



University
of Glasgow

Featherstone, D.J. (2013) *The contested politics of climate change and the crisis of neo-liberalism*. ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies, 12 (1). pp. 44-64. ISSN 1492-9732

Copyright © 2013 The Authors

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

Content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/63606/>

Deposited on: 15 January 2014

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>



The Contested Politics of Climate Change and the Crisis of Neo-liberalism

David Featherstone ¹

School of Geographical and Earth Sciences
University of Glasgow

David.Featherstone@ges.gla.ac.uk

Abstract

Climate change must be placed in relation to broader contestation of unequal social and environmental relations and specifically in relation to the crisis of neo-liberalism. I contest those accounts of climate change which isolate carbon emissions from the unequal social and environmental relations upon which neo-liberal globalization depends. I locate the mobilizations during the COP15 round of climate negotiations in relation to political trajectories that have shaped antagonistic ways of constructing climate change politics. These forms of contentious action challenge the dominant terms of climate change politics in a number of important ways, and at the same time the repressive policing of demonstrations and actions open up the space for protests and for productive debates around the environmental politics of climate change.

Introduction

On 14th December 2010 I attended a small demonstration outside the Bella Centre, the site of the COP15 round of climate negotiations in Copenhagen. Billed as *Climate Reparations* and organized by Jubilee South, we chanted slogans at delegates as they entered and left the convention centre. Speakers from activist groups based in the Philippines, Senegal, India and Brazil and beyond insisted that climate change be understood in relation to the unequal histories of colonialism and



continuing global inequalities. This shaped vociferous demands for “climate justice”. Sited under the tram station that served the Bella Centre, this felt like an inauspicious space for a picket. It became more so when the Danish Police started erecting a wire fence to separate us from the delegates. In a rather surreal turn of events, they then helped us to pin up stickers on the fence. The actions of the Police led to chants of “fence the corporations not the people”.

This was a small demonstration. It didn’t attract much press attention. It was far less dramatic than the events that were to happen outside the Bella Centre a couple of days after. On the 16th the major action during COP15 attempted to shut down the centre through an alliance of protestors from the outside with dissenting delegates from the inside. This was met with severe police repression including widespread use of tear gas and pepper spray.² The speakers at the “climate reparations” demonstration shaped a distinctive approach to the politics of climate change. In contrast to the official negotiations here concerns of social and environmental justice were made central. There was an insistence on linking climate change to histories of unequal relations between North and South. This was defined by attempts to politicize the relations of “place beyond place” (Massey, 2007, p. 188-209). Such interventions have the potential to reconfigure the terms of climate change politics.

This signals one of the key achievements of the mobilizations in Copenhagen. They didn’t necessarily live up to some of the expectations bestowed on them by some commentators. Naomi Klein’s prediction that they would be on a par with Seattle is a particular case in point here (Klein, 2009). They did, however, achieve something at once more modest, but with consequences that may prove to be far-reaching. This was to make a significant challenge to the dominant terms of climate change politics. This was achieved by a consistent foregrounding of issues of climate justice, constructing climate change politics in directly antagonistic ways and positioning climate change in relation to the economic crisis.

This paper draws on involvement in debates at the Klimaforum, the alternative climate summit and in the various mobilizations and actions which contested the market led climate politics which dominated the official COP 15 negotiations.³ It does not attempt anything like a complete overview of these fissiparous, diverse events. Rather, it locates the mobilizations in Copenhagen in relation to political trajectories that have shaped antagonistic ways of constructing climate change politics. I argue that the forms of contentious activity challenged the dominant terms of climate change politics in important ways and draw out the implications of the repressive policing of demonstrations and actions for debates around space, contestation and politics.

² For detailed reports of the different actions and demonstrations see Danish Indymedia, <http://indymedia.dk/>.

³ The official negotiations have been discussed in depth elsewhere, see, for example, Bailey, 2010.

Climate Change and Neo-liberalization

Dominant ways of understanding the politics of global warming have abstracted climate change from the wider contestation of social and environmental relations. This contribution seeks to challenge this way of constructing climate change politics. It argues for the need to locate climate change in relation to broader contestation of unequal social and environmental relations. Debates around climate change have, for example, frequently isolated processes like carbon emission and global warming from the unequal social and environmental relations upon which neo-liberal globalization depends. Movements which are opposing dominant responses to climate change are also seen as rather marginal to the politics of the current conjuncture. Established commentators on the left have marginalized the importance of the ongoing contestation of neo-liberalism in relation to debates around the economic crisis (Blackburn, 2008, Gowan, 2008). Foregrounding the ongoing contestation of neo-liberalism is important in engaging with forms of political opposition and agency being constituted in relation to the crisis. My starting point here is to explore the relation between the politics of climate change and attempts to contest the unequal geographies of neo-liberal globalization.

The counter-globalization movement has brought the unequal relations of power produced through neo-liberal globalization into contestation. This has been a productive and important process. Despite the many criticisms leveled at these movements and their multifarious political strategies, this remains one of their most significant achievements. They have demonstrated, in opposition to the arguments of Hardt and Negri, that it is possible to make the power relations that make up neo-liberal globalization localizable and contestable (Hardt and Negri, 2001). This has important implications for the contestation of dominant responses to climate change. Erik Swyngedouw has argued that climate change has been constructed as a consensual, post-political issue (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2010). This fits into long histories of left critiques of environmentalism for ignoring the contested power relations which shape exposure to environmental hazards and problems (e.g. Enzensberger, 1974). Swyngedouw usefully asserts some of the ways in which climate change has been actively de-politicized. It also suggests the ways in which antagonistic constructions of climate change politics have been marginalized.

