

2020

**Shaping Inquiry in Culture, Communication and  
Media Studies**

Series Editor: Barbie Zelizer

Dedicated to bringing to the foreground the central impulses by which we engage in inquiry, the *Shaping Inquiry in Culture, Communication and Media Studies* series attempts to make explicit the ways in which we craft our intellectual grasp of the world.

**The Changing Faces of Journalism**

Tabloidization, Technology and Truthiness

*Edited by Barbie Zelizer*

**The Politics of Reality Television**

Global Perspectives

*Edited by Marwan M. Kraidy and Katherine Sender*

**Making the University Matter**

*Edited by Barbie Zelizer*

**Communication Matters**

Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility and Networks

*Edited by Jeremy Packer and Stephen B. Crofts Wiley*

**Communication and Power in the Global Era**

Orders and Borders

*Edited by Marwan M. Kraidy*

**Boundaries of Journalism**

Professionalism, Practices and Participation

*Edited by Matt Carlson and Seth C. Lewis*

**Discourses in Action**

What Language Enables Us to Do

*Edited by Klaus Krippendorff and Nour Halabi*

For more information, visit: [www.routledge.com/Shaping-Inquiry-in-Culture-Communication-and-Media-Studies/book-series/SICCM](http://www.routledge.com/Shaping-Inquiry-in-Culture-Communication-and-Media-Studies/book-series/SICCM)

# Discourses in Action

What Language Enables Us to Do

**Edited by Klaus Krippendorff and  
Nour Halabi**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

## 6 Discourses for transformation?

### Climate change, power and pathways to the future

Anabela Carvalho

Contemporary societies face various crises of sustainability related, inter alia, to consumption, resource use, financial management, employment, and environmental degradation. Climate change is the most threatening and wide-ranging expression of the environmental impact of human activity (especially as conducted in rich societies) in the last few decades. Since it emerged in policy and public arenas in the late 1980s, climate change has been assigned a variety of meanings with numerous implications for action. Discourses advanced by scientists, political actors, corporations, civic groups and others have been reconstructed in the media and other public fora in diverse ways, with values, worldviews and power issues working as important filters. Those aspects have also weighed heavily in the progressive institutionalization of discourses on climate change, which led to the dominance of techno-managerial approaches and the marginalization of calls for addressing structural issues at the root of climate change.<sup>1</sup> In the USA and, to a smaller degree, in other societies, various economic and political forces have been continually invested in large-scale propaganda to deny scientific evidence and impede any changes to the present status quo.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, in recent years there has been a mounting realization that current socio-economic practices and policies are conducting societies and the planet to very dangerous limits and that important changes will have to occur in order to achieve sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Multiple interlinked "transitions" have been pointed out as necessary, including an economic transition, a social transition, an institutional transition, an informational transition, and an ideological transition.<sup>4</sup> The scale of the challenge has generated terms such as The Great Transition and The Great Transformation (see below), but there is no shared understanding amongst the very diverse relevant social agents on what those changes can mean or require.

Examining the discursive struggles between the proponents of alternative pathways to the future, analyzing the relation between discourses and socio-political contexts, and identifying the (potential) space for discourses of transformation are critical tasks for social scientists. Discourse analysis offers productive tools to carry this out, as this chapter aims to illustrate.

In the first part of the chapter, I will present the challenges posed by climate change and the contributions that discourse analysis has made towards understanding its scientific, political and cultural dimensions. This will be

followed by a brief review of the *raison d'être* of calls for transformation. The chapter will then move on to the theory and methods of Critical Discourse Studies and outline the analytical approach to be adopted. The final section before conclusions will offer a brief exploratory application to two key texts on transformation towards sustainability.

### Discourse and (in)action on climate change

Of the numerous large-scale risks faced by current and future societies, climate change is likely to be the most severe. As multiple scientific reports have highlighted, potential impacts on human and physical security, food production, water availability, health, ecosystems, biological diversity and other domains would mean vast human, ecological and economic costs and losses.<sup>5</sup>

Addressing climate change calls for major changes in energy production and consumption, with implications for industrial processes, transportation, spatial planning and many other areas. Moreover, climate change is connected to wider sustainability challenges in societies around the world, as urban congestion, waste generation and the levels of consumption of multiple resources continue to rise dramatically creating challenges as to how to curb and reverse these upward trends in the coming decades. Mitigating climate change and other sustainability crises, as well as adapting to already inevitable impacts, would require crucial modifications in policies, lifestyles and business, particularly in more affluent societies. Integrated solutions to sustainability would have to be found at multiple geographical scales and necessarily involve a multitude of actors including governments and governmental organizations, local authorities, commercial, industrial and service enterprises, research institutions, non-governmental organizations and individual citizens.

How is all of this connected to discourse? What does language have to do with changes in weather patterns? How can discourse analysis help us understand the governance of climate change? This chapter will show that words, together with other semiotic resources (e.g. visual images), construct the meaning of both climate change and the practices and structures that are at its root. Language influences understandings of those issues, constraining social and material action and contributing to the institutionalization of given ideas and values, all of which, in a dialectical manner, contribute to the production of (given) discourse(s) on climate change.

