

**Discursive Practices in the Making and
Unmaking of Climate Change:
Modern vs. Traditional Knowledge**

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“But we are not powerless victims. Indigenous Peoples are determined to remain connected to the land, and sufficiently resilient to adapt to changing natural forces as we have for centuries.”¹

“We need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with what the science requires. All countries must play a part, based on common but differentiated responsibilities”²

Anthropogenic climate change has become one of the most important challenges facing the international community on multiple fronts. Scientists, politicians, and many social organizations throughout the world agree that this challenge needs to be dealt with on a global scale rather than on a national level. Climate change is also a complex term which is identified not only with the scientific understanding of climatic alterations, but also with a range of social, political, and economic considerations. A Foucauldian discourse analysis provides a useful framework in addressing the complexity of the global climate change discourse. A discursive approach to understanding this process demonstrates the ways in which the dominant ecological narrative, promulgated by the United Nations, subsumes alternative ecological perspectives, such as that of the Aboriginal Peoples, through the strategic marginalization of the Aboriginal knowledge systems within the dominant discourse. Furthermore, this process reproduces a conceptual dichotomy between nature and culture. I will argue that the dominant paradigm of binary opposition between humans and their environment needs to be fundamentally questioned because it is an obstacle to the creation of a more comprehensive approach to address the challenge of anthropogenic climate change. We need re-conceptualize the very nature of the relationship between humans and nature.

Politics of climate change

Climate change is a complex term which assumes different meanings within different disciplines and their corresponding discourses. From a strictly positivist scientific perspective the term “climate change” encompasses all forms of climatic inconsistency and is “often used in a more restricted sense, to denote a significant change (such as a change having important economic, environmental and social effects) in the mean values of a meteorological element (in particular temperature or amount of precipitation) in the course of a certain period of time, where the means are taken over periods of the order of a decade or longer.”³ An important aspect of this definition is the inclusion of economic and social dimensions in what would otherwise appear simply as a meteorological/climatic problem. It is thus implied that climate science does not exist outside of the social and economic domains of the human civilization. And yet, this definition does not allude to anything debatable or concerning about the change in “meteorological elements”.

Climate change does become a problematic notion when embedded in a more political discourse which is evident in the United Nation's definition of climate change: "[c]limate change" means a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods." ⁴ The focal point of the climatic phenomenon becomes the anthropogenic activity. Thus climate change is constituted as a result of human activity and therefore within human control. This reasoning becomes the foundation of a hegemonic environmental narrative which defines climate changes as manageable, governable, and subjugated to the practices of science and related policy.

According to Angela Oels, the term "climate change" was first produced in 1980s by concerned scientists who restricted the term to the domain of the scientific expertise and political authority of the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC) – both represent supranational initiatives, authorized by governments to produce solutions for managing the challenge of anthropogenic climate change on national levels. ⁵ An important consequence of this process is that a certain type of *rational* knowledge and corresponding *optimal* policy strategies were legitimized within the international governing community. ⁶ This discourse and its accompanying prescriptive and regulatory practices (such as limiting carbon emissions, waste management, carbon taxes, etc.) have laid the foundations of the contemporary politics of climate change which prioritize liberal democratic values of market growth and active government involvement in the process of managing and/or mitigating the effects of climate change.

These principles are explicitly maintained by the leading sociologist Anthony Giddens, who proposes a project for an effective climate change policy framework which focuses on a number of key Western democracies. ⁷ The objective of this project is to address the challenges of climate change in a specific political context, namely the progressive liberal democratic state, through practical and normative solutions on a state level. ⁸ The focus is on the impact of climate change on the Western democracies and thus it excludes the rest of the world from a problem which in reality affects everyone, through and beyond national borders. Furthermore, this particular policy project is aligned with and firmly supporting the authority of the IPCC as a leading actor in the legitimate decision making process regarding climate change science and corresponding policy.