There are, however, important tensions in this argument. In common with other work which adopts a post-political turn, it develops a rather limited engagement with the forms of contestation that are being shaped in the current conjuncture. While there are key attempts to de-politicize key issues such as climate change, to argue that these are the only ways that such politics is being articulated is reductive. The demonstration at the Bella Centre mobilized a set of ideas around climate justice which have become increasingly influential. These discourses of climate justice have been shaped by different trajectories and connections. One of the most significant contributions was protests organized in 2007 at the COP 13 negotiations in Bali, Indonesia. During the UN climate summit

“peoples from social organizations and movements from across the globe brought the fight for social, ecological and gender justice into the negotiating rooms and onto the streets” (Climate Justice Now, 2007). Both “inside and outside the convention centre, activists demanded alternative policies and practices that protect livelihoods and the environment”. They sought to make challenging the injustices that structure the production and impact of climate change central to climate politics (Bond, 2010).

This challenges the nation-centered accounts of the political which have structured the terms of debate on the “post-political” (Mouffe, 2005, Žižek, 1999, 2005). Swyngedouw, for example, tends to ignore the ways in which contestation to climate change, such as the organizing in advance of COP15 and the alliances configured through the protests, exceed, unsettle and undermine attempts to contain contestation within the nation. These mobilizations suggest that forms of contentious politics shape more generative geographies of antagonism and more diverse modalities of contestation than is acknowledged by theorists of the post-political (Featherstone and Korf, 2012). Following such geographies allows a sense of the ways in which different political trajectories are combined/ articulated through such political activity.

These forms of contentious politics position climate politics in relation to the ongoing contestation of neo-liberal globalization. Dipesh Chakrabarty usefully cautions against a “problematic of globalization” which “allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 212). This argument is significant and suggests the importance of not allowing a capital-centered account of globalization to shape the terms of debate. However, a key contribution being made by some articulations of climate politics is to think aspects of the climate crisis and the ongoing crisis of neo-liberalism together.

Such articulations are politically important and necessary. They are, however, rather out of joint with the dominant tone of left analysis of the crisis which has marginalized both contestation and the environmental dimensions of crisis (Chatterton et al, forthcoming). Established commentators on the left have marginalized the importance of the ongoing contestation of neo-liberalism in relation to debates around the economic crisis (Blackburn, 2008, Panitch and Gindin, 2010). Thus dominant left accounts and analysis have concentrated on mapping, delineating and analyzing the financial practices and capital flows through which the economic crisis unfolded (e.g. Harvey, 2010, Peck, 2010).

Debates on the crisis have engaged with contestation. Peck et al, for example, argue that the “long history of struggles and institutional transformations [...] have shaped and continue to shape, the form and trajectory of neoliberalism, which has never proceeded unopposed and which has never exhibited the purity in practice that it claimed in rhetoric” (Peck et al, 2009, p. 104). However, such forms of contestation are rarely accorded centre stage in theorization of neo-liberalism or

accounts of the crisis. As a result a broader set of questions about how contestation is generated and enacted in the current conjuncture become rather marginalized.

The capital centered character of accounts of the crisis close down an engagement about the significance of the ongoing movements which have brought the terms of neo-liberal globalization into contestation. This deals with contestation in an impoverished way. It views oppositional politics as merely a set of responses to neo-liberalization and the crisis, rather than something which more actively shapes the terrain of political debate. By focusing primarily on issues of capital and economic practice the tone of left debate has also led to a rather narrow set of alternative proposals around financial regulation (Blackburn, 2008, Gowan, 2009). Diverse struggles have made links between the economic crisis and climate politics. The protests of workers at the Vestas' plant in Newport on the Isle of Wight, in the UK are a case in point here.

In the summer of 2009 workers at the plant, which made wind turbines, occupied the factory for 18 days after mass redundancies. Vestas, the profitable Danish multinational, was seeking to move the work to Colorado and to close both its British factories with the loss of more than 600 green jobs citing "lack of demand" and opposition to onshore wind farms in the UK (Milne, 2009). The workers demanded that the government demonstrate its "commitment to a green economy by taking over the plant and restarting production under new management" (Milne, 2009). There was a culture of management bullying at the plant. Workers involved in the occupation were sent their redundancy notices in pizza boxes. During the occupation, food had to be smuggled, or thrown, into the plant as the management refused to let adequate supplies in.

Red-Green alliances developed around the dispute, which linked climate change politics to an innovative attempt to politicize the economic crisis; a crisis which continues to be rather successfully de-politicized. The occupation made clear the distance between the rhetoric of an economic recovery being led by "green jobs" and a situation where workers making wind turbines were being laid off. The conditions and actions of Vestas' workers suggest that "green jobs" can frequently be more precarious than rhetoric about the "green economy" sometimes suggests (Green New Deal Group, 2008). Greenpeace hailed the Vestas dispute as promising "a historic change from a situation where the labor movement and environment activists have found themselves on different sides of the fence" (MacAlister, 2009, n.p.). The way that these red-green alliances were hailed as innovative, however, would seem to underline the extent to which "red" and "green" politics are still frequently held apart, rather than to be particular evidence of their convergence. The Greenpeace statement, while welcome, ignores long standing connections between environment and labor politics/justice issues which have shaped different ways of understanding what counts as environmental politics. This suggests the terms on which social and environmental forms of justice are articulated through emerging solidarities demands scrutiny.

There are, as Swyngedouw emphasizes, plenty of ways in which climate change politics is mobilized in ways which close down contestation and actively de-politicize issues. This also draws on important ways in which environmental politics has been mobilized and framed. However, it is unhelpful to extrapolate from this that all climate change politics is necessarily de-politicizing. Swyngedouw does, however, engage with creative egalitarian political alternatives forged by recent insurgent movements such as those contesting the introduction of punitive forms of austerity in Greece (Swyngedouw, 2011). There are important ways in which dominant responses to climate change are being brought into contestation. These practices of contestation can be productive of translocal alliances and of different ways of envisioning alternatives to neo-liberalism. Tracing the contested maps of grievance shaped through these practices how different forms of climate change politics can emerge through bringing dominant geographies of power into question.

