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A Decade of Discourse Analysis of Environmental Politics: Achievements, Challenges, Perspectives

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ABSTRACT *This article assesses the contribution of discourse analysis to the study of environmental politics over the period of the past decade. Defining discourse as a particular linguistic regularity that can be found in conversations distinguishes it from 'deliberation' and 'discussion'. Discourse analysis is seen as focused on situational logics studying 'language-in-use'.*

Three strengths of discourse analysis are highlighted: its capacity to reveal the role of language in politics, its capacity to reveal the embeddedness of language in practices and its capacity to answer 'how' questions and to illuminate mechanisms. The article concludes by sketching some of the challenges lying ahead of discourse analysis. Given the changing nature of policy making, discourse analysts are supposed to have a task in identifying the new sites of politics and analysing the political dynamics therein.

KEY WORDS: Discourse analysis, environmental politics, Foucault, practices

Defining Discourse

'Discourse' is used in a range of meanings, varying from the analysis of linguistic regularities to the normative quality of discussions, as in the 'practical discourse' of Habermas. As this article sets out to assess the contribution of discourse analysis to the study of environmental politics, it must first clarify what is understood by 'discourse'.

In everyday life, the terms discourse and discussion are often used interchangeably, but analytically, the two should be distinguished. 'Discourse' is defined here as an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices. The 'discussion', in other words, is the object of analysis; discourse analysis sets out to trace a particular linguistic regularity that can be found in discussions or debates. This definition implies that the focus in this article will be on discourse in the Foucaultian, rather than in the Habermasian sense. Discourse analysis illuminates a particular

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discursive structure, that might not be immediately obvious to the people that contribute to the debate. Because a particular discourse has its own argumentative rationality, tracing discourses might also shed light on the democratic quality of discussion. The quality with which a discussion might be conducted, is referred to with a third concept: 'deliberation'. A discussion can have deliberative quality if it is inclusive, open, accountable, reciprocal and integer and when the various participants can learn through an iterative dialogue.

Discourse analysis, then, is the study of language-in-use (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001a). The analysis of discourse can be placed in the interpretative or social constructionist tradition in the social sciences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This tradition has an anti-essentialist ontology; it assumes the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities instead of a single reality, governed by immutable natural laws. Characteristically, the approach takes a critical stance towards 'truth' and puts emphasis on the communications through which knowledge is exchanged. Because reality is seen as socially constructed, the analysis of meaning becomes central; for interpretative environmental policy research, it is not an environmental phenomenon in itself that is important, but the way in which society makes sense of this phenomenon. Dying forests do not contain in themselves the reason for the public attention and concern they receive. The fact that they do receive this attention at a specific place and time cannot be deduced from a natural-scientific analysis of its urgency, but from the symbols and experiences that govern the way people think and act (Beck, 1995, p. 47; Hajer, 1995). Considering reality as a socially constructed phenomenon also implies attention for the specific situational logic; what is the historical, cultural and political context in which a particular account of 'truth' arises?

The Appeal of Discourse Analysis

One reason why this social constructionist approach has some appeal to researchers of environmental policy and politics might be that it appreciates the messy and complex interactions that make up the environmental policy process, as Richardson & Sharp (2001, p. 194) observe. Concepts, such as sustainable development or the precautionary principle, are not and cannot simply be imposed in a top-down way, but are continuously contested in a struggle about their meaning, interpretation and implementation. In trying to make sense of this struggle, discourse analysis has three particular strengths; the capacity to reveal the role of language in politics, to reveal the embeddedness of language in practice and to illuminate mechanisms and answer 'how questions'.

The basic assumption of discourse analysis is that language profoundly shapes one's view of the world and reality, instead of being only a neutral medium mirroring it. The use of metaphors—seeing something in terms of something else, bringing out the 'thisness' of a that or the 'thatness' of a this (Burke, 1969, p. 247)—is a case in point. It matters whether the environment is discussed in terms of the spaceship-ness of the Earth, the greenhouse-ness of climate change, or the disease-ness of pollution (Myerson & Rydin, 1996, p. 25). Environmental discussion can lead to the revision of rules, the enactment of laws or the creation of institutions—but underlying these visible changes, there is the creation, thickening or discarding of meanings. Environmental arguments might seem factual and scientific, but they are also meaningful, suggestive and atmospheric.

The meanings affect the outcomes, laws and institutions and indeed become the context in which the environment can be discussed (Myerson & Rydin, 1996, 4).