As Feindt and Oels have maintained, discourse matters to environmental issues because:

- (i) environmental policy problems are obviously the effect of social constructions although they concern 'natural' objects; (ii) struggles about concepts, knowledge and meaning are an essential element of environmental policy; (iii) environmental discourse has material and power effects as well as being the effect of material practices and power relations.<sup>6</sup>

Given its complexity, the multiple time and spatial scales at stake, the diversity of socio-economic domains involved, climate change clearly epitomizes these symbolic dynamics. Various definitions and (in)action proposals compete for attention and legitimacy in discursive struggles where economic, political and other forms of power are played out.

The current regime on climate change developed both through non-linguistic social practices and through a multitude of discursive/semiotic practices that shaped each other.<sup>7</sup> Such practices took place both in a myriad of "private" spheres, in the fields of science, economics, and political negotiation and regulation, and in public ones, with highlight to the media. Some studies have shown that since the late 1980s politicians have attempted to control the definition of climate change and played a crucial role in shaping media discourses in several countries.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, intergovernmental organizations have discursively constructed climate change in ways that justify the continuation of their policies and practices.<sup>9</sup> Among the meaning-making systems that have produced and/or are keeping the symbolic/material regime in place, corporations also occupy an important position: for instance, many in the USA have frequently sponsored denialist discourses through the organization of conferences, the production of reports, media materials, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Extant empirical research on dominant discourses on climate change and sustainability, such as the ones that are put forth by the most powerful political institutions<sup>11</sup> and those that circulate in mainstream media,<sup>12</sup> shows that those discourses are characterized by exclusionary mechanisms that reinforce the current distribution of power and foreclose alternative voices and views. The media, a vital element of the contemporary public sphere, have contributed mainly to reinforcing the symbolic power of certain social actors, such as top-level politicians, and reducing the scope for non-expert/non-elite participation in the politics of climate change.<sup>13</sup> In contrast with mainstream media, alternative (non-commercial) media have been a significant venue for the expression of other worldviews and ideologies.<sup>14</sup>

Promising to reconcile economic, social and environmental priorities, several varieties of the sustainable development discourse, including ecological modernization and the green economy, have gained a hegemonic position in most societies, as further discussed below.<sup>15</sup> By failing to convey more radical views on the relation between humans and nature and the associated social arrangements, most media have legitimated and reinforced the existing social order.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the national and international governance of climate change has increasingly been constrained within the parameters of free-market capitalism, industrialism and neo-liberalism.<sup>17</sup>

Discursive practices involve complex narratives as well as simple linguistic choices. The labels and categories that we use to organize reality are powerful lenses in our experience of the surrounding world. For instance, terming climate change as an "environmental issue" may create a (somewhat) distorting conceptual lens. By reducing it to the realms of nature and "the environment", this commonly found language practice detaches climate change from

the economic, social and political sites and systems that produce it and that need to be transformed. "The category of 'the environment'... is (...) politically suicidal", says Beck.<sup>18</sup> It fails to motivate and engage citizens. Beck adds that "using the concept of 'climate politics' too much castrates climate politics. It ignores the fact that climate politics is precisely not about climate but about transforming the basic concepts and institutions of first, industrial, nation-state modernity."<sup>19</sup> Ironically, the language of "climate politics" may be depoliticizing climate change and all the civilizational challenges it entails. Depoliticization refers to the deletion of alternatives and of democratic debate about alternatives regarding climate change from public spheres. In spite of climate change's massive impacts on citizens around the world, it has been largely transformed into a seemingly consensual techno-managerial matter where citizens have no say.<sup>20</sup> Those depoliticization processes have crucial implications for public engagement.<sup>21</sup>

### **The idea of transformation**

Interest in processes of change towards sustainability is not new. A significant body of research, developed mainly in the Netherlands from the 1990s, has focused on "sustainability transitions", defined as "long-term, multi-dimensional, and fundamental transformation processes through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption."<sup>22</sup> Such studies have highlighted how a given development pathway involves interconnections between technological, organizational and economic dimensions and how those trajectories lock in or lock out (un-)sustainable developmental trajectories. However, the sustainability transitions literature has been criticized for overlooking power and political struggles,<sup>23</sup> in its attempt to circumscribe and monitor given "systems" (e.g. "energy systems"; "transport systems") and "evolution" processes therein. Meadowcroft has asked the "sustainability transitions" scholarship the disarming question "what about the politics?" and called attention to the importance of democratic legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> Although recent works have attempted to address some of these issues, this scholarship remains strongly associated to the notion of "transition management",<sup>25</sup> i.e. the idea that transition can be managed via appropriate policies. More recently, a number of scholars have called attention to presumed "cockpitism", "the illusion that top-down steering by governments and intergovernmental organizations alone can address global problems."<sup>26</sup> Processes of change involve a multiplicity of issues and actors and continuously changing challenges leading some to consider that they are inevitably unruly, bottom-up and complex.<sup>27</sup>