Translocal Solidarity and Articulations of Climate Justice

The terms of climate justice politics has been shaped through ongoing struggles over social and environmental inequalities. Central here has been transnational organizing around the politics of oil. Such injustices were brought into contestation through a set of public hearings around the operation of the oil industry in Colombia. This was set up by the People's Permanent Tribunal (PPT), a non-governmental tribunal set up to investigate and challenge the role of multinationals in Colombia. The PPT uses "exemplary cases", "to show how the Colombian state has facilitated and contributed to the exploitation of our natural resources by these companies, by committing crimes and permanently violating the rights of the individual citizens and their organizations" (PPT, 2007). In 2007 the PPT held a public hearing in Bogota held in relation to the oil industry. There were also seven preliminary public hearings.

There were four hearings in Colombia in Saravena, Barrancabermeja, El Tarra – Northern Santander and Cartagena. Preliminary hearings were also held in the USA, Spain and the UK, the home countries of the three biggest oil corporations with major operations in Colombia: Occidental, Repsol and BP (Colombia Solidarity Campaign, 2007). The evidence presented at these preliminary hearings fed into a formal public hearing of these three oil corporations in Bogota in August 2007. These events produced a networked opposition constructed through connections between activists in different places and through bringing together different groups mobilizing around oil politics and the political situation in Colombia.⁴ Colombia has become a "counterinsurgent terror state" built by "civilian politicians who delegated repression to the military" (Hylton, 2006, p. 131). This state terror has made being a trade unionist in Colombia "one of the

⁴ For a detailed discussion of Colombian social movements and the difficulties of organizing in Colombia, see Escobar, 2008.

most dangerous occupations in the world” (Gill, 2004, p. 1). 4,000 members of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores, the country’s largest trade union confederation, were killed between 1986 and 2004 (ibid.).

Through interrogating the power relations of the global oil industry this process directly linked the politics of climate change to contestation of the violence and inequalities that structure neo-liberalization. Thus in the event held in Glasgow in June 2007 activists from trade unions and social movements in Colombia presented evidence of British Petroleum’s [BP] “corporate crimes”. They gave testimonies of BP’s poor environmental record in Colombia, particularly in Casanare. They also demonstrated what was at the very least complicity between BP and assassinations of leaders and activists of the Colombian Oilworkers Union USO. Since 1988 USO has suffered ‘105 assassinations of its members, 2 members “disappeared”, 6 kidnapped, 35 wounded in assassination attempts, 400 internal refugees, 4 members in exile, 300 members have experienced death threats, 30 have been detained, 900 are undergoing criminal proceedings and 55 have been subject to “mobbing”’.⁵ The Colombian speakers related this to the broader context of assassination and intimidation of trade unionists and to the impunity of multinationals in Colombia. The Glasgow organizing committee included a Colombian exile.

Through directly linking the politics of climate change to the violence and unequal social and environmental relations involved in the production of oil in Colombia and elsewhere, this event suggested the importance of framing climate change politics in antagonistic ways. A politics that doesn’t challenge the unequal power relations related to climate change risks being redundant. This process also produced a set of innovative alliances and exchanges between different groups and activists based in different parts of the world. Thus Scotland was chosen as the site to host the public hearing related to BP because of its importance within oil production within the UK. Links were made with community groups that had campaigned against oil refineries in Grangemouth and other environmental groups in Scotland. Nonetheless, the event also raised significant questions about how these links between environmental concerns and more traditional left concerns around labor and human rights are negotiated. The dominant framing of this politics was through a concern with BP’s violations of labor and human rights in ways which sometimes edged out engagements with environmental injustices. This raises questions about the necessity of challenging unequal social and environmental relations in ways that allow both social and environmental issues to be made central. It also emphasizes that there can be discontinuities and tensions in the ways that social and environmental questions are articulated through solidarities (Featherstone, 2012).

⁵ From the Public Declaration of the Glasgow event.

The PPT process demonstrates, however, the way that such internationalist organizing can open up a contested politics of climate change. It emphasizes that the political trajectories that movements and activists bring to understanding the politics of climate change matter. The political trajectories of diverse movements have also been important in generating actually existing alternatives to neo-liberalized ways of producing globalization. One of the key ways in which they have done this is through experiments with localization. Thus significant movements in the global South, such as Movimento Sem Terra (MST) the movement of the landless in Brazil have sought to produce alternatives to neo-liberal forms of agriculture. After initially mimicking intensive agriculture on the land gained through their occupations the MST has begun to experiment with alternative forms of agriculture and has produced the first organic seeds in Latin America (Branford and Rocha, 2002, p. 211-239, MST, 2005, on MST more generally, see Fernandes, 2004, Wolford, 2010). Allies of the MST in the global north such as the Confédération Paysanne have backed alternative proposals for rural development based around “solidaristic agriculture” related to radical non-agricultural actors in rural communities (Herman and Kuper, 2002, p. 106-107).

There are, however, key differences over ways in which practices of localization are envisioned. Thus arguably, some versions of localization being produced through responses such as the transition town movement constitute what might be termed a “new parochialism”. These movements have had significant effects in shaping low carbon alternatives. They have also been significant in drawing in to political engagement, people who have traditionally not been engaged with activist subcultures. The particular practices of localization they adopt, however, are limited in key ways. They have generally been rather silent about the relations of power that shape practices of localization. Further, they have tended to generate practices of localization in isolationist rather than solidaristic ways.

