The construction of subjectivities and enemies in global warming: searching for the political climate issue in Swedish Election Campaigns, 1988–2014

Anna Friberg


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2241028

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 30 Jul 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 199

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The construction of subjectivities and enemies in global warming: searching for the political climate issue in Swedish Election Campaigns, 1988–2014

Anna Friberg

Department of Culture and Society, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT

It has been argued that the issue of global warming has become incorporated into a postpolitical condition that has deprived it of a proper political subject. In this article, the depoliticizing process is examined through a historical analysis of Swedish election campaigns, 1988 to 2014, a domain that traditionally features political language and politicizations. The analysis shows how the rhetoric of political parties was characterized by an increasingly universalizing language which made it problematic to name a political subject, and how the enemy of global warming was constructed as an outsider that threatened the current order. The article argues for the need to re-politicize the climate issue by understanding climate crises as social crises; that is, crises that can be properly politicized.

Introduction: depoliticized climate change as a democratic problem

In democratic political regimes, the level of attention that political parties pay to an issue is central to understand the development of public policy in relation to the question.¹ Today, global warming seems to have reached an almost consensual point in public discourse. There is not much discussion about its existence or its anthropogenic nature.² Despite the agreement of an ongoing climate change, surprisingly little progress has been made in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. The root of the problem is of course debated but its deepest foundations seem to derive from an overly anthropocentric perspective about the supreme importance of humans. This has led to a commodification of nature that has facilitated the accelerated extraction and consumption of fossil fuels which are central to the ongoing expansion of unsustainable production and consumption on a global scale. As Brand et al. state, the causes of the ecological crisis encompass the very perception of nature as well as the subjectivities and everyday practices of people.³ These are not asocial or apolitical but embedded in the economic and social systems that systematically produce and reproduce highly uneven consequences that are observable in the visible symptoms of climate change.⁴

CONTACT Anna Friberg  anna.friberg@liu.se

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.
While nature may not be a commodity, it has been treated as one, and this has been one of the core drivers of capitalist globalization.\textsuperscript{5} However, the capital relation is, as Jessop states, incomplete, it cannot ‘achieve self-closure,’ that is, ‘reproduce itself wholly through the value form’ which is why it needs extra-economic institutions to contain its self-destructive tendencies.\textsuperscript{6} Whilst capitalist societies constantly transform themselves – permanent transformation is considered the very mode of reproduction of capitalism\textsuperscript{7} – these transformations do not affect the overall institutions and its discursive logics.\textsuperscript{8} Consequently, the crucial question is ‘how to deal with the structural selectivities of institutions in capitalist societies that prevent more radical interests and concepts from being heard’?\textsuperscript{9}

Research on the politicization of climate change can be divided into two main strands: one suggests that the climate debate has become increasingly politicized and polarized, while the other argues that the climate has been incorporated into a postpolitical condition that has spread throughout the world, primarily in Western Europe. The first perspective highlights how there is an increasing consensus in scientific discourses, while public, media, and political discourses are characterized by an increasing dissensus.\textsuperscript{10} The politicization can hence be understood as the suppression or amplification of climate science by political interests. Here, scholars have argued that the climate crisis is too serious to be debated within a left–right context. Instead, the issue needs to reach consensus so that effective measures can be taken.\textsuperscript{11} The postpolitical perspective, on the other hand, states that while the ecopolitical discourses of the 1970s focused on fundamental transformations of social and political structures, from the 1980s onward, they have been characterized by the fact that the various opinions operate within existing systems and discourses. In other words, the ideas put forward make sure that ‘things remain the same, that nothing really changes, that life (at least our lives) can go on as before.’\textsuperscript{12} Hence, while climate debates may have experienced increased polarization, the presented perspectives are subordinated the current order. However, as Marchart argues, democracy is the form of society that is characterized by indeterminacy and contingency, and consequently lacks an ultimate foundation.\textsuperscript{13} The potential loss of the political is therefore, according to Lefort, the central element threatening to undermine democracy. In other words, if society is not understood as divided and open to fundamental contestation, its democratic nature is undermined.\textsuperscript{14}