However, these meanings do not emerge 'out of the blue', but come into politics channelled through a particular set of operational routines and mutually accepted rules and norms that give coherence to social life. Language does not simply 'float' in society, but should be related to the particular practices in which it is employed (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Forester, 1999), as the definition given above already implies. Thus, when the first strength of discourse analysis is its capacity to illuminate the central role of language in politics, its second strength is to reveal the embeddedness of language in practice.

Nature has to be rendered linguistically intelligible. Without such an interpretative process it would be hard to imagine problem-solving at all, because actors would have to return to first principles continually (Dryzek, 1997, p. 8). However, the fact that actors debate nature in shared terms does not mean that they understand each other. Actors use simple storylines as 'short hand' in discussions, assuming that the other will understand what they mean. The assumption of mutual understanding, however widespread, is often false, concealing discursive complexity. Even when actors share a specific set of storylines, they might interpret the meaning of these storylines rather differently. Interestingly enough, actors that can be proven not to fully understand each other can still produce meaningful political interventions. Precisely the effect of misunderstanding can be very functional for creating a political coalition (Hajer, 1995).

The study of discourse also allows one to see how a diversity of actors actively try to influence the definition of the problem. This is another reason why discourse analysis might have come to fulfil such a prominent role in the study of environmental politics and policy. After all, the number of people involved in finding solutions to environmental problems, indeed in order to first get at a deep understanding of what the problem 'really' is, is characteristically high in environmental policy making. Various studies have shown how distinct actors exercise power through trying to impose a particular frame or discourse onto a discussion. So discourse analysis should not be understood as a type of analysis in which actors do not play an important role. Quite the contrary, they are actively 'positioning' themselves and others drawing on discursive categories.

This brings out the third strength of discourse analysis; its capacity to answer 'how' questions. The analysis of discourses can help to illuminate why certain definitions do or do not catch on at a particular place and time and to explain the mechanisms by which a policy does or does not come about. Litfin, for example, describes in *Ozone discourses* how the discursive approach regards international regimes as a localization of power/knowledges, each regime providing an arena for contestation among contending discourses. Because the regime is not simply treated as a dependent variable, discourse analysis is better able to ask how regimes work and what they do. This approach is particularly promising for issues in which the framing of information is decisive, as is often the case with environmental problems (Litfin, 1994, p. 190).

What discourse analysis can do is trace how the 'precautionary principle' first emerged as a key policy principle and how its meaning subsequently evolved as it was moulded by institutional settings and through the application on particular cases. Here discourse analysis would insist that the meaning of the policy principle never solidifies, but is constantly the object of political contestation. This politics of meaning, applied to the precautionary principle, shows how politics

is conducted, and how different actors actively position themselves in such a context (cf. e.g. Dratwa, 2002).

The Contribution to the Study of Environmental Politics

Having sketched briefly the strengths of discourse analysis in general, the focus will turn more specifically on the ways in which discourse analysis could contribute to the study of environmental politics.

The first contribution of discourse analysis to this field lies in the appreciation of nature as a contested notion. McKibben (1990) wrote in *The end of nature* about nature as the almost sacral counterpart of society, virgin-like and untouched. He lamented the fact that nature was becoming more and more humanized and that the idea of nature as 'not-us' would not be able to survive pollution on a global scale. One could pit this view of nature against Donna Haraway's argument that nature is to be seen as essentially a cultural artefact. 'Our' relations with 'nature' might be imagined as a social engagement with a being who is neither 'it', 'you', 'thou', 'he', 'she', nor 'they' in relation to us (Haraway, 1991, p. 3). It is this replacement of naïve realism by an appreciation of the fact that nature is culturally invented and reinvented, for which discourse analysis is essential. Because the concept 'nature' leaps to the eye, language plays an even bigger role in 'the' environmental debate than it does for other topics of societal concern. Nature is not something 'out there', but a culturally appropriated concept, a norm, a counter-image, a memory, a Utopia. When someone talks about nature, the question is 'which nature?' (Beck, 1995, pp. 36–38)—and, it might be added, 'whose nature?'. Thus, whereas social theory used to rely on the claimed logic of nature, discourse analysis can be used to focus instead on the rhetorics of nature (Bennett & Chaloupka, 1993, p. xii). This means a replacement of the naïve realism of Mc Kibben *et al.* in favour of a 'politics of nature' perspective, as employed by Latour (2004). Latour abandons both the notion of nature as an independent entity obeying its own laws and the privileged authority of scientists and experts to represent this entity. He claims that the presentation of nature as an external object, understandable only for the experts, has served as a dogma, thereby limiting the options for human action. In the new post-modern metaphysics that Latour pleads for, facts and values, morality and reality, science and politics should be seen as inseparable. Nature would then become an essentially negotiable concept, that can be represented not only by scientists, but also by poets, architects, farmers and laymen.