A different and more politically productive approach to localization has emerged through some aspects of the opposition to dominant responses to climate change. That is strategies of localization which are envisioned and practiced directly as part of solidaristic alternatives (see also North and Featherstone, 2012). These strategies do not produce localization in bounded or isolationist ways. Rather, they envision localization as part of strategies to “trans-localize” (Chatterton et al, forthcoming). This can be exemplified by the political strategies adopted by *Vía Campesina*, the transnational network of small farmers and peasants.

Vía Campesina’s opposition to dominant responses to climate change has combined a commitment to the importance of localized forms of agriculture, as an alternative to carbon-intensive agri-business. This has been developed through a focus on translocal circuits of opposition to neo-liberalization. Thus one of their statements prior to the Copenhagen meetings argued:

La Vía Campesina believe we must implement new initiatives aiming at changing the model of production. Local production and people based protection of resources should be encouraged because it uses less fossil energy and it maintains livelihoods and local communities. Small farmers around the world defend food sovereignty as a way to overcome the climate crisis. It is the people's right to define their own food policies, with a priority to local food production and sustainable small scale agriculture.

(Vía Campesina, 2009a)

It is clear that this articulation of the local is one which is challenging the unequal geographies of power that shape places. Further through the translocal geographies of connection that shape the movement drawing together alliances etc from across the global South and links with movements like Confederation Paysanne in the global North, break a sense of association of localization with chauvinism or isolationism.

These articulations of localization emphasize how the distinctive political trajectories of oppositional movements have shaped the terms of climate justice politics. Via Campesina were one of the movements which were central to the translocal solidarities forged through counter-globalization movements (Desmarais, 2007). They have brought these forms of political mobilizing and analysis to climate justice politics. As the Building Bridges Collective have argued these forms of translocal anti-capitalist mobilization have shaped articulations of climate justice defined by a "rejection of market solutions" and which make climate change "a political, rather than a technical, issue" (Building Bridges Collective, 2010, p. 29). The importance of these connections was made clear through the mobilizations in Copenhagen.

Contesting the Terms of Climate Change Politics

One set of climate change politics constituted through Cop 15 was about ways of enrolling carbon into new marketised relations and extending practices of neo-liberalization. Such dominant forms of climate change politics marginalize issues of justice and are silent about the unequal impacts of climate change. It is not just "dominant" climate change politics, however, where such issues of justice and unequal social and environmental relations have been occluded. Mark Lynas, a prominent green activist/ intellectual in the UK, has argued that the climate change is such an urgent problem that struggles for equity need to take second place (Lynas, 2004, 2010, for critical discussion see Blagojevic, 2010). In the debates at the Klimaforum and in many demonstrations and actions, issues of justice were not deferred, but were made central to climate change politics.

There was a strong insistence on foregrounding questions of social and environmental justice. This is important. The Copenhagen protests marked the

coming together of political trajectories which have constructed climate change politics in antagonistic ways and through confrontational non violent direct action. This has the potential to make a significant intervention in the terms of debate of climate politics. This project has been taken forward through the “World Peoples’ Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth” (CMPCC) held in Tiquipaya in Bolivia in April 2010 and attended by 33,000 people. Conceived as an alternative to the “moribund UN process”, the CMPCC was shaped by radical articulations of climate justice and sought to massively shift the terms of debate on climate change (Weinberg, 2010). Internationalist connections shaped the way it mobilized questions of climate justice and debt. The process was defined by dynamic and contested relations between social movements and state political activity and attempts to “internationalize” the “political approach and radical discourse” of the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) led by Bolivian president Evo Morales (Building Bridges Collective, 2010, p. 57).

The mobilizations in Copenhagen were shaped by translocal activist networks that were influential in the alter-globalization movements. The Climate Justice Action (CJA) network, for example, drew on forms of political analysis and modes of organizing which were shaped by earlier engagements/movements against corporate globalization (CJA, 2010, p. 1). These connections were made explicit through the Trade to Climate Caravan which travelled from protests at the 7th Ministerial of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva to the Climate Summit in Copenhagen. This involved 44 representatives from the social movements of the Global South who explained “the connections between world trade and climate change with speeches and actions” (Trade to Climate Caravan, 2010, p. 2). The Caravan was organized by People’s Global Action, one of the key networking movements that shaped the counter-globalization movement.

The Caravan was composed of participants from around the world from the worst of environmental and social situations to demand and claim a better world save our planet from those that wish to profit out of the death of the biosphere (Trade to Climate Caravan, 2010). The project was articulated as being about ‘more than a friendship but borne of political solidarity, labor and land ownership, climate justice, the exploitation of the south by the north, even knowing that you can find pockets of the south in the north and the north in the south’. Participants from a diverse range of struggles and organizations were involved.

This included activists from the Bangladesh Krishok Federation, a peasant movement, which has been successful in helping landless farmers to gain access to fallow land in areas along the coast, which is related to the achieving of food sovereignty. In November of 2011 the BKF was central to the Climate Change, Gender and Food Sovereignty Caravan which toured rural communities in Bangladesh. This contributed to attempts by the BKF to “deepen solidarities between different communities in the country and between different international civil society actors (especially other peasant movements), concerning food sovereignty and responses to climate change” (Routledge, forthcoming).

The Trade to Climate Caravan was structured to demonstrate and contest connections between the WTO and the climate change negotiations. This underlines the way that at least some of the mobilizations at COP 15 were not in any straightforward way about pressuring the process to adopt more stringent targets. Rather, as in Bali, there was a direct contestation of the way that the COP 15 process was using the climate negotiations as an opportunity to deepen processes of marketization (Bond, 2012). There was a strong dissent at the use of mechanisms such as carbon trading. For the Caravanistas drawing together the two events brought the direct linkages between climate change and neo-liberal globalization into contestation. These connections reflect the way that this climate activism was shaped by ongoing engagements in struggles against neo-liberalism, reflecting the participation of movements in counter-global struggles.

