Text, fantasy and the political:
A two-track analysis of climate-change politics

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Abstract
Discourse involves interactions between elements both logico-semantic and fantasmatic, suggesting that climate policy discourses are embedded within the fantasmatic repertoires of their broader discursive contexts. Discourses employed by climate sceptics are underpinned by a range of fantasmatic nodal points that, from a Laclauian perspective, maintain the force and regularity of discourses and identities. Purportedly rational sceptic arguments exploit deeply sedimented myths and social imaginaries, particularly those that gather under the signifiers of ‘progress’ and ‘nation’. The re-articulation of ‘progress’ in the direction of capitalist technoscience, and issues of translation between the global, abstract discourse of climate change and national contexts of expansionary development, play into sceptics’ rhetorical strategies. The environment movement ignores the role of myths and social imaginaries at its peril.

Introduction
Whatever the merits of the ecological-modernisation discourse that now guides European economic and environmental policy, just across the Atlantic the triumph of climate denialism has reached the point where climate scientists receive death threats and Senator James Inhofe tells Congress that climate change is ‘the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people’. By now, we are well aware of the close links between oil, coal and gas companies, right-wing think tanks and astroturf groups, and their campaigns to promulgate climate scepticism. In popular books such as Clive Hamilton’s Scorcher and George Monbiot’s Heat, and millions of words of academic literature, the flows of capital, ideas and personnel behind climate denialism are well documented.\(^1\) Yet the bluff and bluster of the think-tanks and cranks has been uncannily successful in rewriting what it means to be American. Even the denialists themselves are surprised at how easily they have managed to position climate scepticism as a litmus test of conservative credentials. Troublingly, surveys now show Australia joining the U.S. as polities in which the strongest correlate of an individual’s position on anthropogenic global warming is their political affiliation.

At this juncture, the overwhelming task of green political theory remains to identify the structures holding in place popular complicity with environmental destruction. This paper hopes to throw some light onto the nature of the growing resistance to climate change measures in the U.S. and Australia through an analysis of the rhetorical appeal of climate scepticism. In the first section, I attempt to show that it is necessary to move beyond the rational explanations of environmental-political actors’ behaviour, and argue that a fantasmatic logic operates in fields of high degrees of complexity and abstraction such as climate politics. In the second, I examine how the circulation

\(^1\) C. Hamilton, Scorcher: the dirty politics of climate change (Black Inc., 2007); G. Monbiot, M. Prescott, and J. Shaw, Heat: How to stop the planet burning (APS, 2006).
within media discourses of social imaginaries of progress and nation have been harnessed by scepticism to build broad anti-climate action constituencies in the U.S. and Australia.

Scepticism in the ascendency

Public opinion for climate change is in a dire situation in the U.S. and Australia, and the politics are often referred to as ‘toxic’. Polling in the United States and Australia shows that acknowledgement of climate change, as well as concern about it, has been on the wane since 2006.\(^2\) Asked to agree or disagree with the statement ‘global warming is a serious and pressing problem. We should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs’, only 41% of Australians agreed in 2011 – a steep fall from 68% in 2006. Interestingly, it also reports that 75% of Australians believe the Federal Government has done a poor job addressing climate change, including 39% who rate it ‘very poor’\(^3\). In the U.S., the latest data shows that 46% of the public say global warming is a problem requiring immediate government action, down from 61% in 2006. According to Pew Research, the decline is mostly a consequence of the fact that fewer now believe global warming is a problem.\(^4\) Indeed, the number of Americans who believe that most scientists think global warming is occurring fell from 47 to 34% between 2008 and 2010. And for the same period, the number who thought there was ‘a lot of disagreement among scientists’ rose from 33 to 40%\(^5\).

The most disturbing finding, however, from polling in both countries, is the correlation between political affiliation and belief in global warming. Asked: ‘Do you think it’s been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the Earth is warming because of man-made problems?’ 95% of surveyed congressional Democrats responded yes, and just 13% of Republicans. The same survey reported that 88 percent of Democrats supported mandatory limits on carbon emissions, compared with just 19% of Republicans.\(^6\) An earlier Pew survey found only 23% of college educated Republicans said that global warming was due to human activity compared to 75% of their Democratic counterparts.\(^7\) Beliefs about climate change among Australians are also beginning to correlate with voting intention, with ‘left-wing political beliefs’ associated with ‘greater belief in human-induced climate change’ and ‘higher levels of concern about the effects of climate change’.\(^8\)

Accounts of climate scepticism

‘Structural’ and materialist perspectives provide a basis for explaining the enduring appeal of climate scepticism in the U.S. and Australia. For instance, Paterson’s distinctions between ecological modernisation and ‘carboniferous capitalism’ as contrasting modes of economic development, with the U.S. and Australian models based on the latter: a legacy of ready access to fossil-fuel energy

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\(^2\) Public opinion polling is a problematic way to assess people’s beliefs about politically charged issues: the wording of questionnaires and the contrived setting of interviewing sometimes lead to misleading and contradictory results. The data presented here is simply intended as one indication of recent trends.


\(^5\) Z. Leviston et al., Australians’ views of climate change (CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences, 2011).


\(^7\) http://scienceblogs.com/framing-science/2007/01/in_latest_survey_only_23_of_co.php

\(^8\) For a brief summary of the emergence of ecological modernisation, see A. P. J. Mol and David Allan Sonnenfeld, Ecological modernisation around the world: perspectives and critical debates (Routledge, 2000), 4-7.
sources, large-scale land development and an open, liberal economic philosophy. Yet Paterson’s emphasis on hegemonic rivalry and forms of capitalist organisation largely sees an unproblematic link between the mode of production and the decisions of state and corporate elites. This is theoretically problematic in that it leapfrogs civil society, neglecting that policies pursued by democratic governments are not only determined by bureaucrats and technocrats, but must be justified to voters. The media, as citizens’ major source of information about politics, shapes the complexity politised terrain upon which people may be activated, ‘resigned to passivity’, or ‘mired in a swirl of contradictory phraseology’. But Paterson’s elevation of structural and material factors also ignores the fact that the U.S. and Australia have made repeated attempts to introduce carbon-trading schemes in the past four years (all of which have failed for domestic political reasons). Recall that there is strong Democratic support for mandatory carbon emissions reductions.

