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Politicizing Environmental Science Does Not Mean Denying Climate Science Nor Endorsing It Without Question

Tim Forsyth

There is an unfortunate tendency in some environmental debates to portray the debate about climate change denial in moralistic terms without seeing how this approach simplifies climate risks and limits debate. In turn, this position is sometimes connected to two further ill-starred beliefs: of justifying climate science because science, *per se*, is uninfluenced by society and hence beyond reproach; or that the struggle for better environmental policy can be represented by a binary divide between valiant green campaigners who command the truth, and obstinate individualists who do not.

Climate change policies deserve better. And so too, for that matter, do debates within global environmental politics about how to incorporate scientific knowledge into global policy.

In this brief paper, I complement the earlier statements of Gert Goeminne and Peter Jacques by arguing three key points. First, the resistance to climate science from so-called deniers cannot be explained by drawing an imaginary line between two fields of science and politics and then investigating each for malfunctions. Rather, political analysis needs to pay more attention to how scientific knowledge and politics influence each other, and adjusting political analysis to account for this kind of coproduction. Second, one key element of this political analysis is to assess which actors, and which notions of environmental risk, are empowered or excluded from public debates and scientific research (on this I agree with Gert Goeminne). Third, this assessment should also consider how political critiques of denial—such as linking it to moral judgments about economic growth or to Holocaust denial—also create exclusions that reduce discussion about how to reduce emissions and vulnerability (here, I disagree with Peter Jacques).

Politicizing Science

The preceding papers demonstrate different approaches to the relationship between science and politics. Goeminne uses debates from science and technology

studies (STS) to argue that “translating scientific matters of fact into political matters of concern constitutes first and foremost a political struggle about what to be concerned about in the first place.” Goeminne describes STS as a “constructivist” approach because it acknowledges political influences on truth claims. Yet, the word “constructivist” can be misleading if it suggests that knowledge has no meaning outside of those influences. Accordingly, Goeminne proposes the notion of “composition” to indicate that scientific facts have explanatory value—but only in relation to those matters of concern that gave rise to them. Goeminne’s first-order claim, therefore, is that scientific knowledge always reflects values and perspectives. His second-order claim is that there will inevitably be exclusions in how facts are generated, which can reduce science’s relevance to concerns not included in their composition. Such arguments have been made in some classic STS texts,¹ but also in some specific analyses of scientific explanation concerning environmental problems such as deforestation, soil erosion, and desertification.²

Jacques, however, emphasizes the normative purpose of science. He cites Paul Sears’ 1964 statement that ecology is a “subversive science” because it could “challenge the central workings of modern society,” adding, “climate change science provides an imminent critique of industrial power, Western modernity, and the ideals of Western progress.” He also uses the powerful metaphor of the Holocaust as a pre-existing debate about how and why denial occurs, but also as a theory of how the “organized deflection of accountability is driven by a movement aimed at defending an ideology.” Jacques spends much time arguing against a “binary” divide between deniers and acknowledgers of climate change, but his discussion is organized by a counter-opposition of ideologies—of those who support or critique “Western modernity.” Jacques acknowledges, “the basics of climate change is certainly political in the sense that Goeminne notes,” but defends his own ideology because, unlike climate denial, it has been subjected to “scrutiny... corroboration and revision.”

But this view too has its exclusions.

Exclusions Within Critiques of Denial

Jacques links climate science with a criticism of “the possessive individualistic ontology of the West.” He also presents climate science in terms where “denial” can only occur through an ideological opposition to this criticism, or because some people still don’t know about climate science. This argument brings two important exclusions. The first is to reduce political discussion about alternative forms of economic growth. The second is to reduce the definition of the risks posed by climate change to something that is expressed sufficiently when one admits that human activities contribute to atmospheric greenhouse gas concen-

1. e.g. Wynne, 1996; and Latour, 2004.

2. Leach and Mearns, 1996; and Forsyth, 2003.

trations. Both of these exclusions reduce the diversity of options for understanding climate change risks.

One common response—and one used by some skeptics—is to avoid the question of whether climate change is anthropogenic, but instead ask whether the costs of potential climate change policies are justified given the continued uncertainty of what climate change impacts will be. One British skeptic wrote: “It’s not people on my side of the debate who want to ravage the countryside with wind farms (with no provision for decommissioning them), rein in economic growth, introduce wartime-style rationing, raise taxes, destroy farmland and rainforests to create biofuels.”³ Of course, this comment makes its own set of simplifications, but the point is that it is not climate science that is being denied, but the implications of what accepting climate science uncritically might bring.

More generally, however, both of these exclusions affect poorer and developing countries. Climate change impacts are not simply driven by atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations, but are mediated by adaptive capacity, diversity of livelihoods, and ability to respond. Industrialization and economic growth are important ways to develop that capacity. Here, it is not the greenhouse gas concentrations that constitute the risk, but the inability to reduce social vulnerability.

