

## We Have Never been “Post-political”\*

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With apologies all around—to Bruno Latour, to the organizers of this symposium, and to Erik Swyngedouw, whose work has provided an invaluable set of provocations for this conversation—I wish to begin by questioning some of the premises of the panel discussion for which these comments were originally prepared. While I wholeheartedly support the project of thinking through the role of environmental questions in advancing genuinely radical and alternative politics, I have some skepticism and reservations regarding the analytical accuracy and political utility of characterizing the present as existing in a “post-political” condition; the historical distinctiveness of the types of environmental politics sometimes advanced as evidence of this condition; and the narrowing, to certain sorts of antagonistic ones, of the definition of “proper” politics that might provide a way forward.

I do not have an alternative framing to offer instead; I have simply a series of observations and questions about this framing and some of the related recent conversations in this area. First, I confess that I begin from some gut resistance to the notion of the “post-political” as widely articulated. It is in many ways quite explicitly an effort by left political theorists to characterize and engage with Francis Fukuyama’s thesis regarding “the end of history,” positive articulations regarding the “Washington consensus,” the common sense of neoliberalism, and a number of other efforts to articulate the contours of a post-Cold War political-economic order. Everyone on the left thought—rightly—that those formulations were profoundly wrong, simplistic, and transparently ideological moves when they were first articulated in the 1980s, and I am not sure it is either accurate or helpful for those critical of them to cede even so much ground as to begin from the premise that such depoliticizing consensus are in fact truly hegemonic. In short, as a description and analysis of the (entire?) contemporary world, “the post-political” often strikes me as potentially analytically flat, totalizing, and inadequate as “globalization” and the like.

Nonetheless, I accept and agree with much of what has been written regarding the “post-political condition,” whether we term it that, the Washington consensus, neoliberal common sense, or any of the other terms describing the same ideological formation from different angles. Indeed, much of my own work in recent years has been on not just the dominance of neoliberal common sense, but on what I believe has been the greatly underappreciated centrality of environmental governance to the formation and consolidation of that common sense (see, e.g., McCarthy and Prudham 2004). Moreover, Erik Swyngedouw’s recent work on environmental politics as important sites and components of the post-political (see, e.g., 2010) does a superb job of tracing precisely some of those contours.

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However, my focus and interest have always been on the ongoing forms and sites of resistance to and disruption of that common sense, which have in fact been legion, including, I would argue, a great deal of environmental politics. And I worry that accepting, using, and perpetuating sweeping categories such as the “post-political condition” runs the risk of glossing over, under appreciating, and indeed potentially undercutting such work.

With that overall perspective in mind, I would then like to simply pose three questions for consideration with respect to the topic of the panel that took up this issue at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in New York in February 2012 and the symposium in the current issue.

### **1. Is this really new?**

One of the things that strikes me when I read characterizations of the alleged “post-political” condition, particularly with respect to environmental politics and governance, is how familiar it sounds. This is from the panel description:

*False urgency suspends the democratic process. The management of nature is entrusted to the non-democratic techno-managerial apparatuses of state bureaucracies, the military and corporations. Forget political debate. It has been evacuated from the public sphere. Nature is deprived of its political content to become a managerial problem. A consensus is pronounced for the need [for] a “sustainable” market economy.*

Much of my earlier work was on the history of public lands management in the western United States, particularly what are now the national forests. And when I read the statement above and others like it, the first thing that springs to mind—counter-intuitively I admit, given the urgency and timeliness of the sentiment—is the Progressive Era. Specifically, it calls to my mind the fears of a “timber famine” in the U.S. at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—fears of resource scarcity that would make it impossible for a rapidly growing capitalist economy to continue its expansion. In response, the U.S. reversed over a century of land policy and decided to keep huge areas of forests and other resources in permanent federal ownership to manage supplies at sustainable rates, and it set up huge new bureaucracies to manage them during the Progressive Era. The Progressives’ approach to environmental governance was that resource management and other public administration problems should be depoliticized: the best scientists and experts would formulate policies based on their technical knowledge and the overall public good, and the bureaucracies would carry them out, in ways that would intentionally and by design render their interactions with the public “apolitical.”