But the majority of analyses of climate laggardism of the U.S. and Australia emerge from the deliberative democracy school of thought, and focus on the distortions involved in the flow of information through the science, media and politics circuit. Given the indications that citizen engagement with climate change politics is generally low, work has focused on engaging the public in discussions relevant to climate-change policy and the role of media in representing climate change to the public. This ‘public understanding of science’ model reflects the traditional assumptions of the modern environment movement: that environmental political apathy is the result of an information deficit and once people understand the facts of environmental destruction, they will become politically engaged in large enough numbers to effect change. Critiques of this approach are legion, often focusing on the way climate change is always interpretively ‘enframed’ by politicians, the media, and even scientists themselves, problematising assumptions of the transparency of scientific data and the strict rationality of the public.

In this mode are prominent accounts that situate contemporary environmental conflicts within broader contests. Hajer reads environmental politics as fundamentally definitional struggles over relations between society, technology and nature, while Beck sees a doctrinal conflict over the proper path for modernity. I concur with Hajer’s view of cultural politics being waged over competing constructions of human/non-human relations, but steer away from his technocratic emphasis to focus on the role of the media-political sphere in liberal democracies. I explicitly include questions of subjectivation in my analysis, and employ a psychoanalytically informed post-structuralist framework to analyse in more detail the specific mechanisms through which meanings and identities are contested. Beyond the reasons already stated, I see three key justifications for adopting such an approach, each of which emerge from respective features of scientific and political constructions of climate change: abstraction, complexity and mediatisation.

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12 “Congressional Insiders Poll.”
Now matter how it is constructed, climate change is an abstract object. We cannot directly perceive it, and nor can we unequivocally ascribe to it concrete events (droughts or storms, for example). Pertaining to vastly dispersed geographical and temporal dynamics, probabilities and distributions, its existence depends upon scientists employing such tools such as supercomputers, kilometre-long ice-core drills and carbon isotope analysers (not to mention the theoretical infrastructure spanning hundreds of years of development of modern physics, chemistry and biology). This abstraction goes hand in hand with complexity: the latest IPCC report, for instance, runs to almost 3000 pages and involves more than 3000 scientists, reflecting perhaps the empirical object of climate science: an atmosphere some 4.2 billion cubic kilometres in volume, subject to very complex chemical, thermodynamic and fluid dynamic effects, interacting with the Earth’s vast and variegated continents and oceans.

Now throw this complex object into the superheated sphere of digital communications – cable TV, blogs, tailored newssfeeds comprising a deluge of opinion and comment, claims and counter-claims, hermetic fora, and intensely affected political debate (which manages to be both polarised and narrow). In this media landscape, the values of novelty, conflict and scandal mix with the formal qualities of terseness and visual appeal. This at a time in which the formal structures of government are increasingly challenged by the influence of indirect forms of politics and types of political pressure. Žižek argues mediatisation amplifies the imaginary, fantasmatic register – indeed, a Plague of Fantasies blurring clear reasoning is ‘brought to its extreme in today’s audiovisual media.’ Understandably, the mythic and fantasmatic registers come to the fore when there is a paucity of rational knowledge; knowledge drives out the phantasm. Yet, accompanying climate change is no scarcity of information – quite the opposite. Paradoxically, these vast quantities of information – mostly scientific, but also economic and political – in the hands of a multiplicitous public sphere, lead precisely to a lack of meaning. When information reaches bursting point, it takes the intervention of myth to order, to structure, the saturated field. And as identities themselves derive from a contingent fixing of discursive structures, they too are subject to this new dynamic, bobbing about disoriented in a homogeneous field until fixing themselves to an available mythic discourse.

Fantasy, myth, social imaginary

Agamben observed that while ‘us moderns devalue imagination as dream and fantasy, for the ancients, imagination was the supreme medium of knowledge’. Interestingly, the usually divergent currents of cognitive science, social psychology and psychoanalytic theory are now exhibiting something of a convergence around a similar notion of a hitherto disavowed ‘underside’ of knowledge. Recent cognitive science has come to recognise two distinct modes of cognition: the serial, based on the symbolic logic of rule-driven process, and the parallel, based on a holistic, connectionist model in which cognition proceeds by comparison to prototype. While by no means a perfect analogy, this reflects the distinction in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory between the unconscious registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Lacan’s Symbolic register is structured, famously, ‘like a language’, the interaction of its various elements governed by a grammar of combination and substitution, while his Imaginary is the realm of identification, of fantasy, of the signified.

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21 Žižek, The plague of fantasies, xxiii.
Heuristically, we can think of the two modes as the logico-semantic, and the fantasmatic. And while they are analytically separable, in practice they are not so readily separable. The most profound difference between the two modes is in terms of their flexibility and durability. While the adaptable structure of the logico-semantic very quickly absorbs new knowledge, it does so at the cost of a certain fragility. Contrast this with the very different structure of the fantasmatic, which is comparatively stable, only reorganising in the face of an accumulation of contradictory information. The fantasmatic is a profounder, more ‘compelling’ register, and shapes behaviour more powerfully than logico-semantic knowledge.  

Now, for Lacan, fantasy has a special relationship with the subject. Because the psychoanalytic subject is constitutively split, it invests much energy in trying to suture its identity, through fixations on social-symbolic signifiers through consumption and political subjectivation, for example. Of course, for the subject such a process of identification is never able to achieve the anticipated fullness (which exists both before language, and as language’s condition of possibility) and thus such identificatory work is ongoing. What distinguishes the Lacanian concept of discourse from the social-constructivist term frame, is that discourses tend to be structured around an intensely cathected signifier, a nodal point. This investment is the bridge linking the logico-semantic to the fantasmatic, or in Lacanian vocabulary, the Symbolic to the Imaginary. It is this Imaginary, fantasmatic realm that structures desire and the individual’s sense of its place in the universe (ego), and thus is the vital spark that animates the form of the symbolic structure. The particular role of fantasy is the covering of lack, a harmonious resolution of the social antagonism that stands as the object cause of the subject’s imagined lack of pre-antagonistic wholeness. Thus by exploiting the fantasmatic logic of subjectivation – typically by holding out an imaginary promise of recapturing a lost or impossible wholeness – a political project can enlist a particular constituency.