Besides emphasizing the roles of civil society, numerous scholars and institutions have argued that the changes needed to address current socio-ecological problems have to involve deeper transformations than what has been on the table so far. As climate change and other pressures on the biophysical environment gain

ever more evident crisis proportions, there has been a proliferation of texts offering pathways to imagined sustainable futures. Such texts have appeared mainly in three social fields – academia and research; governmental agencies; and non-governmental bodies and social movements – suggesting that there is a growing acknowledgement that significant, possibly radical changes in current societies are necessary. Examples of titles include: “World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability” [original German title: “World in Change: A Social Contract for a Great Transformation”] (German Advisory Board on Climate Change, 2011); “The Great Green Technological Transformation” (United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 2011); “The Great Transition: Shifting from Fossil Fuels to Solar and Wind Energy” (Lester Brown, 2015); “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (UN General Assembly, 2015); and “Policy Innovations for Transformative Change: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (“Flagship report” by the UN Research Institute for Social Development, 2016). The IPCC also refers to “transformation pathways” (title of chapter 6) in its 2014 Fifth Assessment Report.

There is, however, no agreement regarding the breadth or the nature of said transformation. Analyses of academic literature suggest that the term “transformation” appears at times to be just the new “fashionable buzzword”<sup>28</sup> with no specific meaning. Ulrich Brand calls “transformation” the “new critical orthodoxy” while pointing out that most “strategic” or “prescriptive” uses of the concept do not address structural obstacles such as “ongoing expansion of the production and consumption of un-sustainable commodities, a focus on economic growth at almost any cost, fierce world market competition”, etc.<sup>29</sup>

These various remarks point to the importance of thorough analysis of views on change, be it labeled transition or transformation (or indeed something similar) and the nature of social and political relations that are advanced. As Patterson et al.<sup>30</sup> noted, sustainability transformations are deeply political as they favor particular values, worldviews and political-ideological stances; take place in power-shaped contexts and institutions; and are likely to have redistributive impacts. “Concerns relating to whose knowledge counts, what changes are necessary and desirable, and even what constitutes the end goal of transformation are all intensely political processes.”<sup>31</sup> Thus what matters here is not just how the present and future worlds are constituted through discourses on transformation but also who is constructed into which (power) positions through those discourses.

### Tools for analysis and critique

“Discourse” is not a univocal term. Drawing on Stuart Hall, Chouliaraki<sup>32</sup> argues that it “refers (...) to the capacity of meaning-making resources to constitute social reality, forms of knowledge and identity within specific social contexts and power relations (Hall 1997: 220).” Semiosis is another way of naming the process of generating meaning through various modalities (photography, design, body language, etc.), which is always situated in a given social, cultural and historic setting.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) encompass theoretical and metatheoretical elements, as well as methodological elements.<sup>33</sup> Drawing on various influences, such as sociolinguistics, French social and political thinking (especially Foucault’s) and Frankfurt School theories, the approach privileged here looks at how, in Norman Fairclough’s words, texts relate to “wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes”, aiming to “explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony”.<sup>34</sup> This leads us to the “critical” in CDS, which refers to the intent to analyze and expose how discourse can contribute to social and political wrongs, as well as to provide potentially emancipatory knowledge. As CDS scholars often emphasize, doing critique implies a normative dimension.<sup>35</sup> This means that the analyst has a normative perspective or sees discourse from a particular normative position. It also means that the analysis involves normative evaluation.

To conduct analysis and critique, CDS scholarship offers several approaches and is often viewed – and indeed used – as a “toolbox” where researchers can pick up different analytical instruments and combine them, often together with other contributions from the human and social sciences, to address their specific objects of study and research questions. Although CDS scholars generally underline the historical nature of discourse,<sup>36</sup> the process of circulation of meanings is not always fully examined. Wetherell summarizes it in eloquent terms:

As accounts and discourses become available and widely shared, they become social realities to be reckoned with; they become efficacious in future events. The account enters the discursive economy to be circulated, exchanged, stifled, marginalized or, perhaps, comes to dominate over other possible accounts and is thus marked as the “definitive truth”.<sup>37</sup>

Drawing on the British Cultural Studies tradition, this chapter attaches high importance to those dynamics and attempts to grasp them in doing CDS.

I will focus on two examples produced respectively in the context of inter-governmental organizations and of a social movement. One is a 2012 report titled *From Transition to Transformation: Sustainable and Inclusive Development in Europe and Central Asia* supported by 13 United Nations agencies, from the UN Environment Program to the International Labor Organization.<sup>38</sup> It was prepared in advance of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development. The other example is a 2015 document titled *The Leap Manifesto: A Call for Canada Based on Caring for the Earth and for One Another*,<sup>39</sup> which is said to come in response to climate change and other crises<sup>40</sup> and was initiated in a meeting attended by representatives from “Canada’s Indigenous rights, social and food justice, environmental, faith-based and labor movements”.<sup>41</sup> It has been signed by a broad coalition of artists and activists fronted by filmmaker Avi Lewis and author Naomi Klein and was presented at a convention of the Canadian National Democratic Party.

