document analysis and our involvement in the movement as scholar activists enabled us to develop a thick and rich image of the movement (Baxter and Eyles, 1997; Patton, 2002). The trends and thematic findings resulting from this analysis will be discussed in the sections below.

The goal of our research was to develop an understanding of the elements that facilitate or impede a repoliticization of climate change, which required our research to be strongly theoretically informed. Evidently, the theoretical discussion on 'the political,' post-politics and depoliticization is quite rich and includes a diversity of voices and perspectives. From the broad spectrum of theories developed within the framework of post-foundational political theory, the work of Rancière (1998, 2001, 2006) and the discourse-theoretical approach informed by Mouffe (2006) and Laclau (1990; see also Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) and further

<sup>2</sup> CJA was of course only one organization in a broader field of climate justice articulations, alliances and movements. The claims made in this paper are only aimed to represent CJA in the strictest sense, in particular regarding its current Flemish incarnation. For additional information on the background and activities of the movement, see Chatterton et al. (2013) and Featherstone (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Only the first author of this paper was engaged as a scholar activist in CJA. However, for practical reasons, we will speak in the plural form 'we' throughout the paper.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that CJA and Transition Towns are both grassroots climate movements that share some features (they both criticize the market approach of conventional environmentalism (e.g., green growth), they conceive of people as citizens rather than as consumers, and they focus on collective instead of individual change) while strongly diverging on several other dimensions. In contrast to CJA, Transition Towns stresses the importance of localization, resilience, cooperation and the psychology of change, and it firmly rejects every 'we against them' discourse (which, as we will see below, is characteristic of CJA) (Kenis and Mathijs, 2009, 2014).

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