The Progressive Era attempt to “depoliticize” environmental governance was of course an utter failure for a host of reasons: powerful economic and political interests found or made entry points into supposedly sealed-off arenas, eventually culminating in the phenomenon of “agency capture”; scientists and technocrats carried their own politics into their work, consciously or unconsciously; the people affected by new property relations and management regimes resisted and reconfigured the newly emergent socio-natures in their areas in a variety of ways, producing a reality more complicated than, and often at odds with, the superficially clear official policy; and so on. In short, it turns out that every moment of environmental governance was shot through with politics all along, and that most of the

people involved or affected recognized it and acted accordingly using whatever avenues and tactics were available to them. In fact, I tend to think that that will always and necessarily be the case, and that therefore any genuine “depolicitizing” of environmental governance is by definition impossible.

I know that many would say I am missing the point of the “post-political”: the claim is not that environmental governance is not political now; the claim is that those politics have been profoundly suppressed, fragmented, and channeled in ways that forestall any serious challenge to the status quo. And clearly that is a claim with much truth to it. Still, I am skeptical of the claims regarding the wholesale success of that project. While I certainly recognize that many powerful interests expend vast resources to present key aspects of environmental governance as not subject to deep political debate or control, I am skeptical about that framing being truly accepted or internalized by anyone beyond its purveyors. (This is not to suggest that everyone is always fully aware or supportive of the critiques of capitalism that might be implicit in their particular environmental concerns or politics; that is clearly not the case.)

Moreover, my first question here is less about whether such sorts of suppression and redirection of environmental politics occurs than about how novel and distinctive it is. It seems to me that we can locate quite similar examples throughout the history of capitalism—Progressive-era conservation above; the technocratic neo-Malthusian managerialism of *Limits to Growth*-era environmentalism; indeed the entire history back to Malthus of justifying unjust social policies via appeals to a fixed external “nature” best interpreted by cold-eyed (and cold-hearted) “experts”—and that these sorts of historical parallels raise important questions about the periodization of the “post-political condition” and suggest that perhaps we ought to ask broader, more structural questions about the recurring ways in which capitalist modernity consistently creates and frames environmental “problems” and “solutions.”

## **2. Is the present really “post-political”?**

My first question concerned how new and distinctive are the contours described by the “post-political” literature with respect to environmental politics. My second question is, how accurately do those contours describe contemporary politics?

Again, to begin with points of agreement, I agree with many of the points in the post-political literature regarding elements that are essential for true politics: antagonism, deep dissent, the space for the imagination of genuine alternatives, and so on. And I agree that a consensus regarding the continuation of capitalism and the liberal state certainly dominates in, at the very least, in formal policy circles and the mass media, and that the architects of that consensus, at least, strive mightily to foreclose the possibility of precisely those sorts of politics. So again, there is a great deal that I agree with entirely, and I would just note that a lot of people have been discussing these dynamics for quite some time, using a range of different terms.

With respect to environmental politics, though, and particularly politics around climate change, I am less sure that current politics are quite as “post-political” as many current observers claim. And here I am reacting most directly to some of Erik

Swyngedouw's writings on this topic, specifically his article (2010) on post-political populism in politics around climate change.

It is certainly true that capitalism operating through the juridical framework of liberal states is all but completely taken for granted as the framework for any responses to climate change in formal policy circles, and that that is tremendously limiting politically; I grant that absolutely. But when it comes to some other elements of the alleged post-political condition with respect to climate change, I am less convinced by some of Erik's characterizations. He argues that, with respect to the environment, the post-political state is characterized by acceptance of scientific consensus assumed to be politically neutral, faith in technocratic management of narrowly compartmentalized problems, consensus formation, a desire on the part of politicians to "outmaneuver each other in brandishing the ecological banner," and "a virtually unchallenged consensus over the need to be more 'environmentally' sustainable if disaster is to be averted" (2010, 216-217). Moreover, with respect to climate change in particular, he contends that:

[T]he matters of concern are thereby relegated to a terrain beyond dispute, to one that does not permit dissensus or disagreement. Scientific expertise becomes the foundation and guarantee for properly constituted politics/policies. (2010, 217)

Finally, the post-political is marked by "the reduction of the political to administration where decision-making is increasingly considered to be a question of expert knowledge and not of political position" (2010, 225).

