

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239810526>

# Lost in Translation: Climate Denial and the Return of the Political

Article in *Global Environmental Politics* · May 2012

DOI: 10.1162/GLEP\_a\_00104

---

CITATIONS

49

---

READS

384

1 author:



**Gert Goeminne**  
Ghent University

66 PUBLICATIONS 588 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Mapping controversies in Flanders. Towards a new theoretical framework for the politics of socio-technical innovation. [View project](#)



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---

## Lost in Translation: Climate Denial and the Return of the Political

Gert Goeminne

Global Environmental Politics, Volume 12, Number 2, May 2012, pp.  
1-8 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



► For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/gep/summary/v012/12.2.goeminne.html>

## Forum

# Lost in Translation: Climate Denial and the Return of the Political

•  
*Gert Goeminne\**

### Introduction

Over the last decade, climate change denial and global warming skepticism have taken the shape of a well-coordinated campaign with funding from industry and free-market think tanks.<sup>1</sup> The so-called “climategate” affair that erupted in late November 2009 with the illegal release of thousands of emails and other documents from the University of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit may well be considered as the culmination of a decade or more of climate denial.

Whether regarded as part of normal scientific practice<sup>2</sup> or as a crime against humanity belying the “inconvenient truth,”<sup>3</sup> climategate has variously been framed as a variant of a truth-challenging practice. It was ironic that both sides almost completely agreed on an idealistic account of science as a truth-speaking device: either, as the believers argued, climate scientific knowledge faithfully mirrors reality and thus it is true or, following the non-believers, it is artificially constructed and should thus be rejected as being false. In this deliberately provocative commentary, I will move beyond truth claims and interpret climate denial from a broader political-epistemological perspective, connecting a constructivist Science and Technology Studies (STS) approach to climate knowledge with an antagonistic conception of the political. This will also strengthen my claim that the issue of climate change, rather than being a problem of translating scientific matters of fact into political matters of concern, constitutes first and foremost, a political struggle over what to be concerned about.

\* This work was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO). I thank Søren Riis and the other members of the Science Studies Unit of Roskilde University for insightful comments on a draft version of this paper.

1. See e.g. Anderreg 2010.

2. See e.g. Collins 2010.

3. See e.g. Brown Donald, “Is Climate Science Disinformation a Crime against Humanity?” Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/cif-green/2010/nov/01/climate-science-disinformation-crime>, 1 November 2010.

## The Politics of Climate Science Revisited

Reflecting on the climategate controversy, Latour recently stated that after thirty years of work in STS, “it is more than embarrassing to see that scientists had no better epistemology with which to rebut their adversaries.”<sup>4</sup> Over the past few decades, STS has indeed taken down the unworldly image of science as a truth-speaking device and replaced it with a practice-inspired account of science as culture. In arguing that matters of fact are always also matters of a particular concern, Latour has explicitly thematized this inherently human, that is to say, “concerned” character of scientific practice.<sup>5</sup> Within the context of its construction, scientific knowledge aims to fulfill a certain function, and the choice of that function depends on the scientist’s concern: What kind of knowledge is aimed at? What is it supposed to account for and to take into account? Beyond construction and representation, I want to appeal to the notion of “composition” to convey the idea that a scientific fact is not chosen or given; rather, it is “concernfully” composed as a “matter of concern” in relation to what is considered to be the issue at stake.<sup>6</sup> As will be illustrated below, composition nicely captures the idea how things have to be put meticulously together in a meaningful whole before the latter can be mobilized as a fact.<sup>7</sup>

Wynne is clearly on this compositionist thread when he argues that “woven into the disciplined scientific attempt to understand what nature is saying to us about changing climate processes, and human responsibilities for them, are always ancillary but constitutive concerns and commitments.”<sup>8</sup> In his latest book *A Vast Machine*, Edwards convincingly demonstrates that what it means to observe “global climate change” is intrinsically intertwined with the concerns that have guided climate modelers in their daily practices.<sup>9</sup> Conceptualizing such a thing as the global climate is indeed premised on a concern for homogeneity, which Edwards shows to have played a crucial role in constructing reliable climate knowledge out of a vast array of disparate information by means of modeling techniques. Demeritt, on the other hand, has argued that a concern for simulation and prediction constitutes another crucial ingredient of the history of climate modeling by showing how atmospheric scientists in the 1970s deliberately tapped into growing public concerns about human impacts on the environment to secure funding for basic modeling research.<sup>10</sup> **Indeed, the only way to demonstrate the anthropogenic character of climate change is to simulate what would have happened without humans adding greenhouse gasses (GHGs) to the atmosphere.**