The above mentioned arguments outline in a general sense the hegemonic discourse on climate change in which it is assumed that the liberal democratic state can effectively respond

to this challenge by producing and implementing policies informed by rational scientific knowledge. Thus, the politics of climate change render the natural environment governable both by reason and by state authority. Luke's discussion on "green governmentality" provides further insightful and relevant interpretation of this discourse.⁹ Luke perceives it as a system of geo - power, eco - knowledge, and enviro - disciplines.¹⁰ Geopower is essentially related to the concept of environmental security loosely connecting a range of issues, such as energy security, social justice, and risk management, all of which constitute a crucial element in the national environmental policy projects in the liberal democratic states.¹¹ Eco-knowledge is shaped by discourses which seek to contain, but not limit, economic growth. This objective is shaped around the idea of managing effectively natural resource systems and ecosystem services. Here the functioning of the environment is perceived exclusively in economic and instrumental terms. Lastly, enviro - disciplines shape particular social behavior in line with the dominant discourse.¹²

Thus the current politics of climate change is embedded in a systemic discourse which is defined by the legitimization of a certain type of knowledge and the active role of the state as a producer of policies which institutionalize, regulate, and discipline a certain behavioral response to climate change. In order to better understand the depth of the implications of this discourse, it is important to focus on some of the less explicit discursive practices embedded within it. On one hand, the hegemonic environmental discourse effectively marginalizes alternative paradigms, such as that of the Aboriginal Peoples, through their strategic incorporation within the dominant deliberative institutions like the UN. In addition, a conceptual dichotomy between culture and the nature is being (re)produced within the dominant paradigm. This dichotomy constitutes an ontological and epistemological dualism between nature and culture which becomes problematic in the context of a newly emerging environmental paradigm.

Theorizing climate change from a discursive perspective

Arturo Escobar's discourse analysis of the construction of the term biodiversity exposes a system of discursive practices that articulate a new relationship between nature and society in global contexts of science, cultures, and economies.¹³ I argue that the concept of biodiversity is in fact contained within the climate change discourse and Escobar's ideas can be extended to explain and deconstruct the discursive formation of the climate change master narrative. Following Escobar's analytical model, the hegemonic ecological narrative can be perceived as a historic discourse which has systematically produced an institutional apparatus that

organizes the production of forms of knowledge and types of power (manifested in the IPCC for example). The network analogy, used by Escobar in illustrating the power structure which shapes the production of the biodiversity master narrative, is useful in understanding the institutional structure that dominates the climate change discourse. International institutions, such as the UN and its specific sub-institutions, northern NGOs, social movements, and academic and intergovernmental panels are all components of a broad institutional network which organizes and produces knowledge and types of power, linking them through concrete strategies and programs such as the Kyoto Protocol for example.¹⁴

In addition, Escobar's discourse analysis goes further by acknowledging the importance of the formation of alternative discourses, or counter-hegemonic narratives, which are crucial in conceptualizing a broader picture of the functioning of the hegemonic ecological narrative. The resistance to the dominant eco-paradigm is ever - increasing, complex and plays an important role in the strategies utilized by the dominant narrative to maintain its own legitimacy. The discourses of resistance are present within a variety of global and local environmentally conscious movements. The discussions of the economic, technological and managerial strategies for containing climate change become more and more prevalent in the dominant market-oriented, state-centered master narrative. At the same time, however, oppositional movements do occur, forming around alternative visions about the ways in which climate change should be perceived and addressed.

This parallel process takes place in the social organization of mostly marginalized segments of the global society, such as Aboriginal Peoples, southern NGOs, and radical environmentalist groups. As Escobar argues, special attention should be given to the ever increasing number of new social actors which are engaged in the redefinition of cultural and ethnic identities in the context of ecological narratives. This particular type of resistance is discursively constituted in terms of cultural and territorial defense and (in various degrees) social and political autonomy mediated by ecological considerations.¹⁵

Escobar defines four major perspectives which provide different climate change narratives:

- resource management: a globalocentric perspective which constitutes the hegemonic master narrative;
- sovereignty: third world national perspectives which don't challenge the dominant discourse, but rather seek recognition within it;
- biodemocracy: progressive southern NGO perspectives which perceives the dominant globalocentric perspective as bio-imperialism;

- cultural autonomy: a social movements perspective which constructs a broader and more inclusive counter-hegemonic discourse.

