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# Time and the spatial post-politics of climate change: Insights from Australia

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#### ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the post-politics of climate change in Australia and discuss an important but otherwise little remarked temporality. First, we note the spatial structuring of Rancière's post-political theorization as it informs geographical research on the governance of social and environmental issues. Second, we identify a post-politics in climate change policy developed by the Australian federal gov-ernment (under Rudd then Gillard) which culminated in 2011 with its carbon pricing proposals and subsequent clean energy plan. Third, referring to the discursive material associated with these developments, we discuss the critical importance of time in the climate change debate, returning us to comment on the problematic temporality of post-politics with a word of caution about any re-emergence here of the political.

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The clock is ticking for the planet, but .... [t]he vested interests at work are simply too great.

Kevin Rudd, then prime minister of Australia, 6th November 2009

#### Introduction

This paper examines recent climate change policy developments in Australia. It draws on the notion of a post-politics which has been identified mostly in urban studies in North America and Europe (see, e.g., Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Davidson, 2011; Dikeç, 2005, 2007; MacLeod, 2011; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Paddison, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2005, 2009a, 2011). Post-political critiques have been applied to climate change in the British context mostly by Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2009b, 2010). Few have been conducted in Australia (for an exception, see Williams, 2012).

In preparing to address this gap, we chanced upon *Rolling Stone* magazine's article 'Climate change and the end of Australia' (Goodell, 2011). Its author had been visiting when tropical cyclone Yasihit Australia's east coast which suited him under the conditions:

'I have come to Australia to see what a global-warming future holds for this most vulnerable of nations, and Mother Nature has been happy to oblige: Over the course of just a few weeks, the continent has been hit by a record heat wave, a crippling drought, bush fires, floods that swamped an area the size of France and Germany combined, even a plague of locusts.'

#### Goodell, 2011

Against a background more suggestive of Old Testament retribution than modern planning for climate change, Goodell tells us that Australia's time is nigh (punishment, presumably for inaction). Goodell considers the lack of preparedness for sea level rise, for example, to be remarkable in such an affluent society of coastal settlements. Despite ratifying the Kyoto Protocol in late 2007, the nation's commitment to reducing carbon emissions is deemed by him to be 'an empty gesture' whereas the opportunity to link climate change to cyclone Yasiis missed as 'media outlets gloss over the complexities' (Goodell, 2011).

An end to politics as well as Australia is insinuated as Goodell (2011) refers to no polity as such. The hosting online of so much of the debate on climate change by media in the style of *Rolling Stone* is itself symptomatic of the post-political. With emphasis on local action in a global context, the state seems only to recede further from view. Contradictions abound though and geographers amongst others are again recognizing territorial aspects to climate change and identifying a political role for nation-states (see, e.g., Giddens, 2011; Howarth & Foxall, 2010; Krytheotis, 2012). An Australian case study can afford useful geographical insights here but, with such apocalyptic pronouncements also demanding interrogation, our analysis looks at time as well as space in the post-politics of climate change.





Political Geography

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Our argument unfolds over three sections. First we outline postpolitical theory as used to explain social and environmental politics with policy and policy-making reduced to a 'policing' that operates through space. Second, we introduce our case study analysis of the Australian federal government's proposals for and subsequent passage in 2011 of a clean energy plan and carbon pricing bill which we see as a manifestation of post-politics. Third, we then examine the empirical material in theoretical terms to explore its temporal framing which is – unlike its spatial counterpart – rarely identified in such analyses of post-political issues and yet seems so relevant to climate change.

#### Post-politics: policing society and environment through space

At a high level of abstraction, the notion of post-politics is associated with philosophers Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2000, 2005) and Slavoj Žižek (1999, 2004, 2006, 2007) as well as Jacques Rancière (2001, 2003, 2007, 2009). A spatial sensibility inflects their work but is most pronounced in Rancière's oeuvre which is a significant source for post-political geography as discussed here.