We might be tempted to assign to the fantasmatic a structuring role in respect of the logico-semantic, but this is not quite the case. Nor should we see the fantasmatic as a mythical beyond of the ‘production of the symbol which would precede the discursive formulation’. For Lacan, the Imaginary can be seen to inhere within the Symbolic. The way the Imaginary relates to the Symbolic register is not through a latent/manifest depth relation but a topological ‘knot’ relation: the two are intimately entwined and co-dependent.

While cognitive science and social psychology tend to take the individual as an Archimedean point, this is eschewed by psychoanalytic theory. Lacan’s concept of the Symbolic as big Other captures the sense that the linguistic pre-exists the subject – indeed, it is the condition of possibility of the subject. Yet the register of the Imaginary is also deeply implicated in the social, especially to the extent that fantasies are shared. These shared fantasies we term myths. Myth is a narrative held by a community about itself, and it serves to legitimise the social order. In keeping with the metaphorical nature of the fantasmatic or Imaginary, the community need not believe in the myth

28 Lacan insists the ‘affective is not like a special density which would escape an intellectual accounting’. (S1, 57). Although he stresses the efficiency of the image in fantasy, this is due not to any intrinsic quality of the image in itself but to the place which it occupies in a symbolic structure; the fantasy is always ‘an image set to work in a signifying structure’ (E, 272).
29 G. A Hosking and G. Schöpflin, Myths and nationhood (Routledge, 1997), 19.
for it to be true; it instead ‘lives on the feather line between fantasy and reality’. 30 We can think of a myth as a point of condensation upon which a community can project its self-identity; and in this aspect it serves a unifying function. For Ricoeur, myth is a dialectic of past and future, a set of coordinates that, although constantly emerging and evolving, orient society with respect to its imagined past(s) and future(s). 31 Yet myth should not be reduced to the narrative, and serves other important functions. For instance, in enshrining society’s values, or enacting systems of classification relating to practical knowledge. 32

Laclau places myth at the interface of the social and the political. 33 Myth originates in the space of structural dislocation, where the signifying structures previously holding a society together are rendered inadequate by the rupturing effect of dislocation. What emerges from the dislocation depends upon the political (hegemonic) struggle between competing myths to suture the dislocated structure. There is a point at which a myth becomes so hegemonic, so sedimented, that its literal content is concealed and it becomes an ‘absolute limit’ structuring a ‘field of intelligibility’. 34 Its positive content has not disappeared but has been hypostasised, been made form. As a ‘smooth surface of inscription’, below the level of objectivity, the myth has become the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object. At this point it becomes, in Laclau’s language, a social imaginary.

Sceptic discourses

The sceptic discourses I analyse in this paper do not come from the fringes. Rather, they are columnists who are represented in the most influential media outlets in the U.S. and Australia: The Wall St Journal, The Australian, Fox News, and Australia’s most popular radio broadcaster Alan Jones, and its most popular columnist, Andrew Bolt. In these countries, scepticism is mainstream. The power of Alan Jones in Australian politics is legendary. Politicians often tailor their message to his own prejudices, even when it opposes their previously uttered positions. And they sometimes write fawning letters to the broadcaster, attempting to curry favour in the knowledge that Jones, just like the Murdoch press, holds enormous sway over their publics, and that it is very difficult to win the public over without winning over these opinion leaders. A similar status is accorded to the United States’s Glenn Beck, with evidence that political parties routinely consider whether their words or actions would expose them to Beck’s rabid venom. In trying to understand the extraordinary success of climate scepticism, we will first broadly outline the sceptic discourse, before zeroing in to those features of most interest. I will present here those features that are common to both the Australian and U.S. sceptic discourses, with the qualification that it is an composite of sceptic statements and that not all sceptics adhere to all of these views. 34

Scepticism portrays climate scientists and environmentalists as a coterie of hysterical doomsayers and alarmists who misrepresent the data in order to secure funding and influence and raise their profiles. They either do so wilfully, or through a blind adherence to the dogma of politicised

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31 For Ricoeur, the dominant function of the Old Testament is the origin myths of deliverance from Egypt and crossing the Red Sea. See Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
science. Sceptics usually downplay ecological destruction, characterising as arrogant the idea that human activity can seriously harm the planet. When they are not attacking climate science wholesale, they portray it as far from settled. ‘The jury is still out’, is a common refrain, and warming is either natural or is not occurring at all. Depending upon the attackers’ view of religion, climate change is tantamount to a faith or a soulless, pagan ideology. At the extreme, some sceptics even cheekily (but not tongue-in-cheek) celebrate the role of carbon dioxide as the gas of life, while many extol the triumph of progress represented by the burning of fossil fuels.

Sceptics tend to be cornucopian, believing that nature’s resources are almost as unlimited as the power of human ingenuity to circumvent natural limits. When they do acknowledge despoilation they exhibit distrust of the regulatory measures that might be needed for mitigation. In their response to specific proposals such as the Australian Labor Government’s proposed emissions trading scheme or the Waxman-Markey bill, they warn of carbon leakage, with emissions-intensive industries going offshore, damaging the economy without reducing emissions. They warn of massive job losses and whole industries, even the economy itself, being trashed. Sceptics’ abhorrence at ‘big government’ and regulation intensifies when the prospect of international regimes is raised, with terms like ‘world government’ or ‘communism’ occasionally being employed. In raising such fears, climate sceptics often portray environmentalists and scientists as radical leftists who see in climate change a convenient justification for the top-down redistributive ideology they have always advocated.

Sceptics’ overriding imperative is economic growth and development. A common refrain is that environmentalists are anti-growth or even anti-modern, put other species of animals and plants before humans, and are pessimists of the human spirit. With their negative themes of damage, restraint, limits, danger, environmentalists play the role of spoilers at the party of modernity. Combining their pompous aversion to mainstream cultures of consumption, suburbia and automobiles with their growing political influence, sceptics often warn ordinary people that environmentalists threaten their lifestyles, livelihoods and freedoms. Sometimes environmentalists are seen to attempting to derail developing nations’ paths out of poverty, indicating that when it is convenient, sceptics will transcend their nationalistic perspective - yet for the most part the boundaries of their discourse coincides with the political boundaries of their nation.