The depoliticization of the climate issue has, however, largely been addressed at a theoretical level.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, this study empirically explores how a depoliticizing process took place in a concrete and specific historical context, namely Swedish political party discourse. Sweden has often been described as a frontrunner in environmental policy because of the nation’s comparatively high level of environmental performance index, progressive and innovative environmental policies, and its longstanding reputation as a progressive actor in both regional and global environmental processes.\textsuperscript{16} However, scholars have pointed to how the frontrunner status is a dynamic entity, and how previous leader countries later have become laggards.\textsuperscript{17} It has for instance been suggested that the idea of the Swedish frontrunner has become outdated because of the nation’s policy changes.\textsuperscript{18} Could this be explained in terms of depoliticization? As the need for radical climate policies is acute, Sweden constitutes an interesting case to better understand how and why climate policy changes under a process of depoliticization.
The postpolitical diagnosis

The notion of postpolitics refers to the critique of a politics of consensus. The concept draws on Schmitt’s distinction between politics and the political, in which the political – understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement – has been colonized by politics – understood as ‘technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism. Under these circumstances, ‘the disen-chanted opinion spreads that there isn’t much to deliberate and that decisions make themselves.’ According to Žižek, the ultimate sign of postpolitics is ‘the growth of a managerial approach to government; government is reconsidered as a managerial function, deprived of its political dimension.’ Problems such as how to reorder or reshape society are dealt with through the production of consensus. The key feature of consensus is ‘the annulment of dissensus [. . .]. Consensus is not only the ‘end of politics’, but also a threat to democracy. As Mouffe states: ‘To make room for dissent and foster the institutions in which it can be manifested is vital for democracy.’

Drawing on political philosophers such as Mouffe, Rancière, and Žižek, Swyngedouw argues that the environmental discourse in general, and the climate discourse in particular, has been deprived of political nature. According to Swyngedouw, there is no such thing as a singular Nature. A proper politicization therefore needs to endorse environmental heterogeneity. However, the discursive formation of consensus naturalizes the idea of capitalism and the market economy as the only alternative. Moreover, Swyngedouw argues that, as a sign of the postpolitical condition, the environmental discourse draws on a range of populist manoeuvres. These include reducing people to universal victims and understanding the environmental catastrophe as a single, socially homogenizing catastrophe. ‘We are all potential victims. “THE” Environment and “THE” people.’ However, other scholars argue that post politicization has resulted in quite the opposite; that it has led to the particularization of climate change causes. Here, researchers argue that the debates target specific causes of climate change which suppress the singular cause, often understood as capitalism. Both perspectives, however, highlight how the discursive condition ‘displaces social antagonism and constructs the enemy.’ The enemy is understood as an intruder who has corrupted the system. Problems are not seen as resulting from the existing system but are blamed on an outsider which in the case of global warming is carbon dioxide.

The postpolitical diagnosis has, however, received critique. Meyer breaks the critique down into two main points: the temporality of the diagnosis and its degree of hegemony. The first point refers to when a postpolitical condition began but also what characterized its 'political' processor, while the second point refers to the degree of univocality. According to Meyer, the idea of a postpolitical era that began during the 1980s or early 1990s – as argued by Mouffe and others – does not correspond to the emergence of environmentalism in the United States and other advanced industrial societies during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which distinctive characteristic was the rejection of a left-right binary. For the US, environmental politics was consensual and depoliticized in the 1960s and 1970s while the 1980s was characterized by an increasingly conflictual tone. In other words, the ‘political’ era that is assumed to have preceded the postpolitical one seems to have been less politicized. Moreover, as Kenis and Lievens observe, ‘the social is always
torn by conflict, division, and the exercise of power." These holding a postpolitical thesis must therefore ease any claims about complete hegemony. As an example, Meyer points to the global environmental justice movement that has gained increased attention since the 1990s and contributed to a 'greater politicization of environmentalism' by drawing out the implications of 'differential aspects of environmental concerns across lines of class, gender, and position in the global economy.'