Rancière's radical critique emerges from a tension between politics and philosophy, which he positions foremost in his seminal text *Disagreement* (1999 [1995]). Here Rancière lays out most fully the thesis he had started to explain in terms of 'the end of politics' with an essay of similar title in *On the Shores of Politics* (Rancière, 2007 [1992]). Following the May '68 student riots in Paris and with impetus since then from international events, the notion of democracy and politics itself has demanded rethinking. Still, Rancière (2009, p. 114) sees his method not as philosophy but more an interrogation of any given situation, such that his books 'are always forms of intervention in specific contexts.' Against a background that features the Soviet empire's collapse, and ongoing globalization of capital in the guise of democracy, he noted upwelling ethnic conflicts and racial hatred:

'On the Shores of Politics and Disagreement were elaborated as an investigation into this strange relationship between the assertion of the global triumph of consensual and peaceful democracy and those new forms of violence. They tried to construct the ideological paradigm able to account for it, by showing that consensus meant in fact the contrary of democracy and, by the same token, the erasure of politics itself. The opposition of politics and police was proposed as a tool for understanding the logic of this process.'

#### Rancière, 2009, p. 115

Here, with this policing, 'society consists of groups dedicated to specific modes of action, in places where these occupations are exercised, in modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places' (Rancière, 2001, §21). A politics proper, on the other hand, can disturb such an arrangement 'supplementing it with a part of the no-part identified with the community as a whole. ... Politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable' (Rancière, 2001, §21). In assuming the principle of equality, extending it as the universal singular, new political subjects are constituted as they render themselves and the objects of their recriminations worthy of political recognition and contestation.

Usually for Rancière, however, politics gets reduced to the postpolitics of a police function. This end to any politics proper, in being subsumed to a police function, is facilitated through spatial relationships. Rancière has therefore appealed to political geographers. There is 'a substantial spatial practice in his theorization of politics' in turn identified and deployed by Mustafa Dikeç in researching the troubled Parisian *banlieus* (Dikeç, 2005, p. 173; see also Dahmann et al., 2012; Dikeç, 2007). Similarly, Swyngedouw (2011, p. 371) reads recent urban violence in Western Europe as challenging the post-democratic order's 'partitioned social and spatial distribution of things and people.' Yet others have used the idea of post-politics to investigate spatial planning (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012), housing gentrification (Davidson, 2011), urban regeneration (MacLeod, 2011) and development based around the provision of theme parks (Paddison, 2009) and golf courses (Neo, 2010).

Spatiality figures in the de-politicization of environmental issues too. A spatial process of closure associated with contemporary consensualism is therefore noted by Swyngedouw in his postpolitical analyses of socio-ecological issues. He sees the politics of nature, environment and sustainability as 'radically conservative' and 'inherently reactionary' (Swyngedouw, 2007, p. 23; 2010, p. 228). Climate change is a case in point as any space for alternative thought and action is closed down in populist discourse expressed through what Swyngedouw describes (and we later explore) as powerfully hegemonic and yet ultimately empty signifiers (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2009b, 2010; see also Boykoff, 2008). State politics and its policy function are akin here to policing or 'polic(y) ing' and 'polic(e)y/politics' (Swyngedouw, 2009b, p. 604; 2011, p. 2). The particularly spatial configuration of this post-politics is summarized as follows:

'These post-political climate change policies rest on the following foundations. First, the social and ecological problems caused by modernity/capitalism are external side-effects; they are not an inherent and integral part of the relations of liberal politics and capitalist economies. Second, a strictly populist politics emerges here; one that elevates the interest of an imaginary 'the People', Nature, or 'the environment' to the level of the universal, rather than opening spaces that permit the universalization of the claims of particular socio-natures, environments, or social groups or classes. Third, these side-effects are constituted as global, universal and threatening. Fourth, the 'enemy' or the target of concern is continuously externalized and becomes socially disembodied, is always vague, ambiguous, unnamed and uncounted, and ultimately empty. Fifth, the target of concern can be managed through a consensual dialogical politics whereby demands become depoliticized and politics naturalized within a given socio-ecological order for which there is ostensibly no real alternative.'

Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 228; see also Swyngedouw, 2009b, p. 613; Swyngedouw, 2007, pp. 34–35

#### Climate change policy developments in Australia

Australian climate change policy is redolent of a post-politics that we explore here. Before detailing our findings, we explain the political background to our case study, the choice of material examined and the methods used.

#### Case study context and methods

Climate change was not a pressing political issue in Australian administration during the eleven years of conservative government delivered with Prime Minister John Howard's election in 1996. Instead, environmental policy relied on the voluntary and market based instruments of a 'light-handed' regulatory approach (Papadakis & Grant, 2003). There was little leadership in implementing integration (Ross & Dovers, 2008). After this long period of conservative rule, federal politics shifted back towards the left when the Australian Labor Party (ALP or Labor), led by Kevin Rudd, Download English Version:

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