In the public sphere, the broad front of climate scepticism extends from (a very few) well-regarded scientists through business generally but particularly fossil fuel industries, free-market thinktanks, cable TV, talkback radio hosts, newspaper columnists, and (overwhelming conservative) politicians. The tone and tenor of sceptic discourse is similarly broad, ranging from the cold, factual scientific and economic debate (‘Solar radiation would appear to be the initial forcing event in which warming oceans waters release dissolved carbon dioxide’, U.S. Senate Minority Report), to moral indignation in the face of environmentalist excess to wanton, incendiary anti-environmentalism (Sarah Palin’s chant of ‘Drill, baby, drill!’), and ‘mine, baby, mine!’

In risk society, for Beck ‘the evening news ultimately exceeds even the fantasies of countercultural dissent’, and even ‘daily newspaper reading becomes an exercise in technology critique.’ Is it not a little bit odd, then, that societies with a healthy degree of scepticism towards technoscience have turned that scepticism towards global climate science and the checking of unfettered industrialism? It is if we remain within a rationalist or social-constructivist frame. In the following sections I focus on the two major social imaginaries – first ‘progress’, then ‘nation’ – and associated fantasmatic processes of identification that sceptics have appropriated, showing how, within publics well-versed in ‘technology critique’, climate scepticism manages to shape opinion despite its lack of rational coherency or rigour.

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The social imaginary of progress

Time and again, sceptics invoke the backwardness of environmentalism, opposing it – usually tacitly – to progress, to development, or to achievement and optimism. ‘Mr. Abbott will also radiate the technological optimism that has characterized the human species since time immemorial,’ wrote a journalist about the new Australian opposition leader, a well-known climate sceptic. An article defending the car against its critics bewails that a ‘perverse logic has taken hold among the intelligentsia that progress can be measured by how much of the earth’s fuels we save,’ when in fact the yardstick has been defined, ‘dating back to the invention of the wheel’, by ‘our ability to substitute technology and energy use’ for ‘human energy’. It is clear here that anti-environmentalist discourse is playing off the centuries-old notion that ‘man’s dominion over earth, and the exploitation of resources to develop ever more powerful and efficient technologies, has been seen as the engine that drives civilisation’.

Let us briefly examine the evolution of the progress signifier so as to draw out its structural role in sceptic discourses.

With its roots in Enlightenment, and its formative influence over the great bulk of modern social, political, economic institutions and discourses, ‘progress’ is ‘one of the most powerful notions in the modern world’. The metanarrative that prevails in American political (and psychological) life is the ideology of progress (which includes aspects of both Enlightenment and human liberation). For Esteva, progress ‘occupies the centre of an incredibly powerful semantic constellation’. As an idea, progress reached its apogee in Western popular and scholarly circles in the period 1750-1900. Values of quality, popular sovereignty, social justice were already in the ascendency, but Nisbet demonstrates that progress was pivotal and acted as a pivotal context within which these three ideas became not only desirable but, crucially, inevitable. As he puts it:

any value that can be made to seem an integral part of historical necessity has a strategic superiority in the area of political and social action. The relatively small things which can be achieved in one generation toward the fulfilment of the idea or value are greatly heightened in importance when they are perceived as steps in the inexorable march of mankind. Marx was probably more aware of this than any other mind in the nineteenth century, but he was very far from being alone.

What role is progress playing here if not that of the social imaginary in Laclau’s theoretical schema, establishing a field or surface playing less of an extant than a structuring, conditioning role?

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The hegemony of the progress imaginary implies a particular idea successfully passing itself off as universal, at which point it ceases to be an object of political contestation and is simply put out of reach of rational enquiry. Clearly, the French and American revolutions were propelled by ideals of progress taken to apply universally. This was a progress that had a distinctly liberal flavour, implying both material development as well as human (moral, political) betterment. Reason would bring mankind prosperity through instrumental application — but this was a ‘necessary yet necessarily insufficient’ component of a broader progress, which included also moral and political improvement. And while the potential of reason to deliver social progress was constantly emphasised, rationality’s boldest expression, (techno)science, was by the 19th century offering a utopian vision beyond the remit of material technics. Thurston:

Thus, ultimately, will science lead, direct, and most efficiently aid, the nation in its progress toward the ideal, yet approachable, social state which has been the hoped for, if not the promised, land of every great political and social economist and philosopher, from the days when Cicero thought it his greatest honor to have written “On the Commonwealth” up to the present time.

Even as such marvels as the telephone, the Eiffel Tower, electric lighting and the World’s Fairs were earning techno-science increased legitimacy, warnings of its dark side were flowing from the pens of English Romantics and New England Transcendentalists like Thoreau. By the 20th century widespread suspicion had taken hold. We can cite many reasons, or events, for the growing unease, but probably do not need to go beyond the two World Wars and the Great Depression. Those who had hoped that the aftermath of World War II would give Western political leaders pause to re-evaluate the direction in which progress had taken their nations, were to be disappointed. Blame for the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century, in the hegemonic diagnosis, lay not at the feet of progress usurped by its technoscientific moment and left to its own logic, but precisely because there had not been progress enough! Thus began a renewed push to export this one-sided progress to the less-developed regions of the world. It is put quite plainly by Harry Truman in his 1949 inauguration address, in which he calls for

a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate, they are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people… We should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life […]

This should be a cooperative enterprise in which all nations work together through the United Nations and its specialized agencies whenever applicable. […] With the cooperation of business, private capital, agriculture, and labor in this country, this program can greatly increase the industrial activity in other nations and can raise their standards of living. […]

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45 Leo Marx, “Postmodern Pessimism,” in Does Technology Drive History?: The Dilemma of Technological Determinism, ed. Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), 249.

