Cultural politics of climate change: constructing and contesting low-carbon subjects

Objectives

This programme of research aims to explore the cultural politics of climate change, which it is becoming clear are involved in shaping responses to climate change. Culture is understood here to be focused on the deep meanings and attachments surrounding everyday life in its broadest sense, and cultural politics thus about the construction and contestation of those meanings. Specifically the project explores the role of cultural subjectivities – the sorts of people that are constructed as part of this cultural political process. It does so in two distinct ways. First it explores the construction of specific sorts of "low-carbon subjects" that are oriented towards meeting the goals of decarbonisation. This aspect of the project can be understood as a focus on the governmentality of climate change, how it entails ways of shaping the daily practices of individuals, organisations and institutions, and the identities associated with those practices, in the pursuit of decarbonisation. Second it explores the character of the political conflicts over these attempts to construct such subjectivities, in order to contribute to our understanding of the political dynamics of responses to climate change. Specifically, it aims to explore how many of the political conflicts over climate change have at their heart deep cultural and emotional attachments to particular sorts of daily practice and related identities that are called into question by decarbonisation. The research explores the way in which these attachments generate resistance to climate change responses and thus create challenges for the pursuit of decarbonisation.

The programme thus aims to contribute to a number of existing debates. First, it aims to contribute to concrete policy and political processes around climate change governance. Second, it contributes to literatures elaborating the notion of and practices of governmentality in the climate change context by extending the empirical scope of such work, and by focusing on the political contestations surrounding these processes of subject formation. It contributes to literatures focused on the notion of "low-carbon transitions", by focusing on the political conflicts entailed in such transitions as well as on the centrality of the shaping of subjects – the sorts of identities and normalised daily practices that people and organisations engage in (e.g. Boykoff et al 2009). It contributes to literatures about discursive conflict both in general and around climate change by focusing on how these conflicts are rooted in deep affective attachments to particular subjectivities and their associated high-carbon practices that are threatened by the construction of low-carbon subjects, as well as the strategies for pursuing low-carbon subjects that therefore need to operate at the same affective level.

Context

There are three principal contexts for this research. First is the increasingly widespread understanding that responding adequately to climate change entails a broad socio-technical transformation (e.g. Pelling 2010; Homer-Dixon 2009; Kemp et al 2007). While most economists and in various technical disciplines working on this transformation have focused on technological change and innovation (e.g. Barrett 2009), in sociology, human geography, and amongst many political scientists, the focus has increasingly been on broader social transformations, particularly focused on their political economy (Newell & Paterson 2010). This is partly a recognition of the inadequacy of techno-centric responses,

but also because even responses focused on technology will have enormous social and political repercussions: a world not organised around fossil fuels will be a very different one, not only technologically, but in terms of social, economic and political organisation.

The proposed research makes two particular contributions to this literature on such low-carbon transitions. First, it focuses specifically on questions of politics which are largely absent from most of this literature (Shove & Walker 2007; Scrase & Smith 2009; Meadowcroft 2009), and where it has started to appear, political life is conceived in institutional terms (e.g. Kemp et al 2007; Smith et al 2010; Meadowcroft 2011) where key questions of power, authority and contestation are largely absent. The proposed research focuses on the political conflicts in the transition process.

The second contribution to this literature is the focus on subjectivity. While these transitions involve shifts at many interacting levels, questions regarding individual practices have perhaps received the least attention. Moreover, work that does this tends to be methodologically individualist and behaviouralist, treating individuals as atomistic subjects rather than parts of broad social systems (Shove 2010, 2012; Shove & Walker 2007; Hargreaves 2012). Shove in particular draws on the tradition within sociology of focusing on social practices and the subjectivities that underpin them, as a means to understanding how such practices become normalised (Shove 2003; also Hargreaves 2013). This is important to show the historical and structural production of the meanings and values attached to specific consumption practices that generate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and avoid treating them as "natural" expressions of individual identity or choice. The focus on practices and the sorts of subjectivities that sustain them is important for the proposed research. Nevertheless, as with the transitions literature, the proposed research will extend this analysis by focusing on the sorts of political conflicts that occur once established practices and their associated subjectivities are called into question.

The second context for this research is the literature that has emerged on "climate" or "carbon" governmentality (e.g. Paterson & Stripple 2010, 2012; Bäckstrand & Lövbrand 2006; Oels 2005; Lövbrand & Stripple 2011). This literature takes its inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault (2007) and a range of authors who have developed his notion of governmentality (e.g. Dean 1999; Miller & Rose 2008). This literature conceptualises governance as precisely operating through the "conduct of conduct", and thus through the creation of specific types of political subject oriented towards acting in the "correct" manner. There is an emerging literature on this subject but much work still to do to explore fully the character of these governance initiatives as they develop, and in particular the nature of the cultural political conflicts they reveal.