As Goeminne acknowledges, Agarwal and Narain’s classic *Global Warming in an Unequal World*⁴ highlighted how science, *tout court*, hides the political struggle underlying the identification of matters of concern. This important work demonstrated that comparing national emissions statistics hide different levels of per capita consumption; the generation of emissions for livelihoods rather than lifestyle; the avoidance of historic emissions from developed countries; and the connections of many developing-world emissions to food security. Jacques, on the other hand, identifies opposition to climate change policy (and in other publications to the Kyoto Protocol specifically) as evidence of climate denial—without acknowledging the deficits and exclusions of the Protocol in terms of what it *didn’t* do for local capacity or technological upgrading in developing countries (nor indeed, for reducing emissions).⁵

The point is, politicizing science does not simply mean mobilizing science for political objectives, but also seeing how political perspectives reinforce partial knowledge and vice versa. This applies to the normative positions of both climate change “deniers” and “acknowledgers.”

For this reason, the comparison with Holocaust denial seems out of place. This shocking metaphor is used to suggest that climate change can be represented in single terms: where deniers are either motivated by ideology or simply unaware of it. The risks from climate change, however, are not represented only

3. James Delingpole “Why I Am So Rude to Warmists.” Daily Telegraph, 28 February, 2012.

4. Agarwal and Narain 1991.

5. See also Lohmann, 2009.

by an “all-global, greenhouse gas concentration-based” approach to risk, but from various specific climatic events that are mediated through forms of vulnerability and adaptive capacity. Economic growth can be one of many ways to reduce vulnerability. Adaptive capacity can mean reducing social vulnerability through livelihoods and social support as well as building protective infrastructure. There needs to be more debate about how to achieve these, which is probably not helped by the singular approach to climate risk.

Jacques makes other exclusions in making “global” assumptions across diverse contexts. He implies that economic growth and progress are specifically “Western” models, and (citing Gramsci) that “expert climate deniers are a ‘real, organic vanguard of the upper classes’ of the global North.” Yet, economic growth is a key concern of many developing countries, and there are various additional theories that link the rise of “green consciousness” to class and uneasiness at modernity in advanced societies.⁶ Equating economic growth with destruction is a fast way to alienate developing countries from future climate regimes. It sounds worse when the people saying this are from countries that have already grown.

Seeking Solutions

The denial, or obstruction, of climate science and policy is difficult to present as the willful rejection of a morally correct position because all ideologies carry simplifications and exclusions in how they shape facts and norms. Moreover, there are existing theories of how this occurs. Cultural Theory, for example, argues that all controversies will see competing knowledge claims from different worldviews, including “individualists” (equivalent to deniers) and “egalitarians” (acknowledgers).⁷ More recent STS work has also highlighted how the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other assessments foreclose normative questions before scientific reports are written.⁸ The purpose of this analysis is not to deny the need for environmental policy, but to indicate means of improving environmental governance by indicating influences on knowledge.

Three specific conclusions seem apparent. First, climate change politics will always invite resistance if they seek to summarize all aspects of environmental risk and political imperatives under one master statement that humans increase greenhouse gas concentrations. There are still too many additional questions to be asked concerning how to reduce concentrations, or how to lessen the impacts of concentrations. These questions particularly affect developing countries, where industrial growth is seen to be a right as well as a means of reducing climate change impacts. Framing climate change under this master

6. Nash, 1973; and Giddens, 1994.

7. Thompson et al. 1990.

8. Filer, 2009; and Beck, 2011.

statement also invites people opposed to climate change policy to frame public debate onto how far anthropogenic influence is actually “proven” in laypeople’s terms, rather than emphasizing the precautionary principle and the array of win-win policies that can reduce emissions in tandem with addressing other needs.

Second, reducing scientific truth claims to counter-posed ideologies will create additional exclusions by focusing on norms of acceptable social order rather than underlying causes and consequences of climate change, and who is vulnerable to these. The old associations between capitalism, modernity, and environmental degradation that were made under Critical Theory in the 1960s, which Jacques in particular evokes with his word “industria,”⁹ need to be replaced with more nuanced understandings of the complexity of environmental change and the variety of forms of economic organization.¹⁰ There also needs to be acknowledgment that it is not just “growth” but also social vulnerability that cause problems.

And third, climate change policy is more likely to be effective if it acknowledges diversity in environmental risks and political norms, rather than uphold predefined positions of moral and scientific authority. There can be many reasons to criticize climate deniers, or seek to outflank them. Complaining that deniers don’t share the same worldview misses the point. Political analysis of environmental science needs to consider how science and politics evolve together, rather than identify one or the other as dysfunctional.

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9. Jacques 2009.

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