The critique of the postpolitical diagnosis is no doubt compelling. However, the critics seem to interpret the condition as a solid empirical category rather an analytical one. As Kenis states, 'the concept of post-politics is not a descriptive, but a critical term. It does not describe reality, but it criticizes the way reality is given meaning.' Scholars of the postpolitical do not argue that a complete societal consensus exists or have existed. It is thus possible for one discourse to be postpolitical – depoliticized and consensual – while others remain politicized. Moreover, the contestation of postpolitics within the environmental field often, as Kenis argues, recourses to postpolitical representations of this very field. In terms of temporality, the choice of departure will always influence interpretations and results. The postpolitical diagnosis does not necessarily need a clear starting date. Instead, it could be understood as a gradual process in which no start can be fixedated; not determining a start does not undermine its current existence. To facilitate a more productive discussion, however, it would perhaps be better (and maybe even more accurate) to use the term 'de-politicized' condition rather than postpolitical. Finally, while I am sympathetic to Meyers claim that the postpolitical diagnosis could be unhelpful for thinking about solutions to the climate crisis in an effective and democratic way, that fact that it is problematic does not render it untrue. Instead, the diagnosis can allow us to understand what is at stake and provide the conceptual tools we need to move beyond it.

**On sources and methodology**

The study is based on election manifestos from the major political parties in Sweden, from the late 1980s to the mid-2010s. During this period, the issue of climate change emerged as one of the most important political issues in Sweden, consequently making it central to the parties to express their opinion on the matter. Previous research argues that proportional representation electoral systems, such as the Swedish case, facilitate a politicization of issues because they generate incentives for the parties to articulate and capture sectors of the electorate that have a special interest in particular questions. The manifestos therefore constitutes a good ground for examining a potential process of depoliticization. While the manifestos are designed to appeal to as much of the electorate as possible, it is highly important for the parties to distinguish themselves from their rivals. Hence, the construction of the material constitutes a balancing act between the universal and the particular.


The 1988 election has been called the ‘environmental election’ because of the vast recognition environmental concern was given in the preceding election campaigns.
particular, the issue was put on the agenda due to thousands of harbour seals found dead off the west coast of Sweden during the summer of 1988, something that was interpreted as a sign of environmental destruction. The highlighted role of environmental concern led to the Green Party entering parliament, receiving twenty mandates from the total of 349.\textsuperscript{43} It was, however, the Social Democrats that formed a minority government after 1988. The social democratic rule, which had been ongoing since 1982, was broken after the election of 1991 when a liberal-conservative minority coalition – formed by the Moderate Party, the People’s Party, the Centre Party, and the Christian Democratic Party – took office. The 1991 election also meant that the Greens were excluded from parliament because the party failed to attract the required four percent of the electorate. The party would, however, return after the following election. Moreover, a new party – New Democracy – came into parliament in 1991, filling an important position between the traditional left and right blocs. New Democracy would, however, be a short-lived story. After failing to maintain parliamentary seats in 1994, the party gradually dissolved. The Social Democrats took office in 1994 and stayed in power until 2006, when the previous liberal-conservative collaboration was formalized in the so-called Alliance for Sweden that governed between 2006 and 2014. In the 2010 election, the nationalist Sweden Democrats came into parliament.\textsuperscript{44} After 2014, the Social Democrats formed a coalition government with the Greens, a government that would stay in power after the election of 2018. Although never in government, the Left Party – which underwent an ideological shift from communism to socialism in 1990 – has been part of the Swedish parliament throughout the time period of this study. The time period from the late 1980s to the mid-2010s has thus been one when the ideological direction of government has shifted and the party composition in parliament has varied.

The study includes all election manifestos from the parties that have been in parliament. However, as the focus of attention is environmental policies in general, and climate policies in particular, in the analysis, there will be an overrepresentation of parties that have addressed these issues frequently. The material has been analysed from a perspective suggested by Kenis and Lievens, who argue that although political elements in environmental politics are often subsumed under a dominant, and perhaps hegemonic, discourse, they can be identified on a metalevel. Paradoxically, depoliticization always entails a struggle but on a metalevel. Postpolitics should hence be considered as a type of discourse that takes sides and engages in conflict because it would be meaningless if there was no meta-level opponent. The opponent is, however, not a particular agent but rather the conflict as such.\textsuperscript{45} Although outright antagonisms may not be expressed, they can be revealed indirectly through linguistic expressions.\textsuperscript{46} Beveridge describes the process in terms of observing the links between ‘everyday politics and the extraordinary political’, to ‘see how order is maintained’, and how ‘contestatory representations and claims … are silenced or simply never become part of formal political discourse’.\textsuperscript{47}