The third context for this research is literatures on discourse conflict (e.g. Hajer 1995; Dryzek 1999; Stevenson & Dryzek 2012) in political life, especially in environmental politics, and the related literature on processes of depoliticisation and repoliticisation (Barry 2002; Flyvbjerg 1998). This research maps usefully the character of environmental politics, and in climate change the best representative is perhaps in Hulme (2009). It tends however to regard such discourses as ideologies – as sets of ideas that animate political life and whose interaction operates at the level of debate and explicit discourse. However, recent advances in the neurosciences have allowed social theorists to explore the central role that affective processes play in political discourse and demonstrate that emotive and visceral dimensions can often be the core mechanisms that

ensure which of the many contending perspectives are victorious in a given public debate (Connolly 2002; Gunster 2006, 2007b; Lakoff 2009; Saurette & Gunster 2011; Saurette & Trevenen 2013; Westen 2008). The proposed research seeks to apply these insights to climate change politics by tracking how the discursive contests over climate change politics are shaped by affective investments in high-carbon practices (e.g. driving, flying, air-conditioning) that are called into question by the pursuit of a low-carbon transition, as well as the affective dimensions of political mobilisation to address those practices – disgust with "excessive consumerism", for example. In other words, it seeks to explore how contending ideological representations of climate change policy employ and manage the visceral hopes and fears triggered by the threat that climate change, and climate change policies, pose to established practices and the subjectivities associated with them.

Methodology
The research will proceed through four specific projects. These are designed to approach the focus of the programme of research in a variety of complementary ways. The research approach is specifically to identify and explore diverse sites which involve both attempts to shape cultural subjectivities and cultural-political contestation over climate change governance, on the basis that the diversity will enable the exploration of such processes in greater breadth than would be possible by focusing only on a single site. Between them they are designed to cover a range of types of subjects (individuals, companies, city authorities, planners) who both seek to govern others in the pursuit of a low-carbon society, and whose activities are themselves shaped by the political contestations that arise in that pursuit. The research will draw together conclusions and comparisons across the sites via regular team meetings and periodic workshops across the individual projects.

Project one (years 1-3)
An analysis of the emerging projects of "carbon governmentality" as they focus on the construction of particular sorts of subject. These are a range of initiatives that focus on shaping subjects in the pursuit of low-carbon development. Examples include carbon footprinting, carbon offsetting, and carbon dieting. Preliminary analysis of some of these initiatives has been published in Paterson & Stripple (2010; 2012). This research so far has focused on a number of key initiatives, and has also only focused on their logic as governing initiatives – how they seek to shape subjects towards a low-carbon society. The research will extend this analysis by:
• developing a more systematic database of these efforts at carbon governmentality. The project will start with collecting documentary data about existing projects, and coding that data according to a range of elements elaborated in existing accounts of governmentality (see Paterson & Stripple 2010), specifically their fields of visibility (what they make visible and invisible), their technical elements (how they seek to effect governing), the forms of knowledge they presuppose and create, and the types of subject they seek to create. This database will be used to build a fuller picture of the patterns of carbon governmentalities than can be generated out of the case study work so far undertaken.
• focusing more systematically on the question of how the subjects that the initiatives seek to shape are contested: how in other words their governing logic is resisted. This will involve collection and discourse analysis of data concerning the public debate

surrounding these initiatives, specifically via media coverage, academic discussion, campaigns for and against such initiatives, and micro-level resistance among those engaging the initiatives.

Project two (years 1-4)

A project focused on the conflicts over efforts by the City of Ottawa to develop a strategy for reducing the city's greenhouse gas emissions. In early 2013 the City relaunched a process of developing such a strategy. The City has a longer history of periodically developing climate change plans, but not of systematic implementation. This project aims to contextualise, track and chart the development of this strategy as it unfolds, focused on the cultural character of the conflicts it generates and the types of subjectivity (e.g. car driver, responsible mother or father, city planner, politician, property developer, suburban commuter, inner-city resident) involved. It will focus on the sources of political opposition to such efforts, and the dynamics that unfold from this contestation.