The two texts were chosen because they tackle “big questions” concerning future sustainability and emerged from two socio-organizational settings that are crucial to environmental politics – intergovernmental policy-making and civic action. Arguably, distinctive socio-political cultures as to how social change can be brought about are both reflected in and re-produced in these texts. Although they are not necessarily representative of those socio-political cultures, the two texts shed light into alternative “thought systems” regarding sustainability and the kinds of transformations needed. Obviously, these texts are of very different genres with very different voices speaking to most likely different intended publics: a more specialized, expert audience in the first case and a more general one in the second. More than comparing these two discursive acts I wish to develop a sense of how alternative visions of the future are being discursively constructed and reconstructed and of their potential to generate engaging debates.

In an exploratory manner, I will raise multiple questions about the two texts referring to two general functions of discourse, namely representation (in this case representation of both present and future worlds) and interaction (or how discourse plays in the construction of social relations and identities). Those questions arose from several readings of the two texts in repeated back and forth-type “dialogue” with academic literature on socio-ecological transformations, on environmental discourses and, at a higher level, on CDS, as well as with “grey” literature on social dimensions of climate change and sustainability (e.g. other policy and NGO reports, media texts, political speech). Familiarity with these kinds of debates enhanced abilities for deconstruction and critique.

I propose distinguishing three levels of analysis. The first level, which may be designated *critical semantic mapping and analysis*, includes questions such as: What do these texts claim that needs transforming? What is the direction of the proposed transformation (or where should the world be heading)? Who are the subjects constituted as relevant in the process of transformation? What roles are different social actors “made to” play in the process of transformation and in the aspired future? At this level, analysis is focused on the text itself although of course any form of critical analysis involves perspectives and knowledges brought by the researcher from outside the text leading, for example, to inquire what values underpin the proposed transformation (e.g. whether consideration is given to socio-environmental justice). Methodologically, it involves, inter alia, identifying key concepts used in texts and examining representations of agency.

The second level is *inter-discourse analysis*. Paying special attention to processes of recontextualization of discourses, it involves asking: How do these texts draw on different discourses and recontextualize them? What new articulations of discourses are there in the texts? What is the origin and semi-otic trajectory of those discourses? Are there new ideas/discourses? This kind of analysis focuses on the relation between one particular text and other texts, and on the discourses that they (re)construct.

I will call the third level of analysis *explanatory critique*, a term borrowed from Norman Fairclough that refers to the goal of explaining existing realities as “effects of structures or mechanisms or forces which the analyst postulates and whose reality s/he seeks to test out”.<sup>42</sup> The following questions relate to that goal: What do the texts naturalize or legitimize? What do they challenge or contest? What social effects may (or has) this produce(d) (e.g. generate consent for the implementation of certain policy proposals)? How do the subject positions that different actors are constructed into redefine social relations? What is the counter-hegemonic potential of these proposals? How can these discourses contribute (or how have they already contributed) to redressing structural problems and shifting relations between social agents? Can (or have) these discourses change(d) relations of power and the politics of climate change? This level of analysis involves examining how discursive strategies relate to certain social, cultural and political effects of discourse, such as the institutionalization of certain ideas. It is centered on the circulation and reconstruction of discourses, which the second level of analysis started opening up to.

### Alternative discourses for transformation

This section will offer a short exploration of the selected texts, guided by the questions/analytical lenses enunciated above. At first sight, the proposals advanced in *From Transition to Transformation* and in *The Leap Manifesto* are not very different, as both put an accent on transformation towards environmental sustainability and on social inclusivity. Many of the suggested measures, such as removing fossil fuel subsidies, creating “green” jobs and increasing social protection are coincident.

Closer attention reveals differences. For instance, use of the concepts of “development” and “sustainable development” is ubiquitous in the UN report and absent from *The Leap Manifesto*. The foreword of the UN report defines the situation and goals as follows:

We know now that all the countries of the world need sustainable development (...) The report is among the first attempts to take an integrated look at sustainable development in the Pan-European region. It argues that a new growth model in this region is both necessary and possible – one which increases human development, advances equality and reduces the ecological footprint.<sup>43</sup>

“Sustainable development” is the well-worn concept advanced in the 1980s by the World Commission on Environment and Development<sup>44</sup> and based on three pillars: economic development, environmental protection and social justice. Multiple actors have employed the concept in very different senses (e.g. economically sustainable, green-ish and economically sustainable, ecologically sustainable). Its ambiguity (or “flexibility”) has allowed it to become hegemonic, i.e. widely used and accepted, and hard to contest, as it neutralizes

difference and conflict.<sup>45</sup> A wide range of standpoints and discourses fall roughly within the “Sustainable Development debate”, from views that in terms of environmental protection and social equality correspond to the status quo, to reformist discourses and to transformational discourses.<sup>46</sup>