The analysis is conducted in two sections. First, I examine the construction of climate change victims: Who are the victims of climate change, or, put differently, who is the proper subject of climate politics? In the second part, I turn the question around to ask how the antagonist of global warming is constructed: Who is the enemy that is the focus of the environmental struggle? Focusing on these issues, makes it possible to analyse the (de)politicization of the climate issue as they involve
the metalevel of discussion. In other words, they are issues in which possible contestation and conflict can be made visible. In the concluding section, I summarize the results and argue for the need to re-politicize the issue of climate change by understanding climate crises as social crises; crises that can be given specific content with proper political subjectivities that can contest the given order.

**Who fights the environmental fight?**

According to Swyngedouw, the environmental discourse has become influenced by populist manoeuvres of universalization in which the people are reduced to universal victims who are exposed to a single homogenizing catastrophe.\(^4^8\) The discourse draws on three distinctive features: *universalization*, in which a particular interest is represented as the interest of all, for instance expressed in utterances such as ‘it is everybody’s problem’; *standardization*, in which symbolic forms are adapted to a standard framework that is put forward as the base of symbolic exchange, established through socially accepted standard concepts such as ‘the climate threat’; and *symbolization of unity*, which relates to the construction of collective identity and identification in which everybody becomes an agent, for instance expressed in terms of ‘it is up to us, everyone has to contribute’.\(^4^9\)

These features reduce the political of a proper subject; there is no one to put forward a particular demand in such a way that it acquires a universal dimension, that is, to create a politicized situation.\(^5^0\) This separates environmentalism from other social movements, such as feminism, the civil rights movement, and the labour movement. While traditional social movements produce new subjectivities that politicize social relations or positions,\(^5^1\) the environmental movement lacks a proper political subject. In a postpolitical condition, the fundamental contingency of the social order is made invisible. This hides the ways in which the order always generates exclusions and consequently antagonisms.\(^5^2\) The theory of postpolitics thus follows a line of thought from Schmitt, who stated that politics is the realm of subjectivity *par excellence*.\(^5^3\)

**The late 1980s and the early 1990s: incorporation into politicized domains**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, environmental issues became fully recognized on a global scale, for instance through the WCED report *Our Common Future* and the establishment of the IPCC. In Sweden, environmental concern was incorporated into the traditional ideological struggle between the left and the right.\(^5^4\) The Left Party argued that environmental destruction and overexploitation of natural resources endangered sustentation and consequently the lives of future generations. Overexploitation was understood as a consequence of capitalism and a free market economy in which environmental resources were underpriced, or – as in the case of clean air – not priced at all.\(^5^5\) The party stated that: ‘We are a red and green socialist party with its roots in the labour movement. We want to unite the labour movement’s traditional values of democracy and justice with a radical environmental policy.’\(^5^6\) Environmental concern was thus brought into the ongoing political struggle for issues such as social justice, consequentially making the working class the political subjects for the environmental struggle too.

The conservative Moderates targeted the Social Democrats by stating that ‘Social Democratic policy looks back and is weighed down by its socialist heritage. […] The
Moderate Party represents the ideas of the future in Swedish politics. Using patterns of repetition, the Moderates suggested that social democratic environmental policy was a relic of the past rather than a way ahead for the future. In this way, environmental issues became politicized by pointing to the dichotomy between the left and the right. The Social Democratic response was that the party’s governmental policy had resulted in several successes and that renewed governmental trust would push environmental policy further; a new mandate period would thus be a continuation and intensification of existing policies.58

The newly formed Green Party, however, argued that the ‘old parties’ could not overcome ‘the problems of today and the future. It’s time for new perspectives.59 In the Green’s view, the politicized economic and social realms could not integrate environmental issues because they were the cause of the problem.60 Hence, the party politicized the environment by placing it outside traditionally politicized domains. For the Greens, environmental problems needed to be solved by new perspectives and, consequently, by new subjectivities.