Previous research on cities and climate change (e.g. Newman & Kenworthy 1999; Bulkeley & Betsill 2005), as well as prior work carried out with Ecology Ottawa (Ecology Ottawa 2009; Paterson 2010a) indicates the likely key empirical focuses of these conflicts and thus the research. The research will focus in particular on the areas of:

- transport provision, specifically the historical priority given in such provision to automobiles over other modes, and the shifts implied by addressing GHG emissions;
- planning processes, notably around the historical pattern of low-density suburban development ("sprawl") and attempts to shift to higher-density urban forms;
- a range of policies to address energy production and use in the city, with for example a current proposal to develop financial support by the city for energy efficiency retrofits, and projects to develop renewable energy generation within the city boundary;
- community-based campaigns by Ecology Ottawa that seek to engage people at neighbourhood level in a range of GHG reduction initiatives on the consumption side.

These conflicts will be situated in the context of the history of previous climate policy attempts in Ottawa, as well as the broader politics and history of urban planning.

There are no existing studies of climate change politics at the city level in Ottawa. There are some commentaries by participants in Ottawa's political life who have an interest in climate change (Doucet 2007), and some broader work on sustainable development focused on Ottawa (Juillet & Andrew 1999). The more general literature on Ottawa city politics make at best only tangential references to climate change (e.g. Chattopadhyay & Paquet 2011). There is however a very substantial literature on the role of cities in climate change politics (e.g. Bulkeley & Betsill 2005; Kern & Bulkeley 2009; Lee 2012; Bulkeley et al 2011), including specific work on Canadian cities (Gore 2010; Gore et al 2012) on which this project will draw heavily and to which it will contribute. This project will be connected to such existing work through participation in the INCUT network (Urban Low Carbon Transitions: A Comparative International Network), an existing international research network on cities and climate change policy funded by the ESRC (UK), in which participation is already approved.

Project three (years 2-4)

A project on the cultural politics underpinning the politicised debates around climate change science and policy, focused on such debates in Canada. While there is a substantial literature on the politics of "climate scepticism" (Jacques et al 2008; Washington et al 2011; Oreskes & Conway 2011), it tends to be focused on either simply debunking sceptic claims, or on the political economy of relationships between climate sceptics, neo-conservative thinktanks and fossil fuel interests. This is clearly an important dimension to this aspect of climate politics but the proposed research complements this work by using new advances in our understanding of the affective and emotive dimensions of political discourse. Specifically, project three will focus on two main aspects of this. First, it will examine the specific ways in which organizations that deny the need to create climate change policy do not merely deny the reality of climate change, but also actively work on the "visceral level" by framing climate change policy as an existential threat to the many deeply embedded affective investments in a high-carbon "way of life". Second, it will also explore the degree to which advocates of climate change policy have, or have not, employed affectively resonant strategies. The hypothesis is that climate change deniers have worked extensively on this terrain, whereas climate change policy advocates have largely ignored it, focusing on providing more and more data and evidence rather than addressing the visceral hopes and fears of the broad citizenry.

There has been little work examining this dimension, with the exception of Lahsen (2007), Norgaard (2011), and perhaps Kahan et al (2011), although the latter tends to reduce the question of culture to one of "values", a more limited concept than the affective account developed in this project. This project will largely focus on the Canadian context – partially as a way of balancing the fact that existing literature is mostly focused on the US. However, a second reason for focusing on the Canadian case is that, as two of the researchers on this project have demonstrated in other work research, both contemporary Canadian conservative discourse (Saurette & Gunster 2011; Saurette & Gunster 2013; Saurette & Gordon 2013), and the contemporary Canadian climate change debate (Gunster 2010), display a variety of important differences with their US comparators.

Project four (years 2-4)

A project focused on the political-discursive character of the explosion of forms of popular cultural expression around climate change, notably in literature, film, music, and video games. These can be understood as sites at which malaise about both climate change itself and responses to it are communicated in "apolitical" settings, but which are important to generating and sustaining specific affective responses to particular initiatives to address climate change.

Preliminary analysis suggests a number of ways that these popular cultural forms both entail constructions and contestations of subjectivities over climate change. For example some operate through the fear generated by climate change-related disasters (e.g. *The Road*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Mother of Storms*, *Ultimatum*), often within the genres of either dystopian fiction or crime thrillers. Others present subjects dealing in more subtle ways with the complexities of a climate-changed world (e.g. *The Carbon Diaries, Oryx and Crake*), while others still express climate denial positions, where the subject portrayed is that of the manipulative scientist or environmentalist (*State of Fear*). This

project will involve developing a more systematic typology and analysis of these subjectivities, as well as of the public debate generated around these cultural products.

Examining the subjectivities represented in popular culture adds a key dimension to the analysis in so far as the characters in movies and novels provide a cultural repertoire for discussing political options and the ethical implications of particular stances in response to climate change. Analysing these cultural forms will extend earlier work on the politics of movies (Dalby 2008b) and novels (Dalby 2010d) in the context of contemporary geopolitics in the larger culture of responses to climate change (Dalby 2013b).