The UN report addresses those matters by discussing the difference between “weak sustainability” and “strong sustainability”. Weak sustainability advocates consider that natural capital, say a local marine ecosystem, is substitutable by human capital, for instance, infrastructure benefits gained with a new industrial harbor. Strong sustainability calls for the maintenance of the separate capital stocks, assuming that natural and human-made capital are not perfect substitutes.<sup>47</sup> This implies that there are physical limits to human capital development. The UN report claims to “espouse” strong sustainability but, throughout the document, the difference between “strong sustainability” and “green economy” is obscured and an implicit semantic equivalence between the two is established.

The UN report speaks of “sustainable development” but also of a “sustainable and inclusive transformation” and of a “rethinking of environmental, economic and social policies,”<sup>48</sup> thereby articulating – in the sense of combining or building bridges between – conventional and transformational views. A few lines down it refers to the “need for a new growth model”<sup>49</sup> which, throughout the report, is associated with the “green economy,” another key concept, which especially since the 2008 financial crisis has become a new “common sense” with its promise to generate increasing prosperity while maintaining the natural systems that sustain us. It should be noted that prior to or around the time of publication of the UN report a number of international organizations, including the OECD, World Bank, IMF and WTO, had started adopting a “green economy” discourse, led (of course) by ideas of economic growth.<sup>50</sup> The report suggests that it is possible to make the “green economy work for the poor,”<sup>51</sup> adding on an issue, rather than transforming the dominant logic of the “green economy,” often spearheaded by economic competitiveness aims, which it sanctions.

In its second chapter, the report advocates “moving beyond GDP”<sup>52</sup> as an indicator of development, which some scholars have considered a condition to move to a socio-economic model compatible with strong sustainability in a post-growth society. However, this appears to be one more act of strategic navigation of the seas of ambivalence because everywhere else GDP is at the core of the UN agencies’ analysis. It is worth recalling that the stated goal is a new “growth model.”<sup>53</sup> By recontextualizing economic growth in a manner that appears to conciliate various types of problems and concerns, the report does more in the way of sustaining contemporary modes of socio-economic organization than challenging them.

In contrast with this approach, *The Leap Manifesto* speaks of a radically different type of “growth” in maintaining that “caring for one another and caring for the planet could be the economy’s fastest growing sectors.”<sup>54</sup> The language and the imaginary are strongly communitarian. The proposed change is to be led by an ethics of socio-environmental justice with

indigenous rights and the unequal distribution of environmental harm taking center stage (“Indigenous Peoples should be first to receive public support for their own clean energy projects. So should communities currently be dealing with heavy health impacts of polluting industrial activity.”).

*The Leap Manifesto* promotes grassroots-led change in the organization of the economy: “as an alternative to the profit-gouging of private companies and the remote bureaucracy of some centralized state ones, we can create innovative ownership structures: democratically run, paying living wages and keeping much-needed revenue in communities.” Thus, it operates a fundamental restructuring of socio-economic relations, which is also encapsulated in the increasingly popular term of “energy democracy”: “The time for energy democracy has come: we believe not just in changes to our energy sources, but that wherever possible communities should collectively control these new energy systems.” The recent historical trajectory of some ideas helps understand this text. It has resonances, amongst others, with eco-socialist initiatives calling for “system change, not climate change,”<sup>55</sup> with Naomi Klein’s book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (2014), and with indigenous values and ways of knowing, which have become more visible through various forms of mobilization of indigenous peoples.<sup>56</sup>

The interactional function of discourse is particularly important for the study of the governance and politics of the transformation towards sustainability. *The Leap Manifesto* constitutes “we”, an encompassing collective, as the key claimant but also the key agent of change. It therefore enacts a fundamental discursive shift in political relations. “We”, the “indigenous peoples”, “women” and “workers” occupy in this text a subject position of action, of possibility, not one of passivity or helplessness. *The Leap Manifesto* is a strong statement of collective, democratic ownership of social and political issues.

Nevertheless, this seemingly inclusive language, this “we,” is contingent and temporary as it brings together diverse identities, standpoints and interests regarding the environment and other domains of life. For instance, as they try to negotiate environmental values with material development rights, First Nation Canadian communities may in some respects align with “workers” or other groups whereas they may otherwise be in tension with those groups. Moreover, this kind of language has and will continue to generate fissures and opposition. For instance, in an opinion piece in the *Globe and Mail*, Thomas Homer-Dixon, an influential Canadian academic, distanced himself from the “Leap revolutions” saying that the “we” “subordinates” the entrepreneurial “I”:

[The Leap Manifesto] ideological starting point (...) largely sidelines the individualist, the entrepreneur, or anyone who thinks that society’s health depends on ensuring lots of space for people to exercise their agency and creative possibility. In *The Leap Manifesto*, altruism trumps selfishness, and “we” subordinates “I”.<sup>57</sup>

This example illustrates how visions of community and individual action may collide in debates on future sustainability. It would be naïve to take “we” as a neutral term. Identity is always relational and *The Leap Manifesto*’s “we” has several “constitutive outsides.”<sup>58</sup> As we have seen, one of them is the “profit-gouging of private companies,” another the “remote bureaucracy of some centralized state ones.” Democracy, it can be argued, is about the enunciation of difference.