The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit - has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing [...] Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge.\(^{47}\)

Following the first post-war election in the U.S., Truman's speech is an exemplary attempt to re-articulate progress to economic development. Critics have labelled this speech as providing the rational for the post-war neo-colonial exploits of the U.S.\(^{48}\) It revivifies the universality of the Enlightenment progress (one path of history, the Western one) narrative that had justified the first round of colonialism. To achieve this universality in the face of the all-too bloody dislocations of the war, the progress myth had to be re-articulated to economic development. Thus the narrative turns around a triumphant United States, whose science and technology should be shared with the ‘primitive and stagnant’ economies of more than ‘half the people of the world’. While taking place through the U.N. and its agencies, the real agents of such development will be ‘business, private capital, agriculture, and labor in this country’. ‘The old imperialism’ is eschewed for a ‘program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing.’ ‘Prosperity and peace’ is the end; increased production through the ‘wider and more vigorous application of scientific and technical knowledge’ is the means. The prior constellation of progress consisted in equality, popular sovereignty and social justice. Now it was being re-articulated around liberal capitalism, techno-science and prosperity through industrialisation. If the previous conception of progress marched under the tricolour, the post-War version wore a stars-and-stripes lapel pin.

If this reinscription of progress by the signifiers of technoscience, economic growth and liberal democracy is accepted, then the challenge presented by climate change casts doubt on all of these signifiers, then the great boon that offers to anti-environmentalists is to paint environmentalists as backward. To be against untrammelled technoscientific development is to be against progress per se. A stark example of such comes in the form of the ‘Heidelberg Appeal’.\(^{49}\) Released during the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and signed by 46 prominent scientists and other intellectuals, the Appeal has since been endorsed by some 4000 scientists, including 72 Nobel Prize winners. The appeal, addressed to state leaders, explicitly invokes the new social imaginary, arguing that ‘humanity has always progressed by increasingly harnessing Nature to its needs and not the reverse.’ It operates a dual movement, both expropriating ‘scientific ecology’ for material forces, and forcefully excluding those who would claim it otherwise. The expropriation movement achieves precisely what the Truman speech does, of re-articulating progress in techno-scientific capitalist terms: ‘Progress and development have always involved increasing control over hostile forces, to the benefit of mankind’. While the exclusionary moment opposes an unnamed ‘irrational ideology’ employing ‘pseudo-scientific arguments’ or false and non-relevant data’ with a tendency to ‘look towards the past’, to ‘scientific and industrial progress’ and ‘economic and social development’.

That the Appeal claims ecology for science is not so important as that the science that is being invoked here is a liberal-capitalist industrial technoscience. It concludes that ‘the greatest evils which stalk our Earth are ignorance and oppression, and not Science, Technology and Industry whose instruments, when adequately managed, are indispensable tools of a future shaped by Humanity, by itself and for itself, overcoming major problems like overpopulation, starvation and worldwide diseases.’ The key rhetorical work of the Appeal is its painting of an ‘irrational ideology’ that is all the more menacing as it is not directly named, serving to siphon whatever vaguely defined fears the population may hold. This is enhanced by the naming of the ‘greatest evils


\(^{49}\) See http://americanpolicy.org/united-nations/the-heidelberg-appeal.html/ [accessed 7 July 2010]
which stalk our Earth": ‘ignorance and oppression’. Although these are not directly attributed to the unnamed ideology, the effect of this stock rhetorical move of opposing industrial technoscience to both the backward looking ideology and to the evils of ‘ignorance and oppression’ is to subtly articulate a connection between the latter two. This re-articulation of progress has handed scepticism one of the most effective rhetorical weapons in its armoury, enabling sceptics to draw clean divisions between, for instance, those who wish to propel society ‘full speed ahead’ and environmentalists who prefer it ‘to go full speed backward’. 50

Climate change dislocates both established discourses and the subjects whose identities derive from affective investment therein. Various myths compete to fill the void, but in facing the abstraction, the poverty of meaning effected by the deluge of information, the (lopsided) myth of progress reasserts itself. The hopelessly complex field is re-structured around the terms of corrupt scientists, alarmist environmentalists: the dignity of common sense, humanity and technology are vindicated. Climate change does not disappear, however (neither as discourse nor material actuality), and although the effect has been to establish two antagonistic discourses based upon radically opposed myths, within each adequate closure, suturing, has occurred. Meaning is re-awakened, identities re-established. Yet we should remain wary of reading the progress imaginary directly off of environmental-political discourse. Arguably, the surface of the progress imaginary is only relevant outside the realm of abstruse scholarship in so far as it shapes more localised myths – myths that then simultaneously speak that surface and are conditioned by it. Indeed, the efficiency of the progress imaginary is such that it need not speak its name. Moreover, the indirectness of its operation shields it from resistant readings and discourses. Thus we now examine how the social imaginary of progress is displaced into national myths, and into national symbols that condense these myths, to detect the ways in which climate sceptic discourse exploits them.

Myths of nation: The progress imaginary made ‘concrete’

Although some scholarship has addressed national myths of progress and development in polities of the global South, little has taken up the task of analysing their role in Northern environmental political conflicts. Cosmopolitans and globalisation theorists have tended to emphasise integration, interdependence, and the role of transnational epistemic communities – but at the cost of discounting the enduring force of local and national discourses. 51 Certainly, particularly in the 1970s, it appeared that eco-political discourse may “transcend the ideological disputes and other sources of division, like class, race, gender, and national identity.” 52 Yet this is to discount the enduring force of local and national discourses. As dominant social imaginaries come into being, national myths powerfully shape discourses, identities and practices. To gain legitimacy, climate change discourse must pass through ‘the treadmill of making itself credible in front of a variety of other practices.’ 53 I contend with Jasanoff that these practices are primarily institutionalised at the level of the nation-state. Her term for these practices is ‘civic epistemologies’, ‘relatively settled’ modes of public deliberation and knowledge-construction; somewhat homogeneous within nations, but varying across national boundaries 54. Processes of subjectivation certainly operate at civilisational (ie Western) and supra-national (ie European), levels, but the nation-state remains the

50 Dunn and Kinney, in Jacques, Environmental Skepticism, 22.
best-resourced governmental (discursive and juridical) apparatus of subjectivation under modernity. Historically, trust in scientific institutions was ‘constructed in the crucible of national imagined communities, in accordance with prior commitments to reason, due process and social justice. But globalisation upsets the earlier accords between scientific knowledge and political order such that ‘efforts to understand natural and social processes at increasingly complex levels of aggregation are producing new, boundary-crossing scientific representations’. Climate science – global, abstract and rarefied, an exemplary boundary-crossing discourse – is firmly on the side of the logico-semantic. Yet, scientific data pertaining to the global environment ‘never take root in a neutral interpretive field’, but are ‘dropped into contexts’ pre-conditioned to engender ‘distinctive cultural responses’. These contexts – the practices, imagery, symbols that constitute the national subject – take root in the fantasmatic. We could, then, expect that if the more durable, affective quality of the national fantasmatic is threatened by the abstract, logico-semantic scientific knowledge of climate change, that the advantage would fall to the fantasmatic. To see this in operation we merely need to open the newspaper and witness what happens when global scientific discourses are translated into national contexts.