4. Latour 2010.

5. Latour 2004.

6. Goeminne and François 2010.

7. Latour 2010.

8. Wynne 2010.

9. Edwards 2010.

10. Demeritt 2001.

### *Science is Political—First-order Claim*

In meticulously unraveling the social embeddedness of scientific practice, STS has brought about what I would call a “first-order claim” that science is political arguing that scientific knowledge—as a result of the situated and human character of its genesis—is always to a certain degree value-loaded and perspective-bound. Within this first order perspective, concerns are *negatively* understood as an unavoidable side-effect of the situatedness of scientific practice. The ideal of the non-interestedness of the scientist still holds sway here—albeit only as an ideal. Consequently, the political character of science is understood in terms of science being “socially embedded” where the latter spans a spectrum ranging from the soft version, i.e. “knowledge is value-loaded” to the strong version saying that “knowledge is distorted by political interests.” It is noteworthy that implicit in such claims is the originary existence of such a thing as “value-free” or “undistorted” knowledge.

In the context of climate change science, this first-order claim of science being political has mainly resulted in a call for more reflexivity in communicating scientific knowledge to the public domain, thereby showing awareness of its value-loaded character and its perspective-boundedness. The latter point has recently been raised by Hulme and Ravetz, amongst others, who argue that “we need a more concerted effort to explain and engage the public in understanding the processes and practices of science and scientists.”<sup>11</sup> Whilst this may be a good thing in principle, it leaves the framing of the climate change issue untouched as what Wynne calls “a problem of translation” from science to politics.<sup>12</sup> It also does not say anything about how to understand climate denial apart from being a mere act of sabotage. However true the characterization of climate skeptics in terms of “merchants of doubt” may be<sup>13</sup>, it does not reflect on the basic principles of a science-policy architecture that is predicated upon a scientific framing of the problem at stake. Beyond such calls for increased awareness and reflexivity, I think it is timely and necessary to put forward a “second order claim” that science is political on its own terms, thereby also making explicit what is meant by “the political.”

### *Science is Political: Second-Order Claim*

Within recent political philosophy, a fundamental critique has been formulated vis-à-vis the conception of the political holding sway in a great deal of contemporary democratic thinking which is characterized by rationalism and universalism. Invoking the term “post-politics,” Mouffe and Rancière, amongst others, lament the evacuation of antagonistic notions such as exclusion, adversary and contestation from the political sphere, reducing politics to a mere instrumental

11. Hulme and Ravetz 2010.

12. Wynne 2010.

13. Oreskes and Conway 2010.

conception focused on the consensual administration of environmental, social, economic or other domains.<sup>14</sup> Recently, Swyngedouw has convincingly illustrated how international climate policy serves as a pre-eminent example of such a technocratic management approach, tellingly characterizing it as post-political populism: invoking the threat of a scientifically framed doomsday scenario, it paralyzes the political struggle between differing and opposing socio-environmental visions, making everybody toe the line of neoliberalism.<sup>15</sup> Contrary to such an instrumental conception, Swyngedouw argues that the political should be conceived as an ontological dimension that determines our very human condition. Indeed, according to Mouffe, human society is essentially political because, first of all, “the need for collective identifications will never disappear since it is constitutive of the mode of existence of human beings”<sup>16</sup> and, secondly, as “in the field of collective identities, we are always dealing with the creation of a ‘we’ which can exist only by the demarcation of a ‘they.’”<sup>17</sup>

At this point, I suggest expanding this non-essentialist thesis from the social to the natural sphere, arguing that the construction of objectivity more generally (identity, knowledge, etc.) is relational, and that its condition of existence is the affirmation of an exclusion. Beyond STS’s recognition of the concerned, ambivalent character of science, I therefore want to illuminate the constitutive role of exclusion and differentiation in the emergence of scientific objectivity. Conceiving science as a concerned work of composition along the lines sketched above indeed shows how the condition of possibility of scientific objectivity necessarily involves exclusion, differentiating between what is taken into account and what is not. This constitutes the core of my second order claim, bringing together my “compositionist” STS-account of science with an antagonistic conception of the political: science, conceived as a situated work of composition, is necessarily political, separating internalities from externalities.