The UN report constitutes “governments” and “markets” as the most important social agents although in a polycentric form of governance of sustainability where public participation is called for.<sup>59</sup> However, it predominantly construes the public as consumers who are to be informed, educated and steered to greener consumption:

Major behavioral changes are essential for effectively transforming production and consumption patterns. Awareness-raising, combined with different forms of incentives, plays a decisive role in this process and must address all actors in society: producers, consumers, political parties, scientific and cultural communities, the media and the public at large. Such changes in behavior call for a mix of general sensitization campaigns and well-targeted information and education programmes.<sup>60</sup>

The report is in many ways an act of strategic ambivalence. It should come as no surprise that it has (seemingly) generated no reactions. In searching for its reception and possible discursive reconstructions, I found little more than references to the document by the authoring UN agencies themselves. This does not in any way mean that the report has been ineffectual: instead, it is likely to be one more step towards the normalization of somewhat stronger views of sustainability at the level of intergovernmental organizations. But it has had no expression in public spaces or been taken up by any other actors, which indicates a short-range impact.

*The Leap Manifesto* certainly has and in many different ways. It has been seen as divisive and dividing.<sup>61</sup> But it has also garnered a significant degree of support: a 2016 poll showed that, among the people who had heard of it, half were in favor (Ekospolitics, 2016).<sup>62</sup>

*The Leap Manifesto* is much more likely to bring back “the political”<sup>63</sup> and to stimulate political engagement with climate change than the UN report. Its calls for transformation in political relations, suggesting that a “bottom-up revival will lead to a renewal of democracy at every level of government,” translate in nearly exact terms the argument that Carvalho and Peterson put forth in 2012 on “reinventing the political: how climate change can breathe new life into contemporary democracies.”<sup>64</sup>

Effects on conventional (party) politics could also occur. As journalist Martin Lukacs wrote in the *Guardian* about the Manifesto:

Canadians craving bold change could be won over to a party that can courageously advocate for it, as the NDP [New Democratic Party] has done before. But only if it is loud and proud and unapologetically progressive, clearly distinguishing itself from the Liberals.<sup>65</sup>

This may be the time for clear political language towards a sustainable future.

## Conclusions

As illustrated by presentations to the Annenberg Scholars Symposium and the resulting chapters featured in this volume, discourse analysis can shed light on many forms of knowledge on social, political and “natural” realities. It can also be applied to different types of materials, from interviews (Urban, this volume) to official reports and social movement’s speech (this chapter). Among the various approaches to discourse analysis, this chapter has drawn mainly on Critical Discourse Studies (cf. Wodak, this volume) and combined it with the concept of circulation (also employed by Greg Urban in this book), which has been operationalized via research questions regarding the diverse readings and appropriations of a given text.

In its multiple variants and strands, discourse analysis offers theoretical, conceptual and analytical resources of enormous relevance to social research. As current societies face growing threats from climate change and other crises of sustainability, the notion of “transformation towards sustainability” has gained currency in the last few years with diverse types of social actors claiming to promote it. This chapter has started delving into different discourses on/of/for transformation with the goal of understanding the ways in which (and indeed whether) they advance social change and how they relate to different forms of power.

What is offered here is not a closed off analytical framework but a starting contribution to discourse-analytical research focused on the transformations needed to address climate change. Although space limitations allowed only for brief examination of two texts, we encountered very different proposals for future sustainability: one dominated by a more “inclusive” variety of the “green economy” with no significant alterations of current political and economic power, and another one, grounded on notions of social and environmental justice, corresponding to a very different configuration of energy governance and economic ownership.

Advanced by a set of UN agencies, the former attempts to devise a “new growth model” where the needs of the poor are seemingly reconciled with the primacy of market economics. Other ambivalences prevail in that UN report. As Schneidewind and Augenstein have noted, conceptual ambiguity and vagueness may be the terrain for co-opting by powerful actors of the idea and the agenda of transformation and “actively impede radical societal change.”<sup>66</sup> The development of a new (false) consensus would allow for the continuation of the current post-political condition of climate change.<sup>67</sup>

The second text analyzed in this chapter (*The Leap Manifesto*) repoliticizes climate change and other socio-economic crises in a bold manner. It expands the range of legitimate political actors and redefines socio-economic possibilities. Whereas its uptake (and contestation) will have to continue being analyzed it is, anyhow, a discursive act of great significance. It enacts a "politics of sustainability" which, in John Barry's words,

is ultimately about choices to live in a different type of society, not some brief public consultation about how to "green" business as usual and our existing societies. And this is a politics of resistance and struggle for transition and transformation not the continuation of what we currently have.<sup>68</sup>

As illustrated here, discourse analysis shows how contemporary societal challenges can be addressed very differently under the guise of similar lexicons. Thorough and context-sensitive analysis of texts and of their social circulation can make visible their constitutive effects either towards reinforcing the ideas and values that dominate current practices and institutions or towards challenging them. Alternative visions of socio-economic and political relations can gain support, get normalized and, ultimately, radically different proposals for social, political and economic organization can be institutionalized.

### Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia for Sabbatical Grant SFRH/BSAB/128424/2017.

### Notes

- 1 Romain Felli, "Environment, not planning: The neoliberal depoliticisation of environmental policy by means of emissions trading," *Environmental Politics* 24, no. 5 (2015): 641–660.
- 2 Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).
- 3 E.g. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber et al., *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability* (Berlin: German Advisory Council on Global Change, 2011).
- 4 Murray Gell-Mann, "Transformations of the twenty-first century: Transitions to greater sustainability," in *Global Sustainability: A Nobel Cause*, eds. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, Mario Molina, Nicholas Stern, Veronica Huber and Susanne Kadner (Cambridge University Press, 2010): 1–8.
- 5 See IPCC, Fifth Assessment Report (2014).
- 6 Peter H. Feindt and Angela Oels, "Does discourse matter? Discourse Analysis in environmental policy making," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 7, no. 3 (2005): 161–173 (cit. p. 161).
- 7 Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough, *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
- 8 E.g. Anabela Carvalho and Jacquelin Burgess, "Cultural circuits of climate change in U.K. broadsheet newspapers: 1985–2003," *Risk Analysis* 25, no. 6 (2005): 1457–1469.

- 9 Paul Methmann, "'Climate protection' as empty signifier: A discourse theoretical perspective on climate mainstreaming in world politics," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 2 (2010): 345–372.
- 10 Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*. Op. cit.<sup>2</sup>
- 11 Methmann, "'Climate protection' as empty signifier." Op. cit.<sup>9</sup>
- 12 Tammy L. Lewis, "Media representations of 'sustainable development': Sustaining the status quo?" *Science Communication* 21, no. 3 (2000): 244–273.
- 13 Ana Horta, Anabela Carvalho and Luísa Schmidt, "The hegemony of global politics: news coverage of climate change in a small country," *Society & Natural Resources* (2017, online first): 1–15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2017.1295497>.
- 14 Shane Gunster, "Contesting conflict? Efficacy, advocacy and alternative media in British Columbia," in *Journalism and Climate Crisis: Public Engagement, Media Alternatives*, eds. Robert Hackett, Susan Forde, Shane Gunster and Karrie Foxwell-Norton (London: Routledge, 2017): 120–143.
- 15 Anneleen Kenis and Mathias Lievens, *The Limits of the Green Economy* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 16 Lewis, "Media representations of 'sustainable development'." Op. cit.<sup>12</sup>
- 17 David Edwards and David Cromwell, *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).
- 18 Ulrich Beck, "Climate for change, or how to create a green modernity?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, nos. 2–3 (2010): 254–266.
- 19 Ibid., p. 256.
- 20 Yves Pepermans, and Pieter Maesele, "The politicization of climate change: Problem or solution?" *WIREs Climate Change* 7 (2016): 478–485.
- 21 Anabela Carvalho, Margit van Wessel and Pieter Maesele, "Communication practices and political engagement with climate change: A research agenda", *Environmental Communication* 11, no. 1 (2017): 122–135.
- 22 Jochen Markard, Rob Raven and Bernhard Truffer, "Sustainability transitions: An emerging field of research and its prospects," *Research Policy* 41, no. 6 (2012): 955–967 (cit. p. 956).
- 23 E.g. Ian Scoones, Melissa Leach and Peter Newell (eds.), *The Politics of Green Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 24 James Meadowcroft, "What about the politics? Sustainable development, transition management, and long term energy transitions," *Policy Science* 42 (2009): 323–340.
- 25 Derk Loorbach, *Transition Management: New Mode of Governance of Sustainable Development* (Utrecht: International Books, 2007).
- 26 Maarten Hajer et al., "Beyond cockpit-ism: Four insights to enhance the transformative potential of the Sustainable Development Goals," *Sustainability* 7, no. 2 (2015): 1651–1660.
- 27 E.g. Adrian Smith and Andrew Stirling, "The politics of social-ecological resilience and sustainable socio-technical transitions," *Ecology & Society* 15, no. 1, Article 11 (2010). <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss1/art11/>.  
Andrew Stirling, *Emancipating Transformations: From Controlling 'The Transition' to Culturing Plural Radical Progress* (STEPS Working Paper 64, Brighton: STEPS Centre, 2014).
- 28 Giuseppe Feola, "Societal transformation in response to global environmental change: A review of emerging concepts," *Ambio* 44 (2015): 376–390.
- 29 Ulrich Brand, "Transformation as a new critical orthodoxy: The strategic use of the term 'transformation' does not prevent multiple crises," *Gaia* 25, no. 1 (2016): 23–27.
- 30 James Patterson et al., "Exploring the governance and politics of transformations towards sustainability," *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* (online first, 2016), cit. p. 2. [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2210422416300843](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2210422416300843).
- 31 Ibid., p. 10.