On July 30, 2010, the broadsheet Sydney Morning Herald and the tabloid Herald Sun both featured articles about the release of a major new climate report from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The Sydney Morning Herald article was twice as long as the Herald Sun article, and contained more detail, but in general both relayed the main findings of the report: the 2000s was the warmest decade on record, 2005 the warmest year in Australia’s history followed by 2009, and that evidence of warming was ‘unequivocal, according to the report’s chief author. Yet while the SMH article closed with a 5-point summary of the report’s key findings, this is how the Herald Sun article concluded:

But at the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre, lifeguard Luci Russell wasn’t feeling any heat.

“I haven’t noticed it’s getting warmer,” she said.

“I swim outside sometimes but not very often, because I can’t stand getting out of the water and being cold.”

Besides that the swimming pool in deepest winter may not be the best time to test local’s views on global warming, we may excuse the tabloid’s choice of pitting a leading science institution against common-sense experience. Constructing the expert voice as distant, questionable and opposed to the authentic voice of direct personal experience is characteristic of the tabloid press, commercial television and talkback radio. We may not, however, expect the journalistic method of the

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55 Take the anti-Islamist discourse of certain U.S. neo-conservatives, or the racist discourses surrounding asylum seekers arriving by boat in Australia: it is clear that identification as Western carries comparatively little grip. White supremacist movements such as Stormfront are less concerned that non-whites are polluting the West, or Europe, or the Judeo-Christian world, than that they are polluting the (white) nation.


57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.


60 ‘Malcolm Holland and Holly Ile, ‘Timely reminder that heat is on’, Herald Sun, 30 July 2010.

61 Shattuc in Lewis, Tania, “PIs on TV: Intellectuals, Public Culture and Australian Television," in The ideas market: an alternative take on Australia's intellectual life / edited by David Carter, ed. David Carter (Carlton, Vic. :: Melbourne University Pub, 2004), 123. argues that television talk shows produce a tension between the authoritative, rational forms of knowledge of the intellectual or expert and the more authentic, physical and emotional truth of the ordinary person. The tension is between the forms of evidence the respective groups rely upon: the “distant” evidence of educated rationality and the “direct” evidence of personal experience, emotion and physical proof (a distinction that neatly maps onto that of the logico-semantic/fantasmatic).
nation’s leading tabloid to be replicated in the nation’s leading national broadsheet. In the heat of summer this time, *The Australian* reports on a speech by Climate Change Minister Penny Wong at the National Climate Change Forum in Adelaide. During that speech, she hit out against sceptic attacks on the IPCC report, calling it ‘probably the single most exhaustively reviewed scientific document ever produced,’ a 3000-page report that ‘has been intensely scrutinised’ with ‘few errors found’. She also cited new Australian Bureau of Meteorology evidence that without carbon reductions, ‘the number of very hot days over 35 degrees will more than double in Adelaide and experience nearly a 30 fold increase in Darwin by 2070’. Further, using new evidence from the CSIRO and the Bushfire CRC, she warned we can expect ‘far more drought in our most important food bowls’, and that ‘the number of very high and extreme fire danger days could increase by up to one quarter by 2020 and more than double by 2050.’ To its credit, the Australian placed its report on this speech on page 1 of the following day’s edition. Choosing to focus on the minister’s claims about the threat rising seas posed to the Australian coastline, it was accompanied by an enormous picture of a hair-bleached, bronzed, Lee Boman at Bondi Beach who has been ‘swimming at the beach for 30 years’. The article began like this:

> Australia’s most iconic beaches, including Bondi, Bells and those on the Sunshine Coast, could erode away or recede by hundreds of metres over the coming century, according to Climate Change Minister Penny Wong.

But locals aren’t so sure.

Bondi veteran Lee Boman has swum at the beach for more than 30 years and was adamant he had seen ‘no change’ to the coastline over that period. ‘Nothing too drastic that indicates it is going to be changed in the future,’ said Mr Boman, 53.

Bob Carter, a geologist and environmental scientist with James Cook University in Queensland, said Senator Wong’s comments appeared to be an attempt to panic the public.

> Pointing to historical rates of sea level rise of an average 1.6mm per year globally over the past 100 years, Mr Carter said it was reasonable to expect a total rise of 16cm in a century.

After reporting some of Minister Wong’s comments in more detail and citing the waning support for the Government’s proposed emissions trading scheme, the article then quotes another Bondi local, Patrick Doab, 63, who has visited the beach every Sunday for 40 years ‘and was not worried anything would change’.

> “I think it’s just too drastic to say that the beach is going to change… it’s very drastic.”

> “I don’t think anyone knows what will happen, quite frankly.

> “It’s like the stock market – no one really knows”.

Finally, Dr Carter has the last word, claiming that sinking ‘geological substrata’ may account for some of the rise. In his study of ‘banal nationalism’ in the British press, Billig describes how the reader, after her eyes have seen Britain “draped around” a variety of stories, may soon forget

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63 Ibid.
individual items but will inhabit a ‘context of awareness’, as Stuart Hall termed it, developed through the patterned mentioning of the nation, and the inhabiting within it. The centrality of the lifeguard and the beach to Australian iconography needs no elaboration. And no beach is more iconic than Bondi. In line with Jasanoff’s account, this is a journalistic attempt to situate the abstract, disembodied discourse of climate science into a ‘distinctive cultural context’. That context includes the national mythos of the lifeguard and the beach, but also a certain egalitarianism (although populism may better explain the valorisation of common-sense perspective). Despite being defined by a modern science that ostensibly pays no heed to national boundaries, these examples demonstrate how climate discourse is conditioned by deeply sedimented national imaginaries. Yet these myths are not merely expressions of national ‘culture’, if by that we mean iconography functioning to bind a community. As I hope to demonstrate, the most important way that these imaginaries prejudice environmentalism is through their reproduction of the broader Western progress imaginary but in the ‘concretised’ form of pioneer and development origin myths which construct the ‘land’ in ways that resonate right through to contemporary discourses of ‘nature’ or ‘environment’.