The Caravan included members of Via Campesina. Via Campesina had a significant, 150 strong presence in Copenhagen, marked out by their distinctive green flags. They mobilized both distinctive actions and solutions. Via Campesina's opposition to dominant responses to climate change has combined a commitment to the importance of localized forms of agriculture, as an alternative to carbon-intensive agri-business. During COP15 Via Campesina were involved in two key actions against the Danish meat industry and in relation to bio-fuels. Targeting the meat industry and the production of biofuels sought to politicize the links between agri-business and climate change (Levidow and Paul, 2010).

Via Campesina activists argued that small-scale producer owned and led agriculture could be a form of low-carbon alternative to such forms of agri-business. They argued that “[l]ocal production and people based protection of resources should be encouraged because it uses less fossil energy and it maintains livelihoods and local communities. Small farmers around the world defend food sovereignty as a way to overcome the climate crisis (Via Campesina, 2009a). Like other oppositional movements Via Campesina positioned climate change politics in relation to the economic crisis. Josie Riffaud, one of the leaders of Via Campesina, argued that “Money and market solutions will not resolve the current crisis. We need instead a radical change in the way we produce and we consume, and this is what was not discussed in Copenhagen” (Via Campesina, 2009b).

One of the defining slogans of the protests was that “if the climate was a bank it would be saved!” This slogan was invoked by Hugo Chávez in his address to the summit. Among the many inventive puppets and banners in the street demonstrations my favorite was a giant puppet of Karl Marx imploring that “it’s the economy stupid”. These slogans/ interventions had a double effect. Firstly, they sought to position the climate negotiations in the context of the failure of the aggressive forms of neo-liberalism, even on their own terms of providing financial growth and stability. This deepened antagonisms against the neo-liberal tenor of the climate negotiations. Secondly, they sought to open up political spaces and possibilities through drawing attention to such failure of neo-liberalism. This was an attempt to challenge the closing down of political horizons and alternatives

through neo-liberal politics. The mobilizations in Copenhagen were defined by the meeting up of political trajectories which sought to construct political alternatives in the wake of neo-liberalism.

The coming together of different political trajectories in Copenhagen was productive, but there were tensions. Many potential alliances were rather fraught and characterized by different styles of politics talking past each other. A panel at the Klimaforum on Danish trade union responses to climate change, for example, was wildly dull and technocratic. Of the few who turned up for the panel many swiftly left. The trade unionists made a serious attempt to think about the possibilities of green jobs. Asked about the possibilities for contestation of neo-liberalism in the current conjuncture by myself and another participant in the workshop one of the trade unionists responded that he had given up on socialism 20 years ago!⁶

This contrasted with the imaginative green-left politics that characterized other sessions. At a debate on left alternatives speakers from parties such as *Der Linke* offered a convincing and passionate left articulation of climate change politics. Trade union federations such as the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) have also sought to construct more imaginative engagements with climate politics based around a rejection of market-led solutions (International Transport Workers Federation, 2010). The ITF have co argued that while “recognising the immense dangers posed by climate change” the crisis is “also a massive opportunity for trade unions to partner with each other and with social movements to bring to birth a different world—a world that ends once and for all the common abuse suffered by both people and the environment” (ITF, 2010, p. 5).

The alliances between social movements and trade unions envisioned by the ITF have significant promise. The events in Copenhagen, however, suggest some of the difficult processes and labor involved in generating solidarities and alliances, as tensions which have long dogged alter-globalization politics recurred. Tazio Mueller, of the Climate Justice Action network, and Naomi Klein were barracked at a rally of a few thousand activists in Christiania, the longstanding autonomous area in Copenhagen, for arguing for a non-violent approach to the ‘mass action’ at the Bella Centre on December 16th. This mass action was seen as the centerpiece of direct action and was planned to involve both activists on the outside together with a walkout of militant delegates from the inside. Klein and Mueller’s defense of non-violence depended though on a rather troubling mobilization of activists from the Global South. They argued that non-violent strategies were necessary to protect Southern activists from those with more visa privileges or juridical status. This spoke in significant ways on the terms in which solidarities and connections were constituted.

⁶ See Christiansen, 1994, for a useful discussion of the history of the left in Denmark over the twentieth century.

This position acknowledged the differential conditions activists from the Global South face in terms of unequal visa privileges. This is something about which activists from the Global North have not always been particularly reflexive when engaging in the construction of translocal solidarities (Featherstone, 2008, p. 167). But it positioned such activists in paternalistic and unitary ways. ‘They’ became “represented” in these debates rather than being allowed to shape the terms of discussion. Such geographical imaginaries of solidarity rework rather than challenge unequal geographies of power’ (Sundberg, 2007). It suggests, however, that in important ways that for leading figures in counter-globalization movements there is still a tendency to represent figures from the Global South in unitary and passive ways. This served to reinforce a set of divisions between activists in the Global North and South. It reified them and made these differences central to movement politics. This closed down the emergence of more productive and nuanced ways of negotiating activists’ different positions in relation to global geographies of power. This intersects with wider practices of representation. The European green movement continues to have issues with orientalism. An NGO activist I spoke to from Sao Paulo, for example, was fed up of people assuming that because he was Brazilian he came from the rainforest.