- 32 Lilie Chouliaraki, "Discourse analysis", in *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis*, eds. Tony Bennett and John Frow (London: Sage, 2008): 674–698 (cit. p. 674).
- 33 Linda A. Wood and Rolf Kroger, *Doing Discourse Analysis: Methods for Studying Action in Talk and Text* (London: Sage, 2000), cit. p. 3.
- 34 Norman Fairclough, "Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities", *Discourse and Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 133–168 (cit. p. 135).
- 35 Norman Fairclough, "Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies," *Critical Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013): 177–197.
- 36 Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical discourse analysis," in *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, ed. Teun van Dijk (London: Sage, 1997): 258–284.
- 37 Margaret Wetherell, "Themes in discourse research: The case of Diana," in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, eds. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage, 2001): 14–28, cit. p. 16.
- 38 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe et al., *From Transition to Transformation: Sustainable and Inclusive Development in Europe and Central Asia* (Geneva: Information Service, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2012), [www.un-rcm-europecentralasia.org/fileadmin/DAM/RCM.../RIO\\_20\\_Web\\_Interactif.pdf](http://www.un-rcm-europecentralasia.org/fileadmin/DAM/RCM.../RIO_20_Web_Interactif.pdf).
- 39 *The Leap Manifesto*, <https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/>.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Fairclough, "Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies." Op. cit.<sup>35</sup>  
Chouliaraki and Fairclough, *Discourse in Late Modernity*. Op. cit.<sup>7</sup>
- 43 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe et al., *From Transition to Transformation*. Op. cit.<sup>38</sup>
- 44 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 45 Alice Krieg-Planque, "La formule "développement durable: Un opérateur de neutralisation de la conflictualité," *Langage et Société* 134, no. 4 (2010): 5–29.
- 46 Bob Hopwood, Mary Mellor and Geoff O'Brien, "Sustainable development: Mapping different approaches," *Sustainable Development* 13 (2005): 38–52.
- 47 Eric Neumeyer, *Weak Versus Strong Sustainability: Exploring the Limits of Two Opposing Paradigms*, 2nd ed. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2003).
- 48 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe et al., *From Transition to Transformation*. Op. cit.<sup>38</sup>
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Methmann, "'Climate protection' as empty signifier." Op. cit.<sup>9</sup>
- 51 Ibid., p. 31.
- 52 Ibid., p. 39.
- 53 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe et al., *From Transition to Transformation*. Op. cit.<sup>38</sup>
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 "System change, not climate change: An ecosocialist coalition," [systemchangenot-climatechange.org](http://systemchangenot-climatechange.org).
- 56 Candis Callison, *How Climate Change Comes to Matter: The Communal Life of Facts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
- 57 Homer Thomas-Dixon, "Start the Leap Revolution without me," *Globe and Mail* (April 22, 2016). <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/start-the-leap-revolution-without-me/article29711945/>.
- 58 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990): 17.

- 59 Ibid., p. 24.
- 60 Ibid., p. 17.
- 61 Sarah Bridge, "A look at the Leap Manifesto that is dividing the NDP," *CBC News* (April 17, 2016), <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ndp-leap-manifesto-policy-1.3538439>.
- 62 According to Lukacs, "[t]hat includes a majority of New Democrats and Greens, half of Liberal voters, and even twenty percent of Conservatives. Considering the relentless smears by the media, these figures are astonishing. What they demonstrate is that Canadians are hungry for dramatic government action on climate change and inequality". Martin Lukacs, "Surprise, the pundits were wrong: Poll shows huge support for Leap Manifesto," *The Guardian* (April 29, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/true-north/2016/apr/29/surprise-the-pundits-were-wrong-poll-shows-huge-support-for-leap-manifesto>.
- 63 Anabela Carvalho and Tarla Rai Peterson, *Climate Change Politics: Communication and Public Engagement* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).
- 64 Ibid., p. 1.
- 65 Lukacs, "Surprise, the pundits were wrong." Op. cit.<sup>62</sup>
- 66 Uwe Schneidewind and Karoline Augenstein, "Three schools of transformation thinking: The impact of ideas, institutions, and technological innovation on transformation processes," *Gaia* 25, no. 2 (2016): 88–93, cit. p. 88.
- 67 Pepermans and Maesele, "The politicization of climate change." Op. cit.<sup>20</sup>
- 68 John Barry, *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability: Human Flourishing in a Climate-changed, Carbon-constrained World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 273.