Like the Green Party, the liberal parties – the People’s Party and the Centre Party – also used a rhetoric in which new perspectives were emphasized. In particular, the concept of future generations was used to argue that ‘the current generation cannot affect nature so that the possibilities of a full life are worsened for future generations,’ and: ‘We need to take responsibility for nature, for the environment we leave to our children and grandchildren, for the legacy we have been given to manage’.61 The rhetoric was thus based on the assumption that humanity is one and the same over time, and that the present needed to acknowledge future generations and their rights on the basis that they would become future citizens. Hence, the people were treated as a homogenous mass presented as the collective victim of environmental destruction. The environmental fight became a collective struggle for all of humanity over an indeterminate period of time.

The liberal and conservative parties frequently stated that environmental problems could be solved within the existing order. The People’s Party argued that it was possible to adapt carbon dioxide emissions to ‘nature’s own thresholds’.62 And the Moderates stated that continued use of nuclear energy would prevent carbon dioxide emissions from increasing.63 In this way, the solutions were subordinated existing systems and discourses. Any future subjectivities that were added to the discussion were included in the current collective of humanity, making them part of existing subjectivities by involving a symbolization of unity. The idea that future generations could have different ideas, values, or priorities was thus downplayed.

The late 1990s and the 2000s: an increasing universalizing rhetoric

During the late 1990s and 2000s, the concept of equal environmental space was used by the Left to argue that ‘the way we live in the West needs to change.’64 ‘The rich part of the world cannot keep consuming most of the earth’s resources.’65 By challenging existing socio-economic structures, the Left politicized the environment by pointing to the dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world. The political struggle was thereby given a subject. However, this was an unnamed subject, defined in negative terms as not being the West. The party also stated that the existing solution to global warming – nuclear energy – was in fact no solution, but more fundamental changes were needed.66
The Greens argued along similar lines, stating that: ‘Current societal development is a dead end.’\textsuperscript{67} By arguing for a new way of living, these parties challenged the dominant order. The climate was politicized by the rejection of the universalizing idea of a common interest and a symbolization of unity. Instead, the responsibility of the West was put forward. However, this resulted in ‘the rest’ being constructed as a homogenous collective.

However, environmental issues were increasingly discussed using a universalizing rhetoric. The Greens argued that: ‘We already know what needs to be done to create sustainable development.’\textsuperscript{68} The ‘we’ referred to all humans and implied a symbolization of unity in which all of humanity was in the predicament together. Moreover, the statement highlighted notions of consensus and standardization, as it suggested a consensual agreement on both the threat and the necessary measures. The Centre Party stated that: ‘The climate goal can only be achieved if everyone contributes.’\textsuperscript{69} The rhetoric was shared by several parties.\textsuperscript{70} The liberal-conservative Alliance for Sweden stated that ‘global environmental challenges, in particular climate change, affect the conditions for life across the globe.’\textsuperscript{71} By leaning on notions of universalization and symbolization of unity, humanity was understood as a collective. The national-populist Sweden Democrats did not explicitly point to humanity as a whole, but the climate crisis was implicitly understood as a collective struggle as the party stated that: ‘Sweden alone cannot solve the environmental problems of the world.’\textsuperscript{72}

When discussing solutions to environmental problems, the Left stated that without ‘a fair distribution and a change in the power balance, it will be difficult to achieve sustainable development.’\textsuperscript{73} Once again, the climate was politicized by bringing the issue into the traditional class struggle. From the other side of the ideological spectrum, the Alliance for Sweden argued that: ‘Nuclear energy emits low amounts of greenhouse gases and will be an important element in energy production within the foreseeable future.’\textsuperscript{74} The solution to global warming was thus a continuation of existing technologies that did not challenge the dominant discourse of market capitalism. The politicization of the issue was thus treated with silence. Contestation was ignored rather than met with agonistic debate. The majority of the parties pointed to a symbolization of unity and the rather abstract need for global agreements, consequently depriving the climate issue of political subjectivities.\textsuperscript{75}

**Constructing the intruder**

The postpolitical condition is also discussed from an ideological approach, in which ideology refers to collective and consensual understandings of a certain issue. Ideology is thus not limited to political ideologies and their ideas on the climate issue but understood as the deeper structures of climate discourse. What turns something into an ideological discourse is its ability to manifest itself and act as consistent and consensual. Hence, the ideological process constitutes a postpolitical condition by the manufacturing of consensus and by preventing critical questioning of the dominant social order.\textsuperscript{76}