Escobar focuses specifically on the last category because it is an example of a radical counter hegemonic discourse which challenges the dominant perspective on multiple fronts. Furthermore, Aboriginal movements in particular are important sites for the production of this particular kind of counter-narrative. This becomes evident in the Aboriginal peoples' Global Summit initiative which aims at establishing an alternative framework for addressing anthropogenic climate change.

In April 2009, just 8 months before the Copenhagen Summit, an Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change was held in an effort to organize a global Aboriginal social movement whose aim is essentially the construction of an alternative ecological approach. A quick review of the Indigenous Peoples' Summit Report strikes with its profoundly different visions, goals, and priorities in relation to the current global ecological challenge. It introduces an ontologically and epistemologically different discourse whose dialectics appear incommensurable with the dominant discourse promulgated by the IPCC. The Aboriginal perspective is explicitly stated in the Anchorage Declaration which ties into the rhetoric of self – determination and preservation of traditional values, calls upon recognizing traditional knowledge in dealing with climate change and urges states to restore land to native peoples.¹⁶

The hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses do not co-exist independently; in fact, they are connected through a complex network of power relations that shape the interaction between them. The hegemonic master narrative utilizes specific discursive strategies in an attempt to contain and limit the legitimacy of the counter – hegemonic perspective. In this context, even though the Aboriginal peoples' movement still remains visible and vocal to a certain degree, it is effectively marginalized within the dominant discourse through the discursive practices of “victimization” and the construction of traditional knowledge as supplementary but insignificant to the modern knowledge.

Discursive production of Traditional Knowledge (TK) within the climate change discourse

The Aboriginal Peoples' perspective is present and to some degree acknowledged within the United Nations community and especially within the UNESCO climate change rhetoric. The Indigenous Peoples Global Summit on Climate Change was in fact sponsored by the United Nations University (UNU) and particularly by the Traditional Knowledge Initiative

launched by UNU's Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS). The languages utilized within the summit report as well in the UNU- IAS statements define the Indigenous Peoples' worldviews in almost identical ways. In addition to the notions of self - determination and human - rights claims, two important underlying ideas need to be further addressed:

- the victimization of the Aboriginal Peoples as being on the frontlines of climate change, and
- the construction of a definition of TK as historical, sacred, and intuitive and thus creating a discursive dichotomy between traditional and modern knowledge.

The notion that the Aboriginal Peoples are the most vulnerable victims of climate change is evident in statements such as: “[the aboriginal peoples are the ones] suffering early impacts due to the particular vulnerability of their territories and their reliance upon resource - based livelihoods” and “Indigenous Peoples figure conspicuously amongst groups identified as particularly vulnerable to climate change”.¹⁷ In addition, this language has been endorsed in the Indigenous Peoples' Summit report where the Indigenous communities identify themselves as “living in areas where they are most vulnerable to impacts and root causes of climate change”, especially harmed by unsustainable development, and experiencing “profound and disproportionate adverse impacts on [their] cultures”.¹⁸

The victimization rhetoric entails the notion of empowerment of Indigenous peoples by including them into the hegemonic global climate change discourse. This is manifested both in the Aboriginal peoples' calls for recognition from IPCC and inclusion into the main decision making process as well is in the statements of UNESCO acknowledging the importance of including the Aboriginal Peoples and their traditional knowledge into the mainstream discourse.¹⁹ In order to achieve this, UNESCO in partnership with the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights initiated a grassroots climate change forum whose goal is to create an internet - based system in order to connect Indigenous Peoples from all over the world with the international community.²⁰ The ideas of empowerment, inclusion, and recognition outline a discourse in which the dominant global community welcomes the powerless Indigenous Peoples into its domain of influence.