While ecological modernisation can be interpreted as a turning in of the application of development towards a refinement of the productive systems themselves, the pioneer mythology of the U.S. and Australia still defines progress as an outward expansion. Spengler argues that the prime symbol of Western civilisation is that of infinite space. Similarly, Castoriadis argues that the limitless ‘march of knowledge’ entails an unlimited expansion of power and wealth. The social imaginary of development, growth and infinity has replaced the pre-modern notion of God. Certainly, the U.S. and Australian settler-colonies were born within a discourse of ‘newness’. Broken free from old-world problems and putatively unopposed by any indigenous society with a historically bedded relationship with the land, the colonial project set about ‘conquering, transforming and ordering’ the empty space by inscribing it with the signifiers of ‘white, Western identity’. As well as the building of towns and roads, such seemingly banal articulations as the naming of geographical features effected a replanting of the European settler identity upon a terra nullius. A common refrain is that if only environmentalists would get back in their boxes, the productive elements of society could ‘get on with the business of building Australia.’ Playing off a national-development myth, these examples play off the mythic social space of Australia as a wide brown land of resources ripe for development. A central element of this myth is expressed in the common knowledge drummed into every schoolchild that ‘Australia rode on the sheep’s back’, referring to the wool exports that were such an economic mainstay. One aspect of the development mythos was captured well by Donald Horne in the title of his 1964 book, The Lucky Country. Horne turned this common expression in post-war Australia on its head, arguing that in fact Australia owed its prosperity to good fortune (abundant natural resources) rather than good management: ‘Australia is a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck.’

64 Michael Billig, Banal Nationalism (London: SAGE, 1995), 114.
65 This perspective demonstrates the difficulty Australian and U.S. discourses have in accepting a discourse that is tainted by association with an elitist global institution – the United Nations. But it may appear curious that the impact of national scientific and meteorological bodies the NAS, EPA, the CSIRO, resoundingly endorse the IPCC findings. Under both the Howard government and Bush administration, scientific reports from national institutions bodies were muffled or watered down. While this was presumably an attempt to prevent public outrage over these nations’ inaction on climate change, its broader effect was to mute the articulation between arguably more trusted national institutions and climate change, thus leaving the UN as the sole – and less trusted – voice on climate change.
This expansionary conception of modernity is even more the case in the U.S., where the progress imaginary is most explicitly concretised in the myth of ‘manifest destiny’. Emerging in the 19th century context of westward development and classical liberal economic philosophy, manifest destiny emblematised the civilising, enlightening duty of the European settlers over the chaotic, dark wilderness. 70 ‘Our manifest destiny is to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions’, wrote Democratic Party activist and writer John Louis O’Sullivan in 1845. The pioneer occupied a central, indeed heroic, position. Nature had no intrinsic value, and was dependent upon the input of human labour to transform it into something of worth. The notion of Providence constructed a potentially bountiful land allocated specifically to the (Christian) settlers to reap for their own benefit and that of ‘civilisation’ in general.

As well as spatially, such national-development myths work to construct the nation socially, by prescribing a logic of individual subjectivation, which works upstream to prefigure the modes of subjectivity available to Australians, and through discursive articulation that fixes the meaning of national signifiers in relation to other signifiers. I will briefly explain the operation of both before observing them at work in climate discourses. For Gray, people’s ‘deepest need is a home, a network of common practices and inherited traditions that confers on them the blessing of a settled identity’. 71 From a Lacauian perspective, it is precisely this quest to stabilise identity that the fantasmatic structure of discourse functions to fulfil. 72 Lacau adopts Lacan’s theory of the subject that is constitutively split owing to it having to cede to the conditions of the Law, the Symbolic Order. Attempting to regain a primordial fullness, the subject expends much energy in trying to suture its identity, through fixations on social-symbolic signifiers, practices of consumption, adherence to political ideologies etc. (Of course, for the subject such a process of identification is never able to achieve the anticipated fullness – thus such identificatory work is ongoing). While the subject is subject to a myriad inscriptions ranging from the familial to the economic to the political (Australian, American), all such inscriptions are conditioned (to varying degrees) by the national myths. To the extent that the subject is a national subject, its imaginary identifications are guided by a fantasmatic logic of constantly seeking to overturn the obstacle blocking the realisation of its ‘fullness-to-come’ 73. It is precisely for the function of offering up the promise of this fullness-to-come that we have myth, from which it follows that the fullness-to-come promised by national-development myths is a significant part of the discursive economy constituting the national subject.

Although individuals are brought into the national fold by their affective investment in national myths, they do not so much identify with the myth itself as with its signifier(s). These signifiers (the flag, iconic flora and fauna) stand in for that myth, acting as condensatory poles, maintaining the myth at just the right distance to perpetuate the promise of the fullness of meaning. Yet these signifiers are also relationally articulated with other signifiers in discursive networks which work to stabilise and legitimise the myth. The flag, for instance, not only references the Australian myths, but implicates Australia in the differential system of all nations, producing Australia as ‘a nation among others’. 74 This differential logic is at work in deictics – terms such as we, our, they, etc. Such deictics draw lines through and around communities and identities. At its crudest, deictic positioning talks a them into being, as for instance when British sceptic Christopher Monckton warns that ‘they want to impose communist world government’. 75 Of course, this always speaks into being

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70 R. Nash, Wilderness and the American mind (Yale Univ Pr, 2001), 24.
73 Fantasies can also involve themes of repression and victimhood, envisioning terror and trauma should the blocking antagonist not be overcome: Ibid.
74 Billig, Banal Nationalism.
an us and tends to fill the content of the we relationally (with the opposite of what is contained in the they) rather than positively, thus constituting a privileged, unmarked us that is further strengthened by its ambiguity.