In this strand of research, scholars argue that the postpolitical condition constructs the enemy as an intruder that has corrupted the system. In the case of climate change, it is carbon dioxide that is given this role. ‘CO\textsubscript{2} stands here as the classic example of a fetishized and externalized foe that requires dealing with.’\textsuperscript{77} Any problems that
occur are blamed on the outsider rather than being seen as a result of the system.\(^7\) Naming carbon dioxide as the intruder means that the enemy becomes socially empty and homogenized; ‘it’s a mere thing, not socially embodied, named and counted.’\(^8\) There are, however, studies stating that the post politicization of the climate has resulted in the particularization rather than the homogenization of causes, and that it is the particular causes of global warming – such as vehicles, factories, and consumption – that repress the singular cause of capitalism.\(^9\) Both perspectives, however, argue that climate governance has become an issue centred around technical, managerial, and consensual administration. There is no contestation of the givens, only debate over the technologies of management, the arrangement of policing, and the timing of implementations.\(^10\)

### The 1970s and early 1980s: naming the enemy

The issue of global warming was not clearly addressed in the manifestos until the late 1980s. However, the earlier environmental debate was steeped in notions of threats. The People’s Party, for instance, stated that: ‘The environment must be saved.’\(^11\) The threat was not named but implicitly understood as being caused by a lack of environmental concern in technological and economic developments. The Centre Party also expressed concern about the increase in wasteful behaviours: ‘to use rather than to exhaust must be the foundation for technological and economic development.’\(^12\) The solution was to adapt technology and the economy in line with ‘the demands of environmental policy.’\(^13\) Although technological and economic development existed within the system, the fight took place against a socially empty enemy which made critique of the dominant social order problematic.

The Left Party also targeted wasteful behaviours. However, in contrast to the Centre Party, the Left put the blame on capitalist industry which was argued to have caused the problem. Therefore, the environmental struggle had to focus on ‘the power of capital.’\(^14\) The party criticized the liberal-conservative parties by stating that their policies would enhance capitalist freedom and consequently lead to further overexploitation.\(^15\) For the Left Party, the enemy of the environment was the capitalist system which did not sufficiently take nature or the environment into consideration. Here, the enemy was not an external intruder, but rather the system itself that had delivered these consequences.

### The late 1980s and the 1990s: the particularization of causes

During the late 1980s, climate issues began to inform political discourse in Sweden. It was the Left and the Greens that put forward criticism of the dominant socio-economic order. The Left constantly put the blame for environmental problems on capitalist industrial life.\(^16\) In a similar tone, the Greens stated that: ‘Do not accept construction of our society in such a way that nature and the preconditions for life are destroyed.’\(^17\) The arguments became more explicit during the late 1990s, when the Greens argued that it was ‘unacceptable that market forces alone control development,’ and the Left argued in favour of ‘new patterns of life.’\(^18\) In the rhetoric of these parties, the enemy of global
warming was not an intruder or a system failure, but rather the system of capitalism with the free market economy itself. To battle climate change was to fight this order.

The Moderates, however, used a rhetoric in which greenhouse gas emissions were the named enemy of global warming. The solution was consequently found in an energy production that did not emit such gases: nuclear energy. The analysis was shared by the People’s Party, that stated that ‘technological development can help to speed up the progress.’ The Social Democrats, that had held governmental power since 1982, were reluctant to admit any environmental ‘crises’. Instead, the party chose to emphasize its goal of a continued environmental policy in which emissions would be further lowered, the development of new technology stepped up, and the restoration of destroyed nature intensified. To these parties, there were no new enemies that caused global warming, meaning that there was no need for new and different measures. Instead, the solution was a continuation and intensification of ones that had already been carried out. The idea of green capitalism seems thus to have been incorporated, consequentially silencing any claims about a new order. The green economy project does not attempt to fundamentally transform existing relations of production, limit growth, reducing global trade, or fight speculative mechanisms of the financial market. Instead, it ‘reinforces these elements, assuming it is possible to mobilize them in a view if a sustainable transition’.

