

REVISITING THE POLITICS OF THE EARTH

By Dr Nicole Curato

Introduction


This year marks the fifteenth year since the first publication of John Dryzek's *Politics of the Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1997; third edition forthcoming). Much has changed since then but much has also remained the same.

Much, for example, has changed as far as the study of environmental politics is concerned. Dryzek's work was pioneering in making sense of the earth's politics using a discourse approach. The book traced the evolution of four main environmental discourses – survivalism, environmental problem solving, sustainability and green radicalism – which included their contestations, overlaps and impact on institutional sites of decision-making and public consciousness. Today, it is not uncommon for researchers to use discourse as unit of analysis. Maurie Cohen, for example, has observed that consumption is moving away from the margins to the centre of ecological discourse, from being framed as a demographic issue of developing

countries with rampant population growth to placing accountability on resource-intensive lifestyles of wealthier nations.

Some use this approach to map the process of environmental policymaking. Berger et al have conducted a study on sustainable development and ecological modernization's influence in environmental policy making in industrialised countries and the role that power and influence play in that process. Discourse analysis has also provided certain necessary checks for environmentalists themselves. There has been a growing acknowledgment that EcoSpeak has lost its innocence, especially when its rhetorical strategies and simplified dichotomies are unpacked and its implications to knowledge production and collective action are analysed.

Why discourse analysis matters

More broadly, however, the *Politics of the Earth* has made a compelling case as to why discourse matters. Theoretically, 

it has made a clear argument for problematizing the ontology of nature – that nature itself is a contested term. It is not part of a reality that is simply out there to be found but a historicised, culturally-invented and constantly negotiated concept. Dryzek finds that the ontology of some discourses recognise the existence of ecosystems, others focus on its materiality (nothing more than brute matter), while some understand it to be a self-correcting entity governed by particular logics. All of these ways of understanding nature is linguistically-embedded, enabling subjects to put together different pieces of information to form a coherent narrative. It is this very process of constructing assumptions and storylines that facilitate policy debates and inform collective problem-solving. Theorists making a similar point include Donna Haraway who considers nature as a cultural artefact and Bruno Latour who challenges the dogmatic scientism of experts that claim to have authoritative understanding of the subject.

Methodologically, Dryzek's approach has provided a reasonable analytical framework in conducting systematic discourse analysis. Although it has emerged as one of the trendiest research methods in sociology, media and cultural studies, there has been a relative shortage of prescribed methodological procedures in conducting discourse analysis. Perhaps this is because laying down a methodological outline itself deviates from discourse analysis's spirit of celebrating the plurality and dynamism of linguistic representation. Another reason could be related to the seemingly taken for granted presupposition that discourse analysis is

necessarily historical and genealogical in the Foucauldian sense, therefore, researchers using this methodology are automatically committing to these strategies of data gathering analysis.

Dryzek's work presents a reasonable research strategy. While his approach is indeed historical, he develops a set of "questions to ask about discourses" which facilitates a systematic, rigorous and theoretically-informed approach in tracing and comparing the evolution of environmental discourses. His questions relate to issues of ontology, assumptions about natural relationships, agents and their motives as well as key metaphors and devices. With such an approach, Dryzek was able to map the decline of "industrialism" as a discourse which pertains to the view that material well-being is promoted through the growth in quantity of goods and services provided by industrialisation to the emergence of a wide range of contesting and overlapping environmental (though not exclusively environmentalist) discourses which has influenced policy, governance and popular understandings in varying degrees.

Politically, discourse analysis reveals the deliberative rationality of particular worldviews. It lends insight into the extent to which political discussions and decision-making are democratic, inclusive, public-spirited, transparent and consequential. For deliberative democrats, a standard for a "good" discourse relates to its ability for self-correction or revision of original preferences should new evidence or more reasonable arguments surface. It is precisely because discourses are not static but are continuously evolving that



such allows them to change through discussions in the public sphere, whether conducted face-to-face or through mediating technologies. Dryzek and Stevenson's more recent work on earth systems governance has provided some indication on how some international forums tackling climate change have provided avenues that host inclusive and authentic deliberations on environmental issues while there are those that remain driven by self-interested bargaining and tit-for-tat negotiations, if not outright coercion.

It is the aim of normative theorists and practitioners of deliberation to make these sites more transparent, deliberative and responsive to the broader discourses in the public sphere. Dryzek takes the position that it is better for a discursive field such as environmental politics to welcome a plurality of discourses and be a part of its critical engagement, rather than have a field where there is a single dominant, if not hegemonic discourse which has not faced any sustained critical scrutiny. This latter is the case, for example, of the global financial markets before the crisis, where alternative views had not been meaningfully considered, thereby creating serious implications for the governance (or the lack of it) of financial markets. It is through contestation that discourses continue to evolve and imagine possibilities for the future.

The more things change, the more they remain the same?

Indeed, a lot has changed as far as research on environmental discourses is concerned but much has also remained

the same in practice. While environmental politics has been a site for vibrant contestation of discourses, engagement continues to be predominantly adversarial rather than deliberative. The US is a good example of this observation where, in spite of its vibrant civil society and creative environmental campaigns, it remains trapped in zero-sum conflicts between economic and environmental interests. Such zero-sum ontology only serves to limit the discursive field, deterring agents from exploring possibilities for problem-solving based on cooperation and inter-subjective agreement. It has been argued that basic governance and policy structures (including hostile party systems and antagonistic relationships between business mainstream and other stakeholders) continue to play an important role in creating sites for constructive and meaningful conversation among different discourses. In this context, it appears that ecological discourses need to broaden their reach and aim to re-constitute institutions established by an industrial society.

Note:

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