Analysing the form and the force of the discursive structures compressed into such deictic subject-positioning shines additional light on the broad terrain on which – and the discursive weapons with which – climate politics is waged. One commentator typically described the Waxman-Markey bill to limit U.S. emissions as

kicking an economy when it’s down[…]) but it’s not even just kicking us when we’re down, they’re actually kicking us in the groin, because it’s going to hurt the industry the most. I mean, at the time when we really have to start producing more[…] And making more products and being globally competitive and exporting, this is a giant tax on productivity, on production.  

Similarly, George W. Bush repeatedly cited damage to the American economy and sovereignty threats when voicing his opposition to the Kyoto Protocol of emissions abatement. The sceptical refrain that climate action will ‘wreck the economy’ is as exaggerated as it is widespread and, of course, it is not a reference to the world economy or the local economy. ‘The economy’ stands in for the nation – or perhaps stands as a moment in the dialectic of nation and progress – and invokes a national imagined just as effectively as do more directly national signifiers.

Of course, even the most hegemonic national myths are periodically contested. Taxonomies of environmentalism detail discursive challenges to manifest destiny. These range from conservation to preservation, ecocentrism and political ecology, through environmental justice, deep ecology, and ecofeminism. There is not the space to rehearse them here. But manifest destiny occupies a dominant position because it is ‘autochthonic’, its narrative structure exhibits a certain elegant simplicity, it enjoys theological support, and it has been (and remains) the discourse of choice of powerful economic interests, especially those involved in natural resource exploitation. But the force uniting all of these factors is undoubtedly that manifest destiny was consecrated and enshrined in the material and symbolic violence that forged the expanded United States.

Summarising the argument, then, it appears the relation between a particular people and its land – in most cases a relation of exploitation and development – anchored in embodiment and ‘concrete’ imagery and iconography, stands in for the general relation between society and nature. To the extent that this general relation is hegemonised, it ceases to operate as a specific myth, and hypostatises into a social imaginary, transforming the very material processes of land development, nation-building, etc, into an abstract surface upon which all other discourses must be presented. It follows, then, that the advantage this hands to discourses concordant with the ‘lay of the land’ must be the first obstacle with which an ecological politics must contend.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have applied a psychoanalytical, post-structuralist perspective to climate scepticism in Australia and the U.S. By examining how the abstraction, complexity and

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78 Official discourses of nation usually involve a *forgetting* that constructs a constitutive outside (native peoples, former colonisers, atrocities, etc) that ‘grounds’ the national discourse. As Ernst Renan puts it, forgetting and historical error are vital to creating a nation: ‘unity is always effected by means of brutality’ (in J. Michael, *Anxious intellects: Academic professionals, public intellectuals, and enlightenment values* (Duke University Press, 2000), 29.)
mediatisation marking climate change discourses weigh its reception in favour of imaginary, mythic (rather than symbolic or logico-semantic) registers, I argued that sceptic discourse expresses the friction between deterritorialised science and embodied imaginaries of progress. The re-accenting of progress away from social emancipation to technological development and economic growth, beginning in the 19th century but reaching an apogee in the post-WWII U.S., amplifies this tension. I contended that myths and social imaginaries relating to Australia and the U.S. reify or concretise the progress imaginary by weaving it into the tapestry of national symbols, images, and myths. Climate change science must negotiate national contexts, yet it meets entrenched resistance in the form of development narratives at the core of both nations’ social imaginaries. Narratives of exploring, conquering, ‘opening up’ and bringing order to a wild, uncivilised land forge a expansionary, developmentalist relationship to nature. Initially conducted under the sign of Western (British) civilisation, these narratives then come to emblematise progress itself. The result of the initial violence and forgetting that forge the nation and the subsequent developmentalist history is that contemporary national identities remain heavily inscribed with expansionary development myths. The impact on national political debates over climate change is clear, with the climate policy positions of the U.S. Republican Party and the Australian Liberal-National Coalition taking political advantage of the dominant articulation of these myths.

The difficulties involved in translating complex global discourses into national contexts is already recognised by parts of the environment movement. Consciously or not, some environmentalism employs myths of recent construction, such as that of the holistic, interconnected planet (Gaia), and seek to promote a global consciousness. By any account, such a discourse faces entrenched opposition at the local and national levels, and stands little chance of hegemonic success. Where discourses of ecological modernisation and sustainable development have made inroads, they have generally articulated (sometimes ersatz) environmentalism with progress and the nation. And this in primarily Western European contexts where the expansionary overtones of progress are weaker than in the U.S. and Australia. As hegemonic as myths of progress and nation are, they are historically contingent fixings. There is nothing necessary or inevitable about their ongoing success, and social movements facing well-resourced opposition have sometimes been able to creatively re-articulate existing discourses to enlist a range of publics to their cause. In seeking to defuse the popular appeal of scepticism, the challenge for the environmental movement is to craft a rhetoric that eschews the distant and negative character of scientific discourse, and that constructs strong action on climate change as a continuation of the nation’s progress narrative. It needs to speak a we of environmental action that people recognise themselves as part of. Even if environmentalism succeeds in building a popular front, there is no guarantee that the entrenched interests of the corporate media, where sceptics find their platforms, can be overcome. It just may, though, be able to reshape the discursive terrain such that sceptic voices appear to issue from a time and a place that is not ours.

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79 Hajer, “Ecological modernisation as cultural politics,” 262.
References


Ben Glasson: Text, fantasy and the political: A two-track analysis of climate-change politics


Political action and intervention on local, national and international levels are going to have a decisive effect on whether or not we can limit global warming as well as how we adapt to that already occurring. However, at the moment, argues Giddens, we do not have a systematic politics of climate change. Politics-as-usual won't allow us to deal with the problems we face, while the recipes of the main challenger to orthodox politics, the green movement, are flawed at source. A fully revised and updated edition of this key book on the politics of climate change, by one of the world's leading social thinkers. This is the first book to develop a systematic politics of climate change. Offers new concepts and practical proposals for coping with a fundamental issue of our time.