Environmental issues were increasingly seen as central to create a good future. ‘It is impossible to imagine a good future without solving environmental destruction,’ stated the Social Democrats, a rhetoric that was shared by several other parties. The threat was also portrayed as urgent: ‘Never before in the history of humanity have we been so close to an ecological catastrophe as we are today.’ The increased appearance of global warming in election manifestos was accompanied by an increase in the particularization of causes. For instance, the Moderates pointed to emissions from vehicles while the Centre Party argued in favour of renewed energy production. Several particular causes were thus named as being responsible for global warming. However, it was only the Left and the Greens that explicitly discussed the problem at a structural level, for instance when stating that: ‘Production, consumption, and transportation all need to be changed into ecologically sustainable solutions.’ For the majority of parties, the problem was understood as being solved by targeting the specific causes.

The 2000s: uniting against a politically empty enemy

The process of particularization increased during the 2000s, when the parties often put the blame on energy production and the transportation sector. The process developed further during the 2010s. In addition to energy production and transportation, the parties also identified food production and housing construction as important factors. The specific causes were, however, understood as being able to be dealt with within the existing system, for instance through renewed techniques or the development of new energy sources. The idea of ecological modernization, that rose internationally already in the 1980s, was here apparent. There was consensus on the existence of an ecological crisis, but the problem was understood as and dealt with as a managerial issue. The parties distanced themselves from their rivals by arguing for different technologies and various implementations of existing techniques. As the problems were presented as separate issues that could be solved within the current
order, there was no proper political enemy of the environment on a discursive level. Symptomatically, the Christian Democrats stated that: ‘Our way of life is threatened by the greenhouse effect.’ The greenhouse effect was thus constructed as an external intruder that had entered the system. Consequently, carbon dioxide became the socially empty enemy.

The Moderates stated that: ‘The climate issue is currently the largest global environmental threat, which all nations have a responsibility to meet.’ Similar statements were made by other parties, for instance the Social Democrats who claimed that the ‘global climate changes are the most severe threat of our time.’ The parties were thus manufacturing a consensus regarding the environment and the climate. The concepts were standardized and were understood in the singular, as one crisis that threatened all humans. However, it was a threat without a clear dispatcher.

A common argument among the parties was that economic growth was key to solving environmental problems in general and global warming in particular. The Christian Democrats stated that: ‘Economic development and environmental policy must go hand in hand,’ and the Alliance argued that: ‘Growth is essential for addressing the climate challenges the world faces.’ The discourse of market capitalism and the goal of continued economic growth were thus presented as being essential for resolving environmental issues. Hence, the enemy was constructed as those opposing the existing economic system and its goal of an ever-expanding economy.

**Concluding remarks**

Throughout the studied time period, climate change was portrayed as a threat, as something that endangered current society and our way of living. These kinds of apocalyptic imaginaries are highly powerful in their rejection of social conflict and antagonisms. The apocalyptic framing obstructs a proper political framing. Environmental struggles are presented as questions about how ‘we’ relate to the planet. Because humanity is understood as a collective, there is no one who can speak in the name of Nature. Moreover, the idea that ‘we are all in the situation together,’ suggests that we all need to cooperate and reach a consensus. However, when ‘everyone together’ constitutes the political subject, postpolitics is the result. As Edelman states: ‘The really intense political advocate acts without tolerating or encouraging controversy about his action, without recognizing that any alternative course of action is tolerable, and therefore without acknowledging that a political issue exists or entering into a dialogue about it.’

However, as Jessop argues, there is no issue that is inherently political. Depoliticization is thus a relational term that can only be understood in reference to specific ‘points in past and present political time-space.’ Because depoliticization only occurs in relation to politicization, every depoliticization will occur in a dynamic relationship with resistance to the attempts to depoliticize, and an arena that has become depoliticized may be re-politicized. According to Swyngedouw, if we are to take the climate catastrophe seriously, we need to pay attention to ‘the infernal process of depoliticization and [...] re-think the political again.’

While environmental issues have been argued to be specifically prone to depoliticization due to their separation between nature and society, this could, as Kenis and Lievens argue, also be what turns them into a field of politicization
par excellence. Because everything can be the object of environmental action and concern, there can be an all-round struggle over what is the proper object of action. 'If everybody can constitute herself as the subject of question there is no a priori exclusion of who can present herself as the bearer of a project that can overcome environmental crises. This allows for the most radical forms of political plurality and politicization in which hegemonic struggles and politicization can appear.'