The context for the angry exchanges in Christiania was concerted and violent police repression of peaceful demonstrations and actions. At the first major demonstration on the 12th December when over 100,000 marched on the Bella Centre, the police made 963 arrests. This was during an overwhelmingly peaceful march. The arrests were pre-emptive. Of the 900 arrested only 3 were brought to trial. Police held protesters in wire cages, joking that they were “mini-Guatanamos”. There were persistent allegations that police had used pepper spray on protesters held in cages. On 20th October 2010 these pre-emptive arrests were ruled to be illegal by the City Court of Copenhagen. Knud Foldschack who represented some of those arrested commented that the “verdict is a clear signal to the Danish Parliament that they should stop degrading legal rights in Denmark, in order to comply with international conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights.”⁷

This police repression was not random or piecemeal. It cannot be dismissed as a legitimate reaction to a few violent protesters. It was systematic and state sanctioned. The Danish parliament voted through legislation, days before the Summit, to effectively criminalize peaceful protest. These new powers enabled Danish police to detain for up to 12 hours people who they suspected “might break the law in the near future” and to jail protesters for 40 days. This legislation is consistent with a broader authoritarian populist political culture in Denmark (see Hall, 1988, p. 123-149). This political culture has been allied with neo-nationalist narratives which have demonized immigrants (Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen, 2006). This is also part of the circulation of techniques of policing and containment

⁷ <http://uk.oneworld.net/article/view/166581/1/7467>.

of protest between different sites, such as the recent G20 protests in London and Toronto. There was widespread use of kettling in response to student protests in the November of 2010 (Solomon, 2011). These police tactics sought to close down vibrant forms of political protest. Significant pressure was exerted to prevent activists travelling to Copenhagen. Buses of activists were stopped and searched in operations which drew on cross-border co-operation between the Danish and German police.

The dramatic repression of peaceful protest that characterized Cop 15 has important implications for debates on the relations between space, contestation and the political. Mouffe and Žižek's account of contemporary societies as 'post-political' tends to ignore actually existing forms of contestation. The policing of the climate protests suggests the importance of interrogating the work that is done to keep contestation out of the terrain of the political. This emphasizes that the formation of a 'post-political', consensual politics without antagonism is something that is achieved through active political strategies and through the disciplining work of repressive policing and juridical frameworks. It is necessary to situate the formation of antagonistic climate change politics within these pressures and geographies of repression. This problematises simplistic claims about the absence of contestation from contemporary experiences of the political.

These actions put significant pressures on the terms of exchanges and connections through which solidarities were forged. Solidarities also shaped different positions on the terms that climate justice was mobilized. A key tension that emerged through and after the mobilizations was around different constructions of climate justice and debt. The terms on which "climate justice" is defined and articulated has been disputed. Simons and Tonak in a blistering critique of the oppositional climate politics at COP15 argue against notions of climate justice and debt. They argue that "Climate Debt" perpetuates a system that assigns economic and financial value to the biosphere, ecosystems and in this case a molecule of CO₂ (which, in reductionist science, readily translates into degrees Celsius). They contend that it is 'an "equalizing dynamic", as it infects relations between the Global North and South with the same logic of commodification that is central to those markets on which carbon is traded upon.' (Simons and Tonak, 2010, n.p.). Simons and Tonak are right to caution about the potential dangers of deepening monetized logics of connection. This is particularly crucial given the way the COP15 negotiations were so dominated by monetized and market-led solutions.

There are, however, key tensions in their critique of the way that discourses of climate debt and justice were mobilized. They ignore how climate debt and reparations were articulated in ways which situated climate politics in relation to the unequal histories and geographies of connection between North and South. This was crucial in attempting to forge solidarities which constructed different logics of connection between movements in North/ South. This cannot be reduced to a sense of monetized linkages. Rather it is about an attempt to challenge the ongoing

inequalities being reproduced through climate politics. As Patrick Bond argues, Climate Debt is about reparations to people who are suffering damages by the actions of Northern overconsumption of environmental space—damages that can be proven even in courts’ pointing to the way the Alien Tort Claims Act in the US has proven useful for some of the Niger Delta plaintiffs against Shell (Bond, 2010, n.p.). This emphasizes how notions of climate debt and climate justice can forge solidarities through contesting exploitative relations and institutions. At the demonstration on climate reparations, with which I started this paper, discourses of climate debt were linked to a direct critique of the role of international financial institutions in climate negotiations. We chanted “World Bank and IMF out of Climate Now.”

Conclusions

In 1979 at the height of the devastating loss of hope and the assault on left political imaginaries that accompanied the onslaught of neo-liberalism Raymond Williams wrote that:

a capitalist economic order is in the process of defaulting on its most recent contract to provide full employment, extending credit and social expenditure as conditions of a political consensus of support. Those who, like myself, have seen that consensus as damaging, as preventing or postponing until it is dangerously late any effective challenge to its destructive long term priorities must feel at one level relief that it is disintegrating but must also feel, at more immediate and in that sense much deeper levels, the human cost of that default, which in terms of just such an order will be paid more heavily by those being defaulted on than by the defaulters themselves.

(Williams, 1979, p. 219).

Invoking Williams’ prescient words during the seminar blockade in the shadow of the *Dong Energy* power station was to mark both the political possibilities and dangers posed by the current conjuncture. The aggressive forms of neo-liberalism that Williams confronted have decisively failed, even on their own terms. This failure has the potential to open up political possibilities and space for the left (see Massey, 2009). Despite this, further rounds of aggressive neo-liberal retrenchment seem to be increasingly ascendant as the dominant political response to the crisis (Clarke, 2010, Featherstone, et al, 2012). The experiences of the Occupy movement and increasing resistance to discourse of austerity, however, suggest that such neo-liberal retrenchment is far from hegemonic.