The idea of TK comes to the forefront in the construction of both the dominant and the counter - hegemonic discourses. The Indigenous Peoples present their traditional knowledge systems as more appropriate in dealing with climate change. Historical land-ownership and the culture of spiritual connection with the land are among the arguments to support the claims for recognition of TK as a considerable alternative to the dominant knowledge system

especially in the context of climate change.²¹ On the other hand, the dominant narrative, embraced by UNESCO, defines TK as a valuable *supplement*²² that can “add much needed detail and nuance to the broad-scale view offered by scientific research”.²³ These discursive practices of defining TK share one similar underlying feature – they construct TK as a distinct episteme, one that is disconnected from the contemporary knowledge, outdated, and yet relevant in certain practical aspects to the climate change discourse. Therefore, it is implied that there is a pressing need to incorporate the useful traditional elements in order to ensure political inclusion of the Aboriginal Peoples into the international community and to possibly improve the contemporary climate science by adding nuances from alternative perspectives.

The project of inclusion of Aboriginal peoples into the dominant governing structure, especially in the context of combating a potential ecological crisis, is an innovative approach which certainly benefits the Aboriginal communities who historically have been profoundly excluded as politically and socially non-existing. This is a great step towards liberalizing the international order and democratizing the global decision making processes. However, the discursive practices endorsed by the hegemonic ecological discourse reproduce a number of conceptual dichotomies amongst which are nature - culture, modern - straditional, rational – spiritual, science – traditional practice, and others. The reproduction of these binary concepts serves to maintain the dominant ecological master narrative which does not take into account the complexity of the interactions between humans and nature. This in my view is what constitutes a major weakness in the attempt to address climate change on a global scale.

Within the Western system of thought the nature - culture dichotomy has been maintained through the governmentality discourse, which confined nature to the realm of human control and scientific expertise. Contrarily, the counter - hegemonic narratives of Aboriginal Peoples insist on the presence of a special connection with the land, one that doesn't embrace the nature - culture dichotomy, but rather maintains a holistic spiritual and physical bond with the environment. However, the Aboriginal perspectives are subsumed within the dominant discourse in a way that renders them impotent. By presenting TK as supplementary to the contemporary modern science and by focusing on the practicality of traditional ecological practices, rather than their theoretical value, the dominant discourse effectively excludes the epistemologically different Aboriginal ecological narratives. Nature continues to be perceived as an externality and not an essential part of human civilization. It is this discursive dichotomy that inhibits the development of an alternative ecological paradigm, one that can address the challenge of climate change in a more comprehensive and less discriminatory way.

Towards a new radical ecological paradigm

As supported by Bruce Braun, the idea of nature's externality, deeply embedded in the capitalist modernity and constantly reinstituted within different discourses, is highly problematic. The nature – culture conceptual dichotomy separates the cultural, political, and technological realms from nature.²⁴ This is further criticized by Asdal who maintains that the humanities and social sciences have been historically dissociated from nature. Both Braun and Asdal see this dichotomy as artificial: a discursive separation which makes us not only perceive of culture as distinct from nature, but also confine nature within the domain of human control. Nature is thus created as a governable, manageable entity. Both Asdal and Braun encourage us to break away from this binary perspective, because nature is in fact deeply socialized. Nature is not an external entity in which we happen to reside, but rather constantly (re)created through our technological, political, and cultural practices. "Nature is infused with social intent", "transformed through science and managed as scenery."²⁵ It is a hybrid realm in which human activities do not occur outside of nature but are in fact deeply imbedded into the making of nature itself.

The nature - culture opposition maintained in the dominant Western master narrative has led to an ontological and epistemological dualism in which nature and society are seen as separate domains, each constituted and governed by different laws.²⁶ This reasoning becomes problematic in the context of climate change – an emerging discourse which fundamentally challenges the nature - culture dichotomy. Climate change, perceived either as a discursive formation or as a *real*, material phenomenon, calls for an alternative epistemological approach which must address the relationship between nature and culture. As Asdal argues, one of the limitations of classical science is the inability to give a coherent account of the relations between humans and nature.²⁷ The question that remains to be answered is in what way a new ecological paradigm should be created.

Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze provide an insightful alternative approach to perceiving our relationship with nature. Similar to Braun in certain aspects, they support the idea that our natural environment cannot be distinguished from culture because in the contemporary world nature is now infiltrated by machines and technologies.²⁸ These authors perceive of our environment as medium within which individuals transmit information and this it is inseparable from (post)modern culture.²⁹ Geo-engineering, bio-engineering or even anthropogenic climate change do not imply that society has dominated nature, but rather that

nature has become part of our culture and separating it into an external realm will produce a distorted understanding about the interaction between the ecosystem and our civilization.

Bruce Braun's concept of social nature supports this new approach which by bridging the gap between nature and culture will provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of our world. Within the hegemonic ecological master narrative there have been attempts to approach the challenge of anthropogenic climate change from a more inclusive perspective by simply combining disciplines (examples: ecological economics, ecological psychology, environmental history). As Asdal suggests, this is far from sufficient. What we need is what Latour calls a paradigm which is "neither anthropocentric nor nature-centric".³⁰

Unmaking climate change

As it has been argued above climate change should be understood as a discursive formation. This does not imply that its real, material effects should be dismissed, but rather that in order to address it more effectively, we need to deconstruct the discursive *shell* surrounding them. The current *modern* scientific approach towards climate change does not focus on new objects of study outside the already existing realms of meteorology, ecology, biology, etc, but instead seeks to respond to a series of moral and practical preoccupations related to human development, economic growth, and human well-being that go beyond the scientific domain.³¹ Climate change has also become a focal point in the production of new master narratives, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic alike.

The cases examined in this paper focused on the climate change rhetoric promulgated by the hegemonic international community, led by IPCC as a legitimate expert on climate science and environmental policy, and the Aboriginal Peoples' framework for approaching climate change as an example of a counter-hegemonic narrative. Even though the Aboriginal perspective is included within the dominant discourse, it is constructed as a traditional way of thinking, focusing on holistic and spiritual conceptualization of the human relationship with nature. The Aboriginal Peoples' practical experience with land cultivation is considered a valuable contribution to the contemporary climate science, and yet, traditional knowledge is rendered marginal and insignificant. Alternative conceptualizations of the nature-culture relationship are undermined. In this way the deeply embedded dichotomy between humanity and its natural environment is further reinstituted within the dominant paradigm.

Here I support Guattari's argument that we need to analyze the world in and from today's conditions.³² Today's nature is not an external entity, but rather an integral part of our technocratic culture. Further, nature is not an inactive background from which we simply

extract resources, but it also defines our lives by changing and modifying the conditions in which we live and our relationship to the surrounding material environment. Therefore, a new paradigm is needed in order to address the anthropogenic climate change – one that will perceive nature and culture as parts of the same continuum.³³

¹ Report of the Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change, 13

² Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 17 August 2009. Quote available from <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/climatechange/lang/en/pages/gateway/the-science>

³ Cited from the National Snow and Ice Data center at the University of Colorado, available from http://nsidc.org/arcticmet/glossary/climate_change.html

⁴ Available from http://unfccc.int/essential_background/convention/background/items/1349.php

⁵ Oels, 197

⁶ Oels, 198

⁷ Giddens, 3

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Oels, 194

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Giddens, 4

¹² Oels, 195

¹³ Escobar, 54

¹⁴ Ibid., 56

¹⁵ Escobar, 54

¹⁶ Indigenous Peoples' Summit Report, 5

¹⁷ Cited from UNESCO's Indigenous Knowledge systems project available at http://portal.unesco.org/science/en/ev.php-URL_ID=6550&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

¹⁸ Indigenous People's Summit Report, 5

¹⁹ Ibid., 6

²⁰ Refer to UNESCO's Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems program, available at http://portal.unesco.org/science/en/ev.php-URL_ID=6550&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

²¹ Indigenous Peoples' summit report, 11, 14

²² Emphasis added by the author.

²³ UNESCO, Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, available at http://portal.unesco.org/science/en/ev.php-URL_ID=6550&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

²⁴ Braun, Preface, ix

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Olkowski, 148

²⁷ Asdal, 149

²⁸ Conley, 117

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Asdal, 73

³¹ Escobar, 55

³² Conley, 118

³³ Herzogenrath, 8.

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