In a similar vain discourse analysts in the field of environmental policy making have shown how the discourse of natural resources has been imposed on environmental politics. In a careful analysis, Tim Luke, for example, has shown how the very broad political concern over environmental decline was channelled into the 'three R's' of resources, recreation and risk (Luke, 1999). To be sure, this is a type of finding that is reminiscent of what others had come up with using other tools (cf., for example, the excellent historical work of Donald Worster (1992). But the contribution of discourse analysis here is to show how this discourse then subsequently starts to institutionalize, in Luke's case in university curricula for MAs in environmental studies.

Secondly, discourses shape what can and cannot be thought, delimit the range of policy options and thereby serve as precursors to policy outcomes (Keller & Poferl, 1998; Litfin, 1994, p. 37). Killingsworth & Palmer (1992) identified

in *Ecospeak* a distinctive language of ecological campaigning and consciousness. Whereas these authors tended to see ecospeak as freezing conflict, preventing argument and leaving environmentalists as outsiders, Myerson & Rydin (1996) took the analysis of nature as rhetorics a step further. Their 'environet' both extended and revised the story of ecospeak. Killingsworth & Palmer viewed environmental issues as unresolvable because of the use of polarizing tactics and over-simple reports of enmities; Myerson & Rydin state that environmental debates are unresolvable because of the diversity of argument and underline that this unresolvability has both negative and positive qualities (Myerson & Rydin, 1996, p. 30). Harré *et al.* (1999) analyse the language of environmentalism as Greenspeak. Greenspeak consists of a multitude of different and often divergent positions, currents and views, so that no common message can be discerned. However, one common thread can be discerned in this multi-voiced, ever-changing reality of discourses; a doctrine of life as an artform, a conception of a rightness in the way human life must fit in as part of nature (Harré *et al.*, 1999, pp. 185–187).

In trying to make sense of the different dialects of Ecospeak, discourse analysis can be a powerful tool. Language has the capacity to make politics, to create signs and symbols that shift power balances, to render events harmless or, on the contrary, to create political conflict. The analysis of structures in 'texts' (in the broadest sense) can help to bring this out and thus demystify ecospeak.

A range of other studies has shown how environmental policy making is dominated by particular discourses that provided a bias both in conceptualizing the policy problem at hand as well as the solutions that can be conceived for those problems (Jensen & Richardson, 2004; Pal, 1995).

It is one of the lasting contributions of discourse analysis to have illuminated the shifting dominance of particular discourses in environmental politics. It is intriguing that this often led to a critique of cynicism. So the analysis of ecospeak or, arguably less provoking, of the emergence of ecological modernization as the dominant way of thinking in the late 1980s and early 1990s was seen as 'not helpful' by many policy makers who battled for the implementation of all sorts of measures that were based on that footing. Without going into the debate as to what is the proper role of academia *vis-à-vis* the policy-making world, this seems a misguided critique as the late 1990s showed how citizens not so much opposed eco-modernist governmental policies but conceived of the environmental problem in different, more culturally loaded terms. They mobilized on themes such as the destruction of the countryside, the unresolved issue of airport nuisance (smell, sounds, traffic) which actually exposed the limits of an eco-modernist approach to environmental policy. Furthermore, governments could be seen to strengthen the ties between eco-modernist thinking and neo-liberal economic discourse (see, for this, the important paper by Oels, 2005).