Foregrounding the already contested character of neo-liberalization is necessary for shaping political alternatives in the current conjuncture. The emergence of political trajectories antagonistic to neo-liberal globalization through counter-global struggles has shaped alternative ways of articulating climate politics. This presents challenges to dominant ways of understanding the politics of

the crisis. It suggests the necessity of situating the crisis within the ongoing contestation of neo-liberalism and powerfully unsettles assumptions that climate politics is uniformly post-political. It opens up possibilities that are foreclosed by capital-centered accounts of the crisis.

The unruly multiple political trajectories brought together through the Copenhagen protests were productive. Antagonistic ways of envisioning climate change politics were certainly in existence before the mobilizations against COP 15. In Copenhagen these alternatives asserted a significant presence, articulacy and vitality. Such alternatives have the potential to reconfigure the terms of debate around climate change politics in important ways. They signal the importance of attending to ways in which contestation remains significant in shaping the terrain of the political. They suggest the importance of following the construction of antagonisms around unequal social and environmental relations, even as such protest is subject to significant repression. The continuing and deepening of such antagonistic constructions of climate politics through the 'World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth' is a testament to their significance and potential.

Acknowledgements

This paper owes much to conversations and discussions with Paul Routledge, Paul Chatterton, Kerry Burton, Kelvin Mason, Jane Trowell of Platform, Jeremy Anderson of the International Transport Workers Federation and many others. James Sidaway, Pete North, Kerry Burton and Mo Hume provided helpful comments on earlier iterations of this paper. Thanks are due to Kelvin Mason's indefatigable patience and commitment to seeing this special issue through to publication and to Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Levi Gahman for very helpful editorial guidance. The responsibility for the interpretation offered here and any substantive errors is, of course, my own. I would like to acknowledge the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for funding the research on which this paper draws.

References

- Blagojevic, K. 2010. Blog post: China, climate justice and Mark Lynas, <http://www.wdm.org.uk/blog-post-china-climate-justice-and-mark-lynas> Last accessed May 18th, 2010.
- Blackburn, R. 2007. The Subprime Crisis, *New Left Review* 50, 63-106.
- Bond, P. 2012. Emissions Trading, New Enclosures and Eco-Social Contestation, *Antipode*, 44; 3, 684-701.
- Bond, P. 2010. Copenhagen Inside Out: Why Climate Justice Did Not Crumble at the Summit, *Counterpunch* <http://www.counterpunch.org/2010/01/12/copenhagen-inside-out/> Last accessed, 11/9/2011.

- Branford, S. and R. Jan, 2002. *Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil*, London: Latin America Bureau.
- Building Bridges Collective, 2010. *Space for Movement? Reflections from Bolivia on Climate Justice, Social Movements and the State*, Leeds: Building Bridges Collective.
- Chakrabarty, D., 2009. 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35: 2,
- Chatterton, Paul, Featherstone, David and Routledge, Paul (forthcoming) 'Articulating Climate Justice in Copenhagen: antagonism, the commons and solidarity' *Antipode*.
- Christiansen, N. 1994. 'Denmark: End of an Idyll', in Anderson, P. and Carmillier, P. *Mapping the West European Left* London: Verso, 77-101.
- Clarke, J. 2010. 'After Neo-liberalism? Markets, states and the reinvention of public welfare', *Cultural Studies* 24: 3, 375-394.
- Climate Justice Action (2010) 'What does climate justice mean in Europe?' <http://www.climate-justice-action.org/resources/documents/what-does-climate-justice-mean-in-europe/> Last accessed 13th September, 2011.
- Climate Justice Now (2007) 'What's Missing from the Climate Talks? Justice' <http://www.climate-justice-now.org/category/events/bali/> Last accessed, 12th September, 2012.
- Colombia Solidarity Campaign, 2007. It's the Oil Stupid, <http://www.colombiasolidarity.org.uk/component/content/article/25-news/117-its-the-oil-stupid> Last accessed 16 May, 2012
- Demeritt, D. 2006. 'Science Studies, Climate Change, and the Prospects for Constructivist Critique', *Economy and Society* 35(3): 453-479.
- Desmarais, A. (2007) *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*, London: Pluto Press.
- Enzensberger, H. M. 1974. *Raids and Reconstructions: Essays in Politics, Crime and Culture*, London: Pluto Press, 253-295.
- Escobar, A. 2008. *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Featherstone, D., I. Anthony, D. MacKinnon, K. Strauss, and A. Cumbers 2012. 'Progressive Localism and the Construction of Political Alternatives', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37: 2, 177-182.
- Featherstone, D. and B. Korf, (2012) 'Introduction: Space, Contestation and the Political' *Geoforum* 43: 4, pagination to be decided.
- Featherstone, D. 2012. *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* London: Zed Books.

- Featherstone, D. 2008. *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: The Making of Counter-Global Networks* Oxford, Wiley Blackwell.
- Fernandes, B. 2005. 'The land occupation as a form of access to land in Brazil: a theoretical and methodological contribution', In Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros eds. *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America*. London, Zed Books: 317-340.
- Gill, L. 2004. 'Labor and Human rights: 'The Real Thing' in Colombia' http://killercoke.org/reports_gill.php Last accessed 30th April, 2012.
- Gowan, P. 2009. Crisis in the heartland. *New Left Review* 55, 5-29.
- Green New Deal Group (2008) *A Green New Deal: Joined-up policies to solve the triple crunch of the credit crisis, climate change and high oil prices* http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_publicationdetail.aspx?pid=258 Last Accessed October 20th, 2011.
- Haldrup, Mi., L. Koefoed, and K. Simonsen. 2006. 'Practical Orientalism – Bodies, Everyday Life and the Construction of Otherness'. *Geografiska Annaler B*, 88 (2), 173-184.
- Hall, S. 1988. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* Verso, London.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri, 2001. *Empire*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. 2010. *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, London: Profile Books.
- Herman, P. and R. Kuper, (for the Confédération Paysanne). 2002. *Food For Thought: Towards a Future for Farming*, London: Pluto Press.
- Hylton, F. 2006. *Evil Hour in Colombia*, London: Verso.
- International Transport Workers' Federation (2010) 'Transport Workers and Climate Change: Towards Low Carbon Mobility' <http://www.itfcongress2010.org/files/extranet/2/24239/ITF%20Climate%20Change%20Conference%20Discussion%20Document%202010.pdf> Last accessed, October 20th, 2011.
- Jubilee South, 2009. Press release: Reparations for Climate Debt demanded from Highly-Industrialised Countries. <http://www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk/Climate%20Justice%20Press%20Release%20+5293.twl> Last accessed, May 18th, 2010.
- Levidow, L. and H. Paul, 2010. 'Global agrofuel crops as contested sustainability, part I: Sustaining what development?' *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 21: 2, 64–86.