As grim and politically limited and limiting as that vision is, from within the U.S.A., my first reaction is, "Would that it were so." In fact, it is striking how entirely at odds U.S. environmental and climate politics are with the above description. While it is true that U.S. politics in this domain are decidedly populist, and that the perpetuation of capitalism and use of market techniques are never seriously questioned in mainstream discussions, the rest could not be further off from the U.S. experience. Large sectors of the American public, including very large percentages of professional politicians and the media, accept neither scientific expertise nor consensus, and regard both as deeply and intractably political, at least with respect to environmental questions. They do not compartmentalize problems for management, instead seeing virtually every specific issue—e.g., light bulb standards—as a significant front in all-encompassing struggle over the relationship between state and subject. "Freedom" is constantly invoked in such struggles in ways that seem perhaps to reject the internalization of environmentally oriented ethical-moral subjectivities that many have characterized as substituting for politics in the post-political order. Likewise, environmentalism in general, and climate change in particular, are very commonly portrayed as entirely fictional issues of concern, invented by self-interested and unpatriotic scientists and activists either for their own gain, or as an excuse for increased government control over the entire society. Nearly all politicians run from being seen as advocates for the environment in anything but the most absolutely vague, minimal, and anodyne ways, since such advocacy will inevitably be interpreted as a lack of commitment to economic growth.

I think it would be interesting to ask similar questions about the politics around climate change in China and a number of other countries, but space does not permit it (although for some provocative thoughts along those lines, see Wainwright and Mann 2012).

The point is that I believe Swyngedouw's analysis of contemporary environmental politics is one from the U.K. and the E.U. in important ways, just as the post-political literature is similarly situated. That is not to say that they are therefore incorrect; it is simply to urge more modest and consciously situated claims regarding the state of contemporary "politics" writ large.

The counterexample of the state of climate change politics in the U.S.A. is an especially depressing one, but I believe there are also other, more encouraging examples that run counter to characterizations of environmental politics, including those around climate change, as entirely subsumed within and contributing to the "post-political" configuration. Very briefly, I would argue that there are in fact very substantial, significant, and ongoing struggles around the politics and politicization of climate change that are directly at odds with some of the "post-political" dynamics that Swyngedouw sees in this area. Many activist groups, from Occupy the COP to multiple groups articulating theories and demands regarding climate justice and ecological debt to those contesting new sites of especially damaging fossil fuel extraction, such as the Alberta tar sands, are focused precisely on the antagonistic interests and dynamics in climate change and reject the parameters of liberal capitalism as a sufficient or acceptable framework (see Chatterton et al. 2012). Moreover, such activism is neither new nor a small sideshow to the consolidation of neoliberal globalization: as Chatterton and his co-authors trace, contentious and antagonistic politics organized around environmental themes have contested and troubled the terms of the neoliberal consensus throughout its history. We do such political activism a great disservice by contending that it somehow does not count as "proper" politics, or that it is inevitably co-opted or complicit in the reproduction of the status quo.

### **3. What constitutes "proper" politics moving forward?**

My first question had to do with the novelty of some of the dynamics often said to characterize the "post-political" configuration. My second had to do with whether contemporary environmental politics are really so lacking in antagonism, alternative visions, and other elements of "proper" politics as many analysts of the post-political condition claim. My third question focuses on whether it is useful or appropriate to define so strictly and perhaps narrowly what constitutes the "properly" political.

Very briefly: I believe that there are multiple and indeterminate routes, sites, forms, and trajectories of politics and political change in environmental politics and otherwise. Indeed, I believe one of the major contributions of political ecology and geography to the understanding of politics in general, and environmental politics in particular, has been to increase our sensitivity towards and understanding of the many, often indirect and surprising, ways in which politics unfold (see, e.g., Hart 2002; Kosek 2006; Mann 2007). Some, to be sure, focus on the state or on sites of direct, overt economic or property relations. But others turn on how the past is remembered or the future imagined, or on what is said or not said, and how, in brief encounters that defy regulation and sometimes even conscious intent, turning perhaps instead on affect. Some happen in moments or sites of tremendous inequality and deprivation, some in moments or sites of surplus and relative equality. Some are rapid and transformative; some involve the very gradual socialization or democratization (or, all too often, commodification) of certain aspects of production or reproduction. For many forms of politics, categories and distinctions, such as public versus

private, economic versus cultural, or formal versus informal, are irrelevant at best and misleading at worst. Countless tanker-loads of ink have been spilled over the past several decades on the relationships among these various sites and modalities of politics, and I will not attempt to recapitulate those debates here. My point is simply to recall and highlight their multiplicity, and given that, to resist the call to produce a universal, schematic account of what constitutes “the properly political.”

This is emphatically *not* to say that everything is political and there is no telling how things will turn out, so we should not worry about strategy, priorities, or political analysis and critique. Nothing could be further from my meaning. It is to say, however, that I think it is a mistake to focus on the insistence that political projects must meet a certain, relatively narrow set of criteria in order to be judged “properly” political by a set of very specifically and partially situated observers. I have no interest in being on either side of such judgments.

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