The third area of innovation is the analysis of discourse as cultural politics, including, among other things, the analysis of bias in the discourses and practices through which policy is made (Hajer, 1996). Dryzek describes a discourse as a shared way of apprehending the world, enabling those who subscribe to it to put bits of information together in coherent accounts. The assumptions, judgements and contentions on which each discourse rests, provide the basic terms for analyses and debates (Dryzek, 1997, p. 8). He is keen to emphasize that powerful actors who see their interests threatened by established or emerging

discourses, will try to override developments at the level of discourse. This does not necessarily mean that they will simply resist environmental values. Indeed, a more effective strategy for recalcitrant actors will be to cloak themselves in the language of environmentalism. The concept of 'sustainable development' and its potential commitment to economic growth is probably the example most often referred to (Dryzek, 1997, p. 11). The terms according to which particular issues are discussed, define the way in which the topic is experienced and thereby also the perceived possibilities to act. For example, Macnaghten & Urry (1998, cf. Macnaghten, 2003) suggest that the lack of any coherent public response to the increasing awareness of environmental risk can be explained by the terms in which 'the environment' is discussed. The storyline of 'global nature' in particular would lack the connection with concerns of everyday life and thereby have a disempowering effect.

The fourth contribution of discourse analysis lies in the application of Foucault's concept of governmentality to the study of environmental politics. In the light of this concept, eco-speak is no longer 'innocent', but can be seen as yet another attempt to discipline society. Governmentality is used by Foucault to identify and qualify the emergence of the modern deployment of power along three axes: institutional centralization around governmental agencies, the emergence of new instrumental knowledge and the diffusion of power effects over society as a whole. The concept of governmentality is particularly apt to analyse eco-speak, because it deals with issues of security, techniques to control the population and new forms of knowledge (Darier, 1999, pp. 21–22). Chaloupka & McGreggor Cawley argue that nature has been the preferred sign to justify authority for ages; the language of nature and Other implies inevitability, while at the same time covering efforts to manage a relationship with an Other (in Bennett & Chaloupka, 1993, p. 5). It is clear that universities play a complicated role in this process, as power and knowledge are seen as fundamentally intertwined—Foucault himself would probably protest against any distinction between power and knowledge at all (see, for example, Foucault, 1980). As Luke points out (in Fischer & Hajer, 1999, pp. 103–106) university is both the place where new representations of the environment are generated and the home base for the many scientific disciplines that study 'nature' in its various meanings. By the discourses of the university, the environment is reframed as a highly complex system that can be understood only by experts. This can lead to the smothering of societal dispute by scientific argumentation, as, for example, Keulartz notes in his criticism of the nature development discourse (in Fischer & Hajer, 1999). Incidentally, others have found that the input of expertise might, under other conditions actually facilitate public debate (Hajer, 2005). Furthermore, governmentality exposes the way in which responses to environmental crises should also be explained in terms of the particular ideas about the respective responsibilities of government and citizens. Indeed, in many domains of the broader 'politics of life' one can see how the failure of the environmental politics of the welfare state (e.g. 'science-based policy making') now lead to a shift in responsibility whereby the state 'empowers' the individual citizen to make choices based on good information provided by the state. So whereas in the domain of health a discourse of the 'unhealthy Western lifestyle' has moved towards an individualized monitoring of health risks (with all practices that come with it, such as fitness, healthy food and self-monitoring), the environmental sphere sees the emergence of individualization of food risks through the

introduction of labelling and web-based information services. A governmentality approach can help explain how such practices come about and how they can function as a society broad discourse.

Discourse and Power

Having read about the contributions of discourse analysis to the study of environmental politics, one might be tempted to ask whether identifying greenspeak or analysing the environet can actually help to improve environmental politics. Or, more precisely, can discourse analysis sharpen practical engagement with environmental policy making? At first sight, the answer to this question seems negative. As discourse analysis acknowledges no extra discursive foundations to determine what is true, right or good, it could easily end up in a situation where 'anything goes'.

This criticism could apply to both Habermasian and Foucaultian approaches, but for the former, the agenda seems more obvious. As this approach aims at a societal rationalization by engaging in practical discourse, it seems crucial to find a way to represent 'nature' in the discursive debate (see, for example, Eckersley, 1999; Habermas himself objected to bringing nature into the moral fold and confined questions of morality to communicative competent subjects). Moreover, discourse in the Habermasian sense has an explicitly normative character and could thus provide a yard-stick of societal environmental debates. The same does not hold for the definition of discourse here, as it is purely descriptive/analytical, whereas the term 'deliberation' is reserved to refer to the quality with which a discussion may be conducted.

In contrast to Habermas, Foucault did not want to offer any rules to judge the deliberative quality of a discourse (Habermas has criticized him for expressing validity only in terms of power, see Habermas, 1994). That is not too surprising, as Foucault sought not to provide a judgement about 'what should be done', but to trace the development of social discourses during the modern era (cf. Hajer, 1995; Richardson & Sharp, 2001). Foucaultian approaches of discourse analysis therefore generate only limited policy recommendations. The real contribution of this approach is not to be found in its prescriptive force, but in the ability to trace the discursive power struggles underlying environmental politics. It allows one to see environmental politics both as a process that seeks to generate an answer to a real world problem, and as a critical struggle where conflicts between discourses may be exacerbated, sidestepped or resolved (Richardson, 1995).