- Lynas, M., 2004. Interview with Mark Lynas, *Red Pepper* <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/Interview-with-Mark-Lynas-author> Last accessed May 16th, 2010.
- Lynas, M., 2010. Why it's wrong to preach "climate justice", *New Statesman* 14th January, 2010 <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2010/01/lynas-climate-carbon>, Last accessed May 16th, 2010.
- Klein, N., 2009. The Seattle activists' coming of age in Copenhagen will be very disobedient, *Guardian* 12th November, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/nov/12/seattle-coming-age-disobedient-copenhagen> Last accessed May 18th, 2010.
- MacAlister, T. (2009) 'Vestas dispute: Red and green coalition forms to fight wind plant closure' *Guardian*, 29th July 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jul/23/vestas-wind-turbine-plant-closure> Accessed September 11th, 2011.
- Martinez-Alier, J. 2002. *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.
- Martinez-Alier, J. and L. Temper, 2007. 'Oil and Climate Change: Voices from the South', *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 15, 2007.
- Massey, D., 2007. *World City*, Cambridge, Polity.
- Massey, D., 2009. 'Invention and Hard Work'. In J. Pugh (Ed) *What is Radical Politics Today?* Basingstoke Palgrave, MacMillan, 136-142.
- Milne, S., 2009. Even the Isle of Wight wants Miliband to Buck the Market. *Guardian* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/22/green-jobs-market-vestas-strike> Last accessed 20th October, 2011.
- Mouffe, C. 2005. *On the Political*, London, Routledge.
- Movimento Sem Terra. 2005. Agriculture <http://www.mstbrazil.org/ag/>, accessed 1/3/2005.
- North, P. and D. Featherstone, 2012. 'Localization as Radical Praxis and the New Politics of Climate Change'. In J. Sen, and P. Waterman [Eds] *The Movement of Movements: Struggles for Other Worlds*, New Delhi: OpenWord, pagination to be decided.
- Simons, T. and A. Tomak, 2010. 'The Dead End of Climate Justice: How NGO Bureaucrats and Greenwashed Corporations are Turning Nature Into Investment Capital'. *Counterpunch* <http://www.counterpunch.org/simons01082010.html>, last accessed, 18th July, 2010.
- Panitch, L. and S. Gindin, (2010) 'Capitalist Crises and the Crisis this Time', *Socialist Register 2011*, 1-21.

- Peck, J. 2010. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peck, J., N. Theodore, and N. Brenner, 2010. Postneoliberalism and its malcontents, *Antipode* 42: Issue Supplement, 94-116.
- Routledge, P. (forthcoming) 'Networking Equivalence'
- Paper available from the author at School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow.
- Solomon, C. (2011) 'We Felt Liberated' in Solomon, C. and Palmieri, T. Ed. *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* London: Verso, 11-16.
- Sundberg, J. 2007. 'Reconfiguring North-South Solidarity: Critical Reflections on Experiences of Transnational Resistance'. *Antipode* 39: 1, 144-166.
- Swyngedouw, E. 2011. 'Interrogating post-democratization: Reclaiming egalitarian political spaces', *Political Geography* 30: 7, 370-380.
- Swyngedouw, E. 2010. 'Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change', *Theory, Culture and Society* 27: 2-3, 213-232.
- Swyngedouw, E. 2007. 'Impossible "Sustainability" and the Post-Political Condition', In: D. Gibbs and R. Krueger, (Ed.), *The Sustainable Development Paradox: Urban Political Economy in the United States and Europe*, Guilford Press, New York, 13-40.
- Trade to Climate Caravan (2009) 'Caravan Diary' <http://www.climatecaravan.org/?q=node/62> Last accessed 21st October, 2011.
- Trapese Collective, 2009. *The Rocky Road to a Real Transition* <http://sparror.cubecinema.com/stuffit/trapese/rocky-road-a5-web.pdf>, last accessed 18th July, 2010.
- Vía Campesina, 2009a. Climate: Time to change our way to consume and produce food. http://www.viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=793:climate-time-to-change-our-way-to-consume-and-produce-food&catid=48:-climate-change-and-agrofuels&Itemid=75, last accessed 21st July, 2010.
- Vía Campesina. 2009b. Press Release: Vía Campesina: Traders failed in Copenhagen' <http://indymedia.dk/articles/1977>, last accessed 18th May, 2010.
- Weinberg, B. 2010. Cochabamba: dissidents push limits of free speech. <http://www.wv4report.com/node/8550> Last accessed 7th July, 2011.
- Williams, R. 1979. *Modern Tragedy*, Second Edition London: New Left Books.
- Wolford, W. 2010. *This Land Is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meanings of Land in Brazil* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Žižek, S. 2005. Against the Populist Temptation.

<http://www.lacan.com/zizpopulism.htm> last accessed 18th May, 2010.

Žižek, S. 1999. Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics. In Mouffe, C., *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, London: Verso, 18-37.