Focusing on social relations and consequences of environmental destruction makes it possible to show the possible subjects of this change but also the objects of change. In this way, it is possible to re-internalize the enemy and thereby re-politicize environmental issues.

Rather than seeking consensus that operates within the existing structures, we should highlight injustices and move beyond current structures. This could be done in several ways: by problematizing the desirability of economic growth, by questioning existing political and economic institutions, by discussing how neoliberal open-market policies and fierce competition leads to further commodification of nature on a global scale, or by critically evaluate how the Western model of production has becoming universal through a globalization process in which access to cheap and often unsustainable produced commodities and labour power are normalized. We thus need to turn environmental crises into social crises, crises that can be given a specific content around which a genuinely political space of plurality can appear – a space where conflicts become visible, and contingencies are contestable.

Notes

8. It should, however, be noted that the ecological consequences of capitalism are in many ways the same as with industrialism in general, capitalist economies are just more dominant and powerful. See Newell, *Globalization and the Environment*, op. cit., Ref. 7.


26. See also Žižek, Looking Awry, op. cit. Ref. 22.


30. e.g. Bergleiz and Olausson, ‘The Post-Political Condition’, op. cit., Ref. 2.


38. It has for instance been suggested that ‘we have never really had a post-political condition . . . although we may have long had depoliticization.’ Beveridge, ‘The (Ontological) Politics’, op. cit., Ref. 15, p. 595.


41. There was a change in the length of office after 1994 whereby the government was chosen for four years rather than three. On the change of this reform, see e.g. I. Mattson and O. Petersson (Eds.) Svensk författningspolitik (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2020).


43. This was the first time in more than seventy years that a new party came into the Swedish parliament. Before this, the most recent introduction to the Swedish parliament had been in 1917 when the Left Party and the Centre Party (then: the Farmer’s Federation) entered the Riksdag.

44. There is an ongoing debate on whether the party should be labelled populist or nationalist, or whether it should be understood as a neo-Nazi or neo-fascist party due to its ideological roots. See e.g. M. Ekman and D. Pooh, Ut ur skuggan: En kritisk granskning av Sverigedemokraterna (Stockholm: Natur & kultur, 2010); A. Hellström and T. Nilsson, ‘We Are the Good Guys: Ideological Positioning of the Nationalist Party Sverigedemokraterna in Contemporary Swedish Politics’, Ethnicities, 10/1 (2010), pp. 55–76.

45. Kenis and Lievens, ‘ Searching for “the Political”’, op. cit., Ref. 12.


50. Žižek, The Ticklish Subject, op. cit., Ref. 19.


52. Kenis and Lievens, ‘ Searching for “the Political”’, op. cit., Ref. 12.


54. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are done by the author.


63. Moderata samlingspartiet, Framtidens idéer, op. cit. Ref. 57.
73. Vänsterpartiet, Arbete, demokrati, rättvisa, op. cit. Ref. 66.

77. Swyngedouw, ‘Whose Environment?’, op. cit., Ref. 12, p. 79.
90. Moderata samlingspartiet, Framtidens idéer, op. cit. Ref. 57.
92. Socialdemokratiska arbetarepartiet, Valmanifest, op. cit. Ref. 58.
95. Miljöpartiet de gröna, Miljöpartiet de gränas valmanifest ’91, op. cit. Ref. 60.
98. e.g. Folkpartiet liberalerna, Ett parti som vågar utmana: Folkpartiet liberalernas valmanifest inför valet 2002 (2002), available at: https://snd.gu.se/sv/vivill/party/fp/


101. Kristdemokraterna, Tid för förändring, tid för handling, op. cit., Ref. 75.
102. Moderaterna, Frihet för Sverige, op. cit., Ref. 75.
103. Socialdemokratiska arbetarepartiet, Tillsammans för trygghet och utveckling, op. cit., Ref. 75.

110. See also Brand, Görg, and Wissen, ‘Overcomming Neoliberal Globalization’, op. cit., Ref. 3.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Stiftelsen Riksbankens jubileumsfond (the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences) under Grant P18-0121:1.

ORCID

Anna Friberg https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8164-2819