In the context of climate modeling, Demeritt has for instance argued that it is only by excluding the messy social relations driving GHG emissions and focusing narrowly on their universal physical properties that atmospheric scientists, concerned as they were about homogeneity and predictability, have been able to compose the issue of climate change.<sup>18</sup> Another interesting separation between internalities and externalities, Demeritt illustrates, is introduced by dividing the atmosphere into a three-dimensional grid as a basis for computation. Whereas “gridscale processes” such as the energy transfer between grid elements are internal to the climate model in the sense that they are modeled from the bottom up applying fluid dynamics, “sub-gridscale processes” such as cloud physics have to be “internalized” by means of exogenously specified parameters that capture the large-scale effects of smaller-scale processes. This dual example

14. Mouffe 2005 and Rancière 1998.

15. Swyngedouw 2010.

16. Mouffe 2005, 28.

17. Mouffe 2005, 15.

18. Demeritt, 2001.

of exclusion being constitutive of climate science knowledge should also make clear that my understanding of the political does not necessarily entail a “societal” connotation. Although externalities such as the unequal political economy that produces GHGs may become the constitutive outside around which a collective identification may take place (see below), this does not have to be so, as may be clear from the example of the “excluded” sub-gridscale processes. In stating that science is political, I thus merely claim that it differentiates between the internalities and externalities of its composition and that this differentiation process lies at the very heart of the scientific practice.<sup>19</sup>

It should be clear that a differing interpretation of the “situatedness of science,” that is to say the awareness that science is a human and therefore necessarily perspectival and value-loaded endeavor, lies at the crux of differentiating my second order claim from most first order claims. The latter *negatively* understand the situatedness of science as resulting in a restricted, suboptimal knowledge of the problem at stake that gets increasingly “contaminated” by uncertainty and value-loadings the more “situated” the issues get. My second order claim, however, *positively* understands the situated, perspectival character of science as being truly constitutive of the knowledge composed and as inevitably resulting in a division between what has been taken into account in the composition and what has not.

## Climate Denial: A Symptom, Not the Cause

The second order claim that “science is political” I have put forward here enables two things. First of all, it sheds new light on the widespread critique that current climate policy’s reliance on science eventually results in the solidification of capitalist status-quo. Secondly, and following on from this, climate denial can now be diagnosed as a symptom of such a badly conceived science-policy framework rather than as a cause of its failure.

Criticisms on the one-sided scientific framing of the climate issue have come both from constructivist perspectives as well as from political theorists. STS-scholars such as Wynne and Demeritt, on the one hand, have focused on the role of science in failing to create “ownership” for the climate issue with ordinary human subjects. “The intensely scientific primary framing of the issue, combined as this is with an intensely economic imagination and framing of the appropriate responses,” Wynne writes, “may engender profound alienation of ordinary human subjects around the globe from ‘owning the issue’ and thus from taking responsibility for it.”<sup>20</sup> Demeritt makes a similar point stating that “the narrowly scientific focus on global climate change addresses itself to an undifferentiated global ‘we’ and relies exclusively on the authority of science to

19. See Goeminne 2011 for an elaboration of this argument in the context of experimental nuclear physics.

20. Wynne 2010, 291.

create this sense of global citizenship. In the absence of some other basis of appeal, 'we' are likely to act more as spectators than participants in the shaping of our related but different futures."<sup>21</sup> Putting aside the specific role of science, Swyngedouw, on the other hand, understands this problematic in explicitly political terms, lamenting on the depoliticization, or in his words post-politicization, of the climate change issue. Predicated on the alleged universality of science, he argues, "a consensual policy framework is established structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative."<sup>22</sup>

Invoking my second-order claim that science is political, both perspectives merge and make clear that such a depoliticization approach is bound to fail because it is preconditioned on the alleged non-exclusive character of science. However, as I have argued on the basis of my compositionist perspective, science does divide and separate. In arguing that matters of fact are always also matters of concern, I have pointed towards the irreducible political moment that is situated at the point of determining what "the issue at stake" is, even in science. Already in 1991, Agarwal and Narain argued that the attempt to allocate responsibility to countries predicated upon the scientific universality of GHG emissions, in effect, erases the historical origins of the emissions, making no difference between luxury and subsistence emissions.<sup>23</sup> However, neutral the invocation of "science" may seem, one can indeed not smooth out the non-neutral and very political struggle that underlies the decision on what to be concerned about.