Foucaultian approaches of discourse analysis regard power and knowledge as fundamentally intertwined. Creating a joint understanding of the world, developing knowledge following particular conceptual guidelines is power. This idea that power is examined in creating the very terms with which politics is conducted should not stand in the way of an analysis of strategic behaviour. The type of discourse analysis advocated here might be looking for regularities in the terms that are employed in a discussion, but it does so in the awareness that it is actors that utter statements and that those actors might do so with certain tactical or strategic goals in mind. The point is, first, not to reduce politics to that strategic behaviour. That would assume a much more sovereign subject than seems realistic. There are discursive categories that have an 'epistemic' quality, that are inaccessible to subjects but that nevertheless steer them in their

thinking. Secondly, one can look at the particular moments at which discursive regularities or routines are broken up. Such 'dislocations' (cf. Howarth, 2000) are prime moments of power struggle. One might, for example, look at sudden crises like the Foot and Mouth Disease or the unrest of BSE and beef in this way. The question then is how such conflicts are subsequently performed (see Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Depending on the meanings that people are able to give to a particular incident, this incident might develop the 'forcings' that make that previously stable policy discourses lose legitimacy and need to be rethought and revised. The power then is not simply in the discourse, but in the performance of a conflict, in the particular way in which actors mobilize discourses and reconnect the previously unconnected.

Finally, if realities are constituted through discourse, then discourse analysis ultimately raises an institutional issue. What institutional practices can be envisaged to conduct debates in such a way that this reality construction can take place in a more democratic way? Discourse analysis can help to expose how society is shaped by and through discursive interaction. For example, emblematic issues can come to guide institutional reform. The anti-fundamentalist stance, acknowledging rhetorics as essential for democratic pluralism, implies that society can, in principle, be shaped differently. Szerszynski *et al.* (2003, p. 10) underline that the seemingly static ideas of nature and the nature–culture relationship that seem to dominate the domains of planning and environmental policy, are complemented 'backstage' by a tacit knowledge of the improvised, performed character of nature–culture. However, this awareness is not brought to the fore, so that planners can control, forecast and act upon a stable and predictable nature. Acknowledging the performative character of nature–culture would imply a demand for new institutional arrangements. The environmental domain stands under the sign of a moral call, as a symbolic marker guiding deliberation, but there is a marked difference in how one relates to this call.

The institutional question becomes all the more pressing, as the political field is changing. Solutions for pressing environmental problems cannot be found within the boundaries of the sovereign nation-state, forcing established institutions to take part in transnational networks of governance in which power is dispersed. Environmental debates often take place in a situation of institutional ambiguity, in which there are no generally accepted rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures are to be agreed upon. The turmoil around the Brent Spar is a case in point. Though the formal decision to sink the Brent Spar had been approved by the British Minister of Energy in a fully legitimate way, it soon turned out that the issue came to be seen as a transnational concern. Pressure groups and social movements argued that the British government did not have the monopoly to decide, circumventing the state by new strategies like a consumer boycott. The media were not simply representing the battle about the Brent Spar; instead this formed a key area of struggle—the crisis cannot be explained without taking into account the images of tiny helicopters with which the activists managed to capture the buoy. The Brent Spar is a telling example of how the view of nature as a contested notion cannot be separated from the negotiations about the rules of the institutional game (cf. Hajer, 2003).

As the units within which policy has to be made coincide ever less with the constitutionally defined settings, policy making becomes a site of cultural politics, leading people to reflect on who they are and what they want. The polity becomes

a discursive construction, established via the deliberation of shared problems. The debates about environmental problems have been increasingly enacted on the international and transnational level and discourse analysis has followed the actors. Studies into national discourse have been complemented with comparative studies; studies comparing the discourse of nation-states have been complemented with the study of global discourses and finally the focus has shifted from global discourses to transnational discourses.[1] Given the changing nature of policy making, discourse analysts are well equipped to identify the new sites of politics and analyse the political dynamics therein.

Notes

1. Cf., for example, the work in progress as part of the EU-funded PAGANINI project, www.paganini-project.net.

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