Lost in the translation from science to policy, the concerned work of composition that goes into the construction of a matter of fact is obscured in consensual decision making, leaving policy nothing but externalities to be managed in a technocratic way. Understanding the task of raising and addressing matters of concern as a work of composition, however, is the true political heritage of constructivism, conceiving politics as a struggle for who and what is to be taken into account.<sup>24</sup> Such a struggle presupposes the openness towards "divergent, conflicting and alternative trajectories of future socio-environmental possibilities," the composition of which constitutes the very political work that needs to be done.<sup>25</sup>

**This eventually brings me to my second point, arguing that climate denial could be understood along the same lines that Mouffe has diagnosed the increasing success of right-wing populist parties in several European countries—as being a symptom of the stifling consensus at the centre, which does not “allow**

21. Demeritt 2001, 392.

22. Swyngedouw 2010, 215.

23. Agarwal and Narain 1991.

24. Goeminne and François 2010.

25. Swyngedouw 2010, 228.



voters to make a real choice between significantly different policies.”<sup>26</sup> In taking away the channels through which dissensus, disagreement, and conflict can be expressed, Mouffe argues, a consensual approach “is bound to give rise to the emergence of conflicts on the antagonistic mode.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, every attempt to depoliticize a societal issue, even when such an attempt is founded on a scientific basis, will eventually lead to a return of the political. I thus suggest that climate denial constitutes such a symptomatic outburst of the political in a completely depoliticized landscape. Perhaps apt for a concluding comment is a paraphrase of Mouffe’s observation regarding the appeal of right-wing populism: In a context where the dominant discourse proclaims that there is no alternative to a global cap and trade emission scheme and that we should accept its dictates unless we are ready to take personal responsibility for the end of humanity, it is not surprising that a growing number of people are listening to those who proclaim that alternatives do exist, even if the latter carry a right-wing signature and are predicated upon a straight denial of sound scientific arguments.<sup>28</sup>

## References

- Agarwal, Anil and Sunita Narain. 1991. *Global Warming in an Unequal World*. New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment.
- Anderreg, William. 2010. The Ivory Lighthouse: communicating climate change more effectively. *Climatic Change* 101 (3–4): 655–662.
- Collins, Harry. Forthcoming. ClimateGate: The Inside and the Outside. In *Rethinking Climate Change Research: Clean-Technology, Culture and Communication*, edited by Søren Riis et al. London: Ashgate.
- Demeritt, David. 2001. The Construction of Global Warming and the Politics of Science. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91 (2): 307–337.
- Edwards, Paul. 2010. *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data and the Politics of Global Warming*. Cambridge (MA) & London: The MIT Press.
- Goeminne, Gert. 2011. Once Upon a Time I was a Nuclear Physicist. What the Politics of Sustainability Can Learn from the Nuclear Laboratory. *Perspectives on Science* 19 (1): 1–31.
- Goeminne, Gert and Karen François. 2010. The Thing Called Environment: What It Is and How to Be Concerned With It. *The Oxford Literary Review* 32 (1): 109–130.
- Hulme, Mike and Jerome Ravetz. 2009. “Show Your Working”: What “ClimateGate” means. BBC News website, 1 December 2009. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8388485.stm>, accessed 14 December 2010.
- Latour, Bruno. 2004. Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2): 225–248.

26. Mouffe 2005, 66.

27. Mouffe 2005, 5.

28. Mouffe 2005, 70.

- Latour, Bruno. 2010. An attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto. *New Literary History* 41 (3): 471–490.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Oreskes, Naomi and Erik Conway. 2010. *Merchants of Doubt*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
- Rancière, Jaques. 1998. *Disagreement*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Swyngedouw, Erik. 2010. Apocalypse Forever? Post-political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change. *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2–3): 213–32.
- Wynne, Brian. 2010. Strange Weather, Again. Climate Science as Political Art